"You're not Listening, or I'm not Saying it Right": Reflecting on Borderland as Methodology

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TEACHING WRITING NOW:
DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

Teaching Writing at the Border
Delivered Wednesday, January 27, 2021, from 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm.

Rio Grande Valley Land Acknowledgement

> *Indigenous land does not conveniently map onto current political projections, and modern-day people whose lands are overlapped by current Mexico/U.S. borderlands are in precarious positions of being nations across nations. We would like to recognize and acknowledge the indigenous people of this land, the Coahuiltecan and Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribes of Texas. Members of the Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe are still fighting to protect and preserve the*

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*National Butterfly Center in Mission, Texas, Eli Jackson Cemetery in San Juan, Texas,
and all our threatened and endangered relations in this area from further harm.*

Overview

Sonia Saldívar-Hull (2007), in her critical introduction to the second edition of Gloria Anzaldúa's resonant *Borderlands/La Frontera*, observes, "The *Borderlands* genre continually refuses stasis" (p. 3). Ripe with implications for rhetoricians, this framing situates borderlands as at once recognizable enactments of epistemological action *and* as fundamentally contextual and thus resistant to singular characterization. Paradigmatic of place-as-incident, of region-as-method, borderlands are locations where political states, languages, cultures, and people meet and are divided in various kinds of discursive formations. They are boundaries that, according to Mezzadra and Neilson (2015), "overlap, connect, and disconnect in often unpredictable ways, contributing to shaping new forms of domination and exploitation. ... not merely geographical margins or territorial edges," but "complex social institutions… marked by tensions between practices of border reinforcement and border crossing" (pp. 81, 231).

So, what constitutes borderlands in our conception? They are the physical place as it exists in the material world but also on the map, the people but also the non-human occupants, the human-made (or modified) objects and the natural ones, and they are the discursive representations of each of these. Borderlands thinking attunes to all of these things, accounting for a "deep ambivalence" (Rivers, 2015) as well as an "overt acknowledgement of Indigenous materialism" (Clary-Lemon, 2019). Lastly, and of particular interest to writing instructors and writing center administrators, borderlands are proliferations, constructed and reinforced through writing, through policy and practice. Borderlands recognize their own liminality as spaces of transition and memory, at once *kairotic* and *choric*, neither static nor predetermined, constantly written and rewritten.

Proliferation of the Borderlands

An ambient factor complicating the work of teaching writing now, are the conditions of capitalism and the neoliberal academy, which are reproduced, both in terms of time and space, through articulations and proliferations of borders. The neoliberal academy is reproduced across a range of rhetorical acts, such as institutional branding, outsourcing to specialized companies for skilled labor in food service and maintenance, the increased reliance of educational technology including surveillance

and assessment software, and the tautological justifications of degrees and programs based on buzzwords like "research priority areas" and "return on investment." Each of these can likewise be analogized to what we witness in rhetorical constructions of the border: privatization of documentation processes, perpetual surveillance facilitated by state-of-the-art technology, participation in the economy as a condition for granting asylum, and public funds granted to private contractors to construct the border wall.

Like the border metaphor, neoliberalism flattens identity and atomizes individuality, rendering everyone as individual entrepreneurs indebted to no one else outside the heterosexual family unit (unless in financial terms) (Brown, 2015), ending history and constraining possible futures (Olson, 2012). Borders are places through which business transactions occur and are facilitated. Institutional discourse of borders, as a function of the neoliberal academy, does the same. Uncritical readings of border regional discourse, according to Wood (2012), "simply affirm dominant power relationships, especially when we accept national, institutional, and corporate domains as we find them" (p. 290). Necessarily then, writing classes and writing centers function within the constraints of neoliberal discourse, simultaneously reinforcing, promoting, and challenging its logics. This transactional nature is what Camarillo (2019) speaks to when he compares the writing center to "border processing centers," and what McNamee and Miley (2017) invoke when observing that "centers are intricately wrapped up in institutional status quo" (para 58).

Borderlands and the Neoliberal Academy

Educational institutions play an operative role in these proliferations, often by situating their identities in relation to borders—and borders' identities in relation to the institutions. The strategic plan for the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine reflects this function with one of its stated goals: "Leverage UTRGV's unique geographic location on the border of the United States and Mexico, a place rich with diverse cultural and family traditions, but also one burdened by health disparities."[1]

This example is representative of how institutions of higher education especially—including the universities that employ us and disciplinary organizations we belong to—appropriate the border in support of their own identities. In this case, the border is valuable because it validates the institution's anticipated educational and economic outcomes. This usage tracks with Rice's (2012) characterization of regions

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[1] The strategic plan language has been updated since this quotation was used.

as "not so much places but ways of strategically describing relationships among places, as well as the world those doing the descriptions wish to cultivate" (p. 206). Although the School of Medicine's plan acknowledges the needs of the region, and indeed it administers specialized programs to meet those needs, the political contexts that contribute to those needs are skipped over, as are the previous efforts to meet those needs made by the people of the region. Discourses such as these should remind us that, when we hear "borders" invoked by institutions of higher education, we should be prompted to ask, "who is included in this invