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Author(s): Richard E. Miller
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Fault Lines in the Contact Zone

Richard E. Miller

On the cover of what has turned out to be the final issue of *Focus*, a magazine "for and about the people of AT&T," there's a tableaux of five happy employees, arranged so that their smiling faces provide an ethnically diverse frame for a poster bearing the slogan "TRUE VOICE." Although the cover promotes the image of a harmonious, multicultural working environment, one gets a slightly different image of the company in the "Fun 'n' Games" section at the back of the magazine. In the lower right hand corner of this section, beneath a quiz about AT&T's international reach, there is a drawing of a globe with people speaking avidly into telephones all over the world: there's a woman in a babushka in Eastern Europe; there's a man with a moustache wearing a beret in France; and, following this theme and the telephone lines south, there is a gorilla in Africa holding a telephone (50). A gorilla?

Although Bob Allen, AT&T's CEO, has acknowledged in a letter to all AT&T employees that this was "a deplorable mistake on the part of a company with a long, distinguished record of supporting the African-American community," he has so far met with little success in his attempts to manage the crisis caused by the distribution of this illustration to literally hundreds of thousands of AT&T employees worldwide. First, the art director who approved the cartoon and the illustrator who drew it were dismissed; commitments were made to hire more minority artists, illustrators, and photographers; a hotline was opened up for expressing grievances and making suggestions; AT&T's Diversity Team was instructed to make recommendations "for immediate and long-term improve-

Richard E. Miller is an assistant professor of English at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. His articles have appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, *Iowa English Bulletin*, *The Writing Instructor*, and James Berlin and Michael Vivion's recent collection, *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom*.

ment"; and, as a cathartic gesture, employees were encouraged to "tear that page out and throw it in the trash where it belongs," since they wouldn't want "AT&T material circulating that violates our values" (Allen). Then, when the hotline overheated and the battle raging across the company's electronic bulletin board continued unabated, Allen pulled the plug on the entire *Focus* venture and assigned all its employees to other posts. This is certainly one strategy for handling offensive material: declare solidarity with those who have been offended (Allen's letter is addressed "To all AT&T people"); voice outrage (it was "a deplorable mistake"); shut down avenues for expressing such thoughts (fire or reassign employees, dismantle the magazine). While this approach undoubtedly paves the way for restoring the appearance of corporate harmony, does it have any pedagogical value? That is, does the expulsion of offending individuals and the restriction of lines of communication address the roots of the racist feelings that produced the image of the gorilla as the representative image of the African? Or does it merely seek to insure that the "deplorable mistake" of having such an image surface in a public document doesn't occur again?

"What is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique in the imagined classroom community?" Mary Louise Pratt asks in "Arts of the Contact Zone" (39). In Pratt's essay, this question is occasioned not by an event as troubling as the cartoon discussed above, but by the fact that Pratt's son, Manuel, received "the usual star" from his teacher for writing a paragraph promoting a vaccine that would make school attendance unnecessary. Manuel's teacher, ignoring the critique of schooling leveled in the paragraph, registered only that the required work of responding to the assignment's questions about a helpful invention had been completed and, consequently, appended the silent, enigmatic star. For Pratt, the teacher's star labors to conceal a conflict in the classroom over what work is to be valued and why, presenting instead the image that everything is under control—students are writing and the teacher is evaluating. It is this other strategy for handling difficult material, namely ignoring the content and focusing only on the outward forms of obedient behavior, that leads Pratt to wonder about the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse in the classroom. With regard to Manuel's real classroom community, the answer to this question is clear: the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse is no place at all.

Given Pratt's promising suggestion that the classroom be reconceived as a "contact zone," which she defines as a social space "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34), this example of the kind of writing produced in such a contact zone seems oddly benign. One might expect that the writing Pratt's students did in Stanford's Culture, Ideas, Values course, which she goes on to discuss, would provide ample evidence of more highly charged conflicts involving "unsolicited

oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique." Unfortunately, however, although Pratt avows that this course "put ideas and identities on the line" (39), she offers no example of how her students negotiated this struggle in their writing or of how their teachers participated in and responded to their struggles on and over "the line." Instead, Pratt leaves us with just two images of writers in the contact zone—her son, Manuel, and Guaman Poma, author of a largely unread sixteenth-century bilingual chronicle of Andean culture. Both, to be sure, are readily sympathetic figures, obviously deserving better readers and more thoughtful respondents, but what about the illustrator who provided what might be considered an unsolicited parody or critique of AT&T's "Common Bond values," which state that "we treat each other with respect and dignity, valuing individual and cultural differences"? What "Arts of the Contact Zone" are going to help us learn how to read and respond to voices such as this? And what exactly are we to say or do when the kind of racist, sexist, and homophobic sentiments now signified by the term "hate speech" surface in our classrooms?

In focusing on a student essay that, like the *Focus* cartoon, is much less likely to arouse our sympathies than Manuel's inventive critique, my concern is to examine the heuristic value of the notion of the contact zone when applied not only to student writing, but also to our own academic discussions of that writing. The student essay I begin with was so offensive that when it was first mentioned at an MLA workshop on "Composition, Multiculturalism, and Political Correctness" in December 1991, provisions were quickly made to devote an entire panel to the essay at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication, and this, in turn, led to a follow-up workshop on "The Politics of Response" at CCCC in 1993. Thus, I would hazard a guess that this student essay, entitled "Queers, Bums, and Magic," has seized the attention of more teachers, taken up more institutional time, and provoked more debate than any other single piece of unpublished undergraduate writing in recent memory. Before beginning my discussion of "Queers, Bums, and Magic," I should note, however, that in what follows I have intentionally allowed the content of the student's essay and the wider sweep of its context to emerge in fragments, as they did in the contact zone of the national conferences, where competing modes of response served alternately to reveal and obscure both the text and information about its writer. This partial, hesitant, contradictory motion defines how business gets transacted in the contact zones of our classrooms and our conferences, where important questions often don't get heard, are ignored, or simply don't get posed in the heat of the moment, with the result that vital contextual information often is either never disclosed or comes to light very late in the discussion. I believe that following this motion provides a stark portrait of the ways in which dominant assumptions about students and student writing allow unsolicited oppositional discourse to pass through the classroom unread and unaffected.

"Queers, Bums, and Magic" was written in a pre-college-level community college composition class taught by Scott Lankford at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, in response to an assignment taken from *The Bedford Guide for College Writers* that asked students to write a report on group behavior. One of Lankford's students responded with an essay detailing a drunken trip he and some friends made to "San Fagcisco" to study "the lowest class . . . the queers and the bums." The essay recounts how the students stopped a man on Polk Street, informed him that they were doing a survey and needed to know if he was "a fag." From here, the narrative follows the students into a dark alleyway where they discover, as they relieve themselves drunkenly against the wall, that they have been urinating on a homeless person. In a frenzy, the students begin to kick the homeless person, stopping after "30 seconds of non-stop blows to the body," at which point the writer says he "thought the guy was dead." Terrified, the students make a run for their car and eventually escape the city.

It's a haunting piece, one that gave Lankford many sleepless nights and one that has traveled from conference to conference because it is so unsettling. When Lankford discussed it at CCCC in his paper entitled "How Would You Grade a Gay-Bashing?" the engaged, provocative, and at times heated hourlong discussion that followed provided a forum for a range of competing commitments to, as Pratt might say, "meet, clash, and grapple" with one another. What was clear from this interchange was that part of what makes "Queers, Bums, and Magic" so powerful is that it disables the most familiar kinds of conference presentations and teacher responses. Here is writing that cannot easily be recuperated as somehow praiseworthy despite its numerous surface flaws, writing that instead offers direct access to a voice from the margins that seems to belong there. The reactions given to Lankford's request to know how those present "would have handled such a situation" (5) varied considerably, both in intensity and in detail, but most of them, I would say, fell into one of three categories: read the essay as factual and respond accordingly; read the essay as fictional and respond accordingly; momentarily suspend the question of the essay's factual or fictional status and respond accordingly.

In the first category, by far the most popular, I place all suggestions that the student be removed from the classroom and turned over either to a professional counselor or to the police. Such a response, audience members argued repeatedly, would be automatic if the student had described suicidal tendencies, involvement in a rape, or having been the victim of incest. To substantiate this point, one member of the audience spoke passionately about Marc LeClerc, saying that the Canadian gunman had revealed his hatred of women to many of his college professors prior to his murderous rampage. As compelling as such examples seem, it is important to realize that this line of argumentation assumes that the essay

records a set of criminal events that actually occurred or, at the very least, evidences the fantasy life of a potentially dangerous person. This assessment of the student essay is striking because the audience members had little to go on beyond the kind of brief outline that has been provided here. In other words, although no one in the audience had actually read the student essay, many felt quite confident recommending that, based on brief excerpts and a summary of the essay's content alone, the student ought to be turned over to either the legal or the psychological authorities! These respondents, starting with the assumption of a stable and unified subjectivity for Lankford's student, went on to construct a student writer incapable of dissimulation. Within such a paradigm, the actual text the student produced was of secondary importance at best in relation to a hasty and, as we will see, partial summary of the text's contents.

Lankford chose another route entirely, electing "to respond to the essay exactly as if it were a fictional short story" (4). What this meant in practice was that he restricted himself to commenting on the student's word choice, querying the student about his imagined audience, acknowledging the text's "reasonable detail," and "favorably comparing the essay to *A Clockwork Orange* in its straightforward depictions of nightmarish 'megaviolence' and surrealistic detail" (4). According to these criteria, Lankford determined that the essay merited a low B. Although this strategy provoked the wrath of a large portion of the audience, Lankford argued that it was not without its virtues: by focusing only on the formal features of the essay and its surface errors, Lankford was able to successfully deflect the student writer's use of his writing to "bash" his professor, with the unexpected result that the student not only stayed in the course, but actually chose to study with Lankford again the next semester. Thus, despite Lankford's own assessment of his approach as "spineless," he was in a position to insist that it was nevertheless a "qualified success," since the student in question "learned to cope with an openly gay instructor with some measure of civility" (5).

Among those present who had access to the student's paper, there were those on the panel who agreed with Lankford's approach but disagreed with the grade assigned. These respondents spoke of the essay's faulty organization, the problems evident in its plot development, the number of mechanical errors. On these grounds alone, one panelist assured the audience, the paper ought to have received a failing mark. If the first category of response displays a curious willingness to dispense with the formality of reading the student's essay, Lankford's strategy asks teachers to look away from what the student's writing is attempting to do—at the havoc it is trying to wreak in the contact zone—and restrict their comments to the essay's surface features and formal qualities, affixing the "usual star" or black mark as the situation warrants. Such a strategy itself invites parody:

would changing the word choice/spelling errors/verb agreement problems/organization really "improve" this student's essay? Would such changes help inch it towards being, say, an excellent gay-bashing essay, one worthy of an A?

I intend this question to be deliberately troubling and offensive. The problem, however, is not that this approach is "spineless." To the contrary, in Lankford's hands, this kind of response made it possible for both the teacher and the student to remain in the contact zone of his classroom, allowing them to negotiate the difficult business of working with and through important issues of cultural and sexual difference. By suggesting that his difficulty in responding to the student essay is a personal problem, that it revolves around a question of "spine," Lankford obscures the ways in which the difficulty that confronted him as he struggled to find a way to respond to "Queers, Bums, and Magic" is the trace of a broader institutional conflict over what it means for a teacher to work on and with student writing. Lankford and the others who spoke of responding to the essay as "a piece of fiction" did not suddenly invent this curiously decontextualized way of responding to writing, this way that can imagine no other approach to discussing a piece of writing than to speak of how it is organized, the aptness of the writer's word choice, and the fit between the text and its audience. Such an approach to writing instruction has been proffered in the majority of grammars, rhetorics, and readers that have filled English classrooms since before the turn of the century: it has been around for so long that, despite the grand "turn to process" in writing instruction, it continues to suggest itself as the most "natural" or "reasonable" way to define the work of responding to student writing. All of which leaves us with this profoundly strange state of affairs where the discipline explicitly devoted to studying and articulating the power of the written word gets thrown into crisis when a student produces a powerful piece of writing.

To sum up, then, these two lines of response to the student essay—one recommending the removal of the offending writer from circulation and the other overlooking the offensive aspects of the student text in order to attend to its surface and structural features—taken together dramatize how little professional training in English Studies prepares teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone of the classroom. This absence of preparation, I would argue, actually comes into play every time a teacher sits down to comment on a student paper: it's just that the pedagogical shortcomings of restricting such commentary to the surface features and formal aspects of the writing aren't as readily visible in a response to an essay on a summer vacation as they are in a response to an essay about beating up the homeless. Unfortunately, recent efforts to reimagine the work of responding to student writing provide little guidance for addressing this particular problem. Edward White's *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, for instance, argues for holistic

scoring, but offers no suggestions on how to go about holistically scoring essays that are racist, homophobic, or misogynistic. And, similarly, the NCTE's *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research*, which asserts that "real, substantive response is in one form or another fundamental to language development" (Anson 4), never gets around to the business of discussing how to produce a "real, substantive response" to the kind of unsolicited oppositional discourse discussed here. Since this is uncharted territory, it is not surprising that we often find ourselves at a loss, not knowing what to do, where to go, or what to say once we cross this line.

One has to wonder why it is that, at a time when almost all of the current major theories on the rise celebrate partial readings, multiple subjectivities, marginalized positions, and subjugated knowledges, nearly all student essays remain essentially illegible, offered forth more often than not as the space where error exercises its full reign, or, as here, the site where some untutored evil shows its face. There seems, in other words, to be little evidence of what one might call "poststructural" or "postcolonial" trickledown, little sign that the theoretical insights that carry so much weight in our journals actually make themselves known in the pedagogical practices deployed in classrooms across the country. There were, however, a few respondents to Lankford's presentation who saw a way to smuggle some of these insights into the classroom and thereby propose more fruitful responses than either expelling the student or ignoring the content of his essay. In proposing that "Queers, Bums, and Magic" be reproduced alongside legal definitions of hate speech for the entire class to read and discuss, one panelist found a way to pull the paper out of the private corridor running between the student writer and the teacher and move it into the public arena. This approach turns the essay into a "teachable object," enabling an investigation of the writing's performative aspect—how it does its work, what its imagined project might have been, and who or what might be the possible subjects of its critique. By situating the essay in relation to legal definitions of hate speech, this approach also puts the class in a position to consider both how words can work in the world and how and why that work has been regulated.

The prospect of having such a discussion would, no doubt, frighten some, since it would promise to be an explosive, tense, disturbing interchange. Some students would undoubtedly agree with the treatment meted out to the disenfranchised; others might speak of it as being funny; others might point to the references to "Elm Street," "nightmares," and "magic" in the essay to argue that it was a piece of fiction; and still others might be horrified by the essay and express their feelings to the class. Such a discussion would, in other words, place one squarely in the act of teaching in the contact zone where, as Pratt says, "No one [is] excluded, and no one [is] safe" (39). The point of having such discussions, however, is neither to establish a community where a simple pluralism rules and

hate speech is just one of its many voices, nor is it to create an environment that is relentlessly threatening, where not feeling safe comes to mean the same thing as feeling terrified. Pratt, in fact, is careful to maintain the importance of establishing "safe houses" in the curriculum, courses where a different kind of talk is supported and sustained. But for those courses that take as their subject how language works in the world, the central concern should be to provide students with moments taken from their own writing as well as from the writing collected in published texts where the written word is powerful. In such classrooms, "teaching the conflicts" is not simply an empty slogan plastered over a practice that means "business as usual," but an actual set of practices whereby the conflicts that capture and construct both the students and their teachers become the proper subject of study for the course.

This third category of response argues for the necessity of seeing the way we structure our courses and the kinds of texts we read with our students as potential resources for commenting on the writing our students produce. Thinking along these lines, another member of the audience suggested that the best way to respond to this essay was with a revisionary assignment, where the student would be required to rewrite the story from the perspective either of the gay man whom the students had harassed on Polk Street or from the perspective of the homeless person whom the students had beaten in the alleyway. This strategy of having the student do some more writing about this event seems particularly appropriate in a discipline that believes in the heuristic power of the composing process, and the further requirement to have the student shift perspective provides a meaningful avenue for re-seeing the described events. As useful as I believe it is to see the assignment of revision as a way of responding to student writing, though, I think the response called for in this instance is so obvious that it is most likely to solicit a seamless parody, one of those acts of hyperconformity regularly produced by those writing in the contact zone. In other words, while producing a writing situation where the student is advised to mime the teacher's desired position would probably succeed in sweeping the most visible manifestations of the student's hateful thoughts and actions out of the classroom, it would not, I think, actually address the roots of that hatred. That hatred would simply curl up and go underground for the duration of the course.

At this point, it may seem that in assessing the range of reactions to "Queers, Bums, and Magic" I am holding out for some magical form of response that would not only make this student stop writing such things, but would actually put an end to his thinking them as well. My central concern, however, is not with this particular student essay or with what the student writer, as an individual, thinks, but with what this student essay and the professional activity that surrounds it can tell us about the cultural, political, and pedagogical complexities of composition instruction. With this distinction in mind, I would go so far as to argue that

adopting any classroom strategy that isolates this essay and treats it as an anomaly misreads both the essay's cultural significance and its pedagogical possibilities. As the recent debate over military service has made abundantly clear, Lankford's student has not expressed some unique and private hatred of gays, nor, to be sure, has he voiced some peculiar antipathy for the homeless. Rather, the homophobia this student articulates and the violence he describes himself as perpetrating against the disenfranchised are cultural commonplaces. For these reasons, it seems much more important to me to produce a classroom where part of the work involves articulating, investigating, and questioning the affiliated cultural forces that underwrite the ways of thinking that find expression in this student's essay—a classroom, in short, that studies the forces that make such thoughts not only permissible but prevalent.

From this perspective, one could say that the only truly surprising thing about "Queers, Bums, and Magic" is that it voices this particular set of cultural commonplaces in the classroom, since most students practiced in the conventions of reading teacher expectations know not to commit themselves to positions their teachers clearly oppose. In this regard, the following facts are not insignificant: the student writer grew up in Kuwait; English is his second language; he was writing during the onset of the Persian Gulf War. An outsider himself, Lankford's student almost certainly did not understand what was intended by the examples that accompanied the assignment in the *Bedford Guide* to: "Station yourself in a nearby place where you can mingle with a group of people gathered for some reason or occasion. Observe the group's behavior and in a short paper report on it. Then offer some insight" (41). Following these instructions, the student is informed that one writer "did an outstanding job of observing a group of people nervously awaiting a road test for their driver's licenses"; another observed a bar mitzvah; another an emergency room; and another a group of people looking at a luna moth on a telephone pole "(including a man who viewed it with alarm, a wondering toddler, and an amateur entomologist)" (42). Unschooled in the arts of reading the textbook, this student failed to pick up on the implicit directions: when you write this essay, report only on a group from which you are safely detached and on behavior unlikely to disturb others. Had the student been able to read the cues in the suggested examples, he might well have selected a less explosive topic and thereby kept his most familiar ways of knowing the world out of view.

If the examples direct students to topics guaranteed not to provoke offense, the assignment, by refraining from using any kind of critical terminology, further guarantees that the students will not wander beyond the business of reporting their immediate experience. In lieu of inviting students to work with any of the central terms taken from anthropology, sociology, or cultural studies, say, the assignment merely informs the students that, after observing the behavior of their

selected group, they are "to form some general impression of the group or come to some realization about it" (42). They can expect, the assignment concludes, that it will take at least two written pages "to cover" their subject. Grasping the import of these directives, Lankford's student did even more than was required, performing the kind of hyperconformity I suggested earlier characterizes one of the arts of the contact zone: he wrote, as required, for his "fellow students" (41); he handed in not two, but four typed pages; and he made sure his essay concluded with "some insight." His final paragraph reads as follows:

> Although this night was supposed to be an observation on the people of the streets, it turned out that we were walking on "Elm Street," and it was a "nightmare." I will always remember one thing, next time I see bums and fags walking on the streets, I will never make fun of them or piss on them, or anything like that, because they did not want to be bums or fags. It was society that forced them out of their jobs and they could not beat the system. Now when I think about that bum we beat up I can't understand how he managed to follow us the whole time, after being kicked and being down for so long. I think it was one of two things; he is either psychic or it was just plain magic.

In miming the requisite better understanding that is supposed to come from studying groups, the student's essay concludes by disrupting all that has come before: did the beating actually take place or has the writer simply fabricated it, recasting the assignment within the readily available narrative frame of *Nightmare on Elm Street*? Is the student having one over on the system, manufacturing both the material for his response and his consequent realization, and thus, in one fell swoop, parodying, resisting, and critiquing the values that hold the classroom community together? Or, and this is obviously the more frightening possibility, is his conclusion some kind of penitential confession for events that really did happen?

These questions, slightly rephrased, are of central importance to any writing classroom: how does a writer establish authority? How does one distinguish between fact and fiction in a written document? What does it mean to read and to write dialogically? And yet, it is important to realize that, had the assignment worked as it was supposed to, these questions would never have surfaced with the urgency they have here. That is, had Lankford's student been a better reader of classroom norms and textbook procedures, he might well have written about beekeepers or people at hair salons and left the surface calm of the educational community undisturbed. If we step back from "Queers, Bums, and Magic" for a moment and consider the fact that the mixture of anger, rage, ignorance, and confusion that produced this student essay are present in varying degrees on college campuses across the country, what is truly significant about this event is not that it occurred, but that it occurs so rarely. This, surely, is a testament to the immense pressures exerted by the classroom environment, the presentation of the

assigned readings, the directions included in the writing assignments, and the range of teaching practices which work together to ensure that conflicts about or contact between fundamental beliefs and prejudices do not arise. The classroom does not, in other words, automatically function as a contact zone in the positive ways Pratt discovered in the Stanford course, where, she asserts: "Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone" (39). As the conclusion of Pratt's article makes clear, and the foregoing discussion of "Queers, Bums, and Magic" vividly illustrates, there is still a great deal of work to be done in constructing the "pedagogical arts of the contact zone." Thus, in setting aside the important but what is for us irresolvable question of whether or not "Queers, Bums, and Magic" is a factual or fictional account, I would like in the remainder of this essay to discuss my own efforts to reconfigure the power relations in my classroom so that more contact between the competing interpretive systems of the classroom and the worlds outside the classroom might occur and become available for discussion.

There is a paradox, of course, in trying to establish a classroom that solicits "unsolicited oppositional discourse." There is, also, an attendant danger of a kind of "intellectual slumming," where investigating the disjunction between the ways of knowing fostered inside and outside the classroom might inevitably result in students deeming the former kind of knowledge "artificial" and the latter "authentic." Rather than perish in the abyss created by this killer dichotomy or put myself in the pedagogically questionable position of inviting my students to vent their feelings on the page for us to discuss afterwards, I have tried to develop a pedagogical practice that allows the classroom to function as a contact zone where the central activity is investigating the range of literate practices available to those within asymmetrical power relationships. My primary concern as a composition instructor, in other words, is with the kinds of issues raised in Pratt's article and Lankford's student's essay in so far as they shape the ways of reading and writing that occur inside and outside the classroom and our ways of talking about that reading and writing. Given the heightened racial tensions following the Rodney King beating, the ongoing fear and ignorance about AIDS and the means of its transmission, the backlash against feminism, and a climate of rising unemployment and violence, it has not been difficult to find material around my campus that meets these requirements.

Most recently, for example, I have become interested in a battle being waged at my campus along what I have come to call the "textual corridors"—the walkways to and from the main libraries, the mailboxes and newspaper dispensers, the bus stops and lamp posts. In these spaces, all well away from the classrooms, one or more students or perhaps competing groups of students have been carrying out a heated, accusatory, and highly coded discussion about rape, feminism, and

sexual politics. Early in the semester, the following poster affixed to the lid of a garbage can caught my attention:

DON'T MAKE
YOUR
MOTHER
HAVE TO TELL
HER FRIENDS
THAT YOU'RE
A
RAPIST

Copies of this poster stayed up for a couple of days before being ripped down or papered over with campaign flyers for the upcoming student elections. Then, a few weeks later, the following poster appeared:

WHO aRE ~~you? Go~~
TRA~~de your~~ MoPs
~~for a~~ BIT ~~of~~ CHa~~nge.~~
~~Be a w~~HOLE ~~woman~~
~~becau~~Se LIT~~tle else~~
Wi~~ll ev~~EN CHange.
De~~fY, Kill~~, E~~ven~~
TrEAt So~~mE as~~
DOGS.
Revo~~l~~U~~tio~~N
RevolUtioN

While I found the rhetorical tactic of the first poster fairly straightforward, this one stumped me: I simply could not figure out how to read it or what it might be saying. Was it written by the same person or group of people who had distributed the first poster? Or was it written in response to the first poster, demanding to know who was making such anonymous accusations? What sense was to be made of the play between the text under erasure and the subtext placed in the foreground? And, how, finally, was one to read the question in much smaller type at the bottom of the poster: "what are you, a feminist?"

My inability to decode the interaction between these posters ceased to be a simple matter of curiosity for me that weekend, when I read in the local paper that one of our students had been abducted and raped on her way home from a party. Because I found this event so upsetting and felt that it, in some way, was connected to the posters, I brought the broadsides into my composition classroom as texts to be read. We had just finished working through what Pratt might

mean when she defines autoethnographic texts as "heterogenous on the reception end as well as the production end" (36–37) and I felt that discussing these two posters might bring this definition to life. Here was writing from the contact zone that was simultaneously oppositional, parodic, resistant, and critical: how, I asked, were we to read it? One student described the first poster as "sneaky": instead of just coming out and saying that rape was wrong, it asked a rhetorical question. When I asked her to turn that rhetorical question into a statement, she replied: "It says, 'We know who you are and we're going to catch you,' but it says it in a way that makes you stop and think. It's like a threat, almost." While the students had up to this point expressed a healthy suspicion of "hidden meanings" in general and had specifically criticized Pratt for "reading too much into" the writings of her son and Guaman Poma, they found little to object to in this assessment of the first poster's strategy and its "message." And although there was some disagreement about whether the "you" in the poster signified all men or just those men who were or had the potential to be rapists—about whether the poster was produced by "one of those male-bashing feminists" or by a "politically-committed artist" trying to make a better world—the students were united in condemning the act of rape. Given the combination of the context and the location of this discussion and the spell cast by the rhetorical structure of the first poster, it is hard to see how they could have said anything else.

The second poster problematizes the dependable uniformity of this response, however, since, to a certain way of reading, it seemed to make an open call for violence against women. From this perspective, the second poster responds to the first, asking "Who are you?" in an effort to discover the identity of its anonymous and threatening author. The poster then parodies a feminist call to arms—"go trade your mops for a bit of change"—and culminates in a command to "defy, kill, even treat some [men presumably] as dogs." The poster, in effect, transforms the feminist revolution into license to talk back to, discipline, and, ultimately, kill their oppressors. This is a multivocal poster, however, deploying the clumsy Derridean device of erasure to speak its two positions simultaneously: beneath the parodic call to arms rests the undistilled anger of the author or authors, unleashed in the catalogue of derogatory terms for women as it builds to the frightening transformation of "revolution" into a series of commands to "Run, run." In the context of the kidnapping and sexual violation that had occurred on campus over the weekend, I was both convinced that this was what the poster intended and horrified by what I read. To my mind, and to some of the students in the class, the second poster openly defied the threat of the first poster, providing an involved, but nonetheless clear, assertion of the second writer's determination to go on a rampage.

A number of the students in the class resisted this take on the second poster, however, arguing that it was probably by the same person who produced the first

one. Making a case for a wholly ironized text, these students insisted that the writer was miming the voice of "the angry male" and through this process mocking that voice. This reading, in effect, reverses the foreground and the background of the previous reading, making the list of derogatory terms the literal or surface meaning and the call to arms embedded in and amongst the letters of this list the hidden promise of a better world. Thus, where the voice of the "angry male" commands "Run, run," the creative genius of the writer/artist sees the possibility of "revolution, revolution." As clever as I found this approach to the text and as persuasive as many of the members of the class deemed it to be, I was not, in the end, convinced that the second poster was just "more of the same" from the writer of the first poster. Although this discussion ended up releasing a flood of stories from the students about the daily acts of violence they experienced in the dorms and parking lots, at football games and dance parties, on and off campus, it did not lead to any sort of consensus about which reading of the poster was "correct." This is one of the hazards of allowing students to work with writing in the contact zone: the meaning of a text is seen to be up for grabs; the students, drawing on their local knowledge, may prove to be better readers of certain texts than their teacher; and the teacher's ability to insist upon a certain reading will be diminished. In place of a community of uniform and obedient students, one finds a contestatory space where the vertiginous possibilities of the multivalent, multivocal text become at least a momentary reality in the hands of a loosely federated, heterogenous group with widely divergent reading abilities and political commitments.

As exciting as it can be when students are arguing in an engaged way about how best to interpret a text, such moments mark for me a starting point in the work of a course on reading and writing rather than an end point. That is, while such exercises do serve to introduce students to the idea that texts may be interpreted to have a range of meanings, there is always the danger that such work will quickly produce a classroom situation where any reading is seen to be as good as any other reading. Thus, when the third poster appeared a month later, it was difficult to get the students to move beyond developing an interpretation of the poster to staking out a position in relation to their interpretation, despite the poster's deliberately provocative declaration:

NOT ALL
MEN RAPE
SOME OF US
JUST
WATCH

By this point in the semester, we were reading Stanley Fish's "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," and the students had become fairly adept at

detecting and exploiting ambiguities in a text. Some of the students had also read an interview with the author of the first poster, entitled "Guerilla Feminist Kicks Some Ass," in the university's self-described "common, degenerate tabloid." In this interview the student, whose anonymity was maintained, stated, "I put these flyers up because art has an obligation to be dangerous and political" (Mulligan). With Fish and the interview in mind, the students quickly produced three overlapping readings of this poster: the broadside, written by the author of the first poster, either accuses all men of being involved in rape in one way or another or, more inclusively, indicts an entire culture for standing by while rape occurs; or, some students suggested, the poster, conversely, could have been written by a male parodying the feminist critique . . . What had started as an exciting discussion that led to a number of insights into the dynamics of the contact zone quickly devolved into a predictable trotting out of interpretations. The students, it seemed, had learned what they could *in the classroom* about the advantages and disadvantages of the conventions governing this particular interchange in a textual corridor outside the classroom. But they also recognized that the anonymity of the participants deprived the interchange of the kind of depth necessary to sustain discussion, with the significant result that a strategy to produce public art designed to be "dangerous and political" ended up being dismissed as the work of cowards afraid to make their position clear. This, too, is one of the inevitable perils of writing in the contact zone: the rhetorical approach designed to deliver a critique or parody may simply lead to the material being cast aside as nonsense. There is always the possibility, as Pratt observes, that the letter will not reach its intended destination.

This is not an insignificant lesson to learn in a course devoted to thinking about writing as a process, since it both introduces the possibility of a range of ways of responding to a writing assignment and, at the same time, drives home the importance of balancing the strengths and weaknesses available within any given rhetorical approach. To return to the example of the posters, anonymity may buy the writer or writers the freedom to express opinions and prejudices openly, but it does so at the cost of undermining the credibility or significance of what is being said. It also, in the name of fostering a heightened awareness of violence against women, helps to create an environment of suspicion and hostility: "What if," one of my students asked, "the people producing these posters are in this class?" The conventions governing the interchange, in effect, guarantee only that the described situation will continue: in this sphere, anonymous threats and ambiguous slogans combine to produce a kind of political paralysis, where nothing happens because nobody knows where anybody stands. The value of pursuing such issues in a writing course is that it helps to illustrate the fact that no writing situation is without its conventions, nor is any writer ever fully able to control those conventions. Once the student writer recognizes that all texts, in

this regard, are heterogeneous in their production as well as their reception, it becomes possible to talk about the range and kinds of choices available during the acts of reading and writing and this, I would argue, is the most important work that can be begun in a composition course.

If discussing the posters and the conventions of the interchange within this particular textual corridor allowed us to explore what can and cannot be achieved through the adoption of a uniformly confrontational stance, the assignment of Gloria Anzaldúa's "Entering into the Serpent" moved the class on to the business of developing alternate routes of response to a challenging and, for many of my students, threatening text. In "Entering into the Serpent," excerpted from Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa shifts back and forth between Anglo-American English, Castilian Spanish, Tex-Mex, Northern Mexican dialect, and Nahuatl, writing in a mélange of languages to express the diversity of her heritage and her position as lesbian, feminist, Chicana poet and critic. While Anzaldúa's multilingual text thus places special linguistic demands on its readers, it also makes relatively unique generic demands, moving between poetry and prose, personal narrative and revisionist history. Where the posters spoke in one or two voices, Anzaldúa occupies a range of positions, some of them contradictory, as she relates her efforts to reclaim the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, the "serpent goddess," split from the goddess Cihuacoatl by the "male dominated Azteca-Mexica culture" in order to drive "the powerful female deities underground" (26–27). After the Spanish Conquest, Cihuacoatl was further domesticated by the Christian Church and transformed by stages into the figure now known as the Virgin of Guadalupe. While Anzaldúa admires *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as "the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-*mexicanos*, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess" (29), she nevertheless insists on the importance of regaining access to Coatlicue, "the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life" (33). Recovering this contact with the supernatural provides one with "*la facultad* . . . the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" (36). Anzaldúa concludes this section by asserting that "Those who are pounced on the most have [*la facultad*] the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the dark-skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign" (36).

Here's how one of my students described his experience reading "Entering into the Serpent":

> Even though I had barely read half of the first page, I was already disgusted. I found myself reading onward only to stop and ask "What is she trying to prove?" Scanning the words and skipping over the ones that were not english, I went from

> an egocentric personal story to a femo-nazi account of central american mythology that was occasionally interrupted by more poems. . . .
>
> From what I gather, she is trying to exorcise some personal demons. Her feelings of inadequacy and insecurity drove her to project her own problems not only onto the world, but into history and mythology. I'm surprised she didn't call history "herstory." It seems that she had no sense of self or worth. To overcome this, she fabricated a world, a past, and a scapegoat in her own image. Although her accusations do hold some truth, her incredible distortion of the world would lead me to believe that she has lost touch with reality and is obsessively driven by her social psychosis. She views herself as a gallant and brilliant member of a great culture that has been oppressed by the world. Her continuous references to females, sex, and the phallic symbols of snakes is most likely brought out by the lack of a man in her life. Rather than admit her faults, she cherishes them and calls them friends.

This is not an uncommon response to my assignment that began by asking the students to discuss the difficulties they encountered reading Anzaldúa's essay. This student, having made his way past the language barrier of the text, confronts the description of a world and a way of being in that world that he finds personally repugnant. Beginning with a variant of a Rush Limbaughism, "femo-nazi," the student then proceeds to document the many ways that "Entering into the Serpent" offended him: it contains Anzaldúa's effort to "exorcise some personal demons"; it includes "her incredible distortion of the world"; the writer claims to be "a gallant and brilliant member of a great culture" of which the student is not a part. Given this reading, it is not too surprising that the student concludes that all the faults in the text are produced by "the lack of a man in [Anzaldúa's] life."

Taking offense at this student's response to Anzaldúa's essay strikes me as being exactly the wrong tactic here. It is of paramount importance, I believe, to begin where students are, rather than where one thinks they should be, and this student, by my reading, is trapped between the desire to produce a stereotypical critique of any feminist text ("I'm surprised she didn't call history 'herstory' ") and the necessity of responding to this particular feminist text. He negotiates the tension between this desire and this necessity by producing a fairly detailed outline of Anzaldúa's essay and, simultaneously, mocking its argument ("Rather than admit her faults, she cherishes them and calls them friends"). However rudimentary or sophisticated one deems this kind of multivocalic writing to be, it is, as I've said above, only a starting point for beginning more detailed work with Anzaldúa's text. For this reason, the assignment that solicited this response does not simply ask the students to revel in the difficulties they experienced reading Anzaldúa's essay, but also requests that they outline "a plan of action for addressing the difficulties [they] encountered." The goal, thus, is not to invite students simply to record their various levels of rage, incomprehension, and

despair with an admittedly difficult text, but rather to have them reflect on how their own ways of reading are disclosed and complicated during this textual transaction.

The results of having the students read their own readings and chart out alternative ways of returning to the text can be startling indeed. Although this writer began by accusing Anzaldúa of being a "femo-nazi," he concluded by reflecting on what he had done with her text in the following way:

> If not for searching for her hidden motives and then using them to criticize/bash Anzaldúa and her story, I would not have been able to read the story in its entirety. Although my view is a bit harsh, it has been a way that allows me to counter Anzaldúa's extremities. In turn, I can now see her strategy of language and culture choice and placement to reveal the contact zone in her own life. All of my obstacles previously mentioned, (not liking the stories, poems, or their content) were overcome by "bashing" them. Unfortunately, doing that in addition to Anzaldúa's ridiculous disproportionism and over-intense, distorted beliefs created a mountain which was impossible for me to climb. This in effect made it impossible to have taken any part of her work seriously or to heart. I feel I need to set aside my personal values, outlook and social position in order to escape the bars of being offended and discouraged. Not only must I lessen my own barriers of understanding, but I must be able to comprehend and understand the argument of the other. It is these differences between people and groups of people that lead to the conflicts and struggles portrayed and created by this selection.

This strikes me as being an extraordinarily astute assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this writer's initial reading strategy: "bashing" Anzaldúa enabled a certain kind of work to be accomplished (the reading was completed, the writing assignment could be fulfilled), but it also prevented the writer from taking "any part of her work seriously or to heart." The writer's approach, in effect, only verified feelings he already had: it did not allow him to see or learn anything he didn't already know. Reflecting on his own reading practice, the writer finds himself compelled to reassess Anzaldúa's strategy, seeing at the end of his work that she has written in a way that will show "the contact zone in her life." Thus, by "bashing" Anzaldúa, the student inadvertently ended up showing himself that her description of her trying experiences within the straight Anglo world was, at least partly, accurate. The writer's proposed solution to this problem—setting aside his "personal values, outlook and social position"—attests to the magnitude of the challenge Anzaldúa's position holds for him. Whether or not this proposed solution proves in practice to be a workable plan is something that emerges when the writer returns to Anzaldúa's essay to begin his revision. What is important to notice here, however, is that the writer's plan does make returning to her text an imaginable activity with an unforeseeable outcome. Given the way this student's essay began, this is no small accomplishment.

Required self-reflexivity does not, of course, guarantee that repugnant positions will be abandoned. At best, it ensures only that the students' attention will be focused on the interconnections between the ways they read and the ways they write. This can be a salutary experience as in the example above, where it provided the student with an avenue for renegotiating a relationship with a difficult text and the wide range of concerns affiliated with that text, but it does not mean that this approach wields sufficient power to transform the matrix of beliefs, values, and prejudices that students (and teachers) bring to the classroom. This kind of wholesale transformation (or, to be more precise, the appearance of this kind of wholesale transformation) is only possible in classrooms where the highly asymmetrical relations of power are fully reinstated and students are told either implicitly or explicitly (as I was during a course in graduate school), "No language that is racist, sexist, homophobic, or that degrades the working class will be allowed in our discussions." Reimagining the classroom as a contact zone is a potentially powerful pedagogical intervention only so long as it involves resisting the temptation either to silence or to celebrate the voices that seek to oppose, critique and/or parody the work of constructing knowledge in the classroom. By dismantling *Focus*, Bob Allen did not address the roots of the problem that produced the offensive cartoon; he merely tried to make it more difficult for another "deplorable mistake" of this kind to further tarnish the image of multicultural harmony the company has been at such pains to construct. Scott Lankford, on the other hand, achieved the kind of partial, imperfect, negotiated, micro-victory available to those who work in the contact zone when he found a way to respond to his student's essay that not only kept the student in his course, but eventually led to the student signing up to work with him in another course as well. By having my students interrogate literate practices inside and outside the classroom, by having them work with challenging essays that speak about issues of difference from a range of perspectives, and by having them pursue this work in the ways I've outlined here, I have been trying to create a course that allows the students to use their writing to investigate the cultural conflicts that serve to define and limit their lived experience.

In the uncharted realms of teaching and studying in the contact zone, the teacher's traditional claim to authority is thus constantly undermined and reconfigured which, in turn, enables the real work of learning how to negotiate and to place oneself in dialogue with different ways of knowing to commence. This can be strangely disorienting work, requiring, as it does, the recognition that in many places what passes as reason or rationality in the academy functions not as something separate from rhetoric, but rather as one of many rhetorical devices. This, in turn, quickly leads to the corollary concession that, in certain situations, reason exercises little or no persuasive force when vying against the combined powers of

rage, fear, and prejudice, which together forge innumerable hateful ways of knowing the world that have their own internalized systems, self-sustaining logics, and justifications. For teachers who believe in education as a force for positive social change, the appropriate response to these new working conditions is not to exile students to the penitentiaries or the psychiatric wards for writing offensive, anti-social papers. Nor is it to give free rein to one's self-righteous indignation and call the resultant interchange a "political intervention." The most promising pedagogical response lies, rather, in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone.

NOTE

I thank Scott Lankford for making this student essay available for discussion, Jean Ferguson Carr for providing me with materials related to this panel, and Mariolina Salvatore for introducing me to the idea of the "position paper" that appears here, in modified form, in my discussion of my students' responses to Gloria Anzaldúa's essay. None of these parties is, of course, to be understood as endorsing the position I have staked out here.

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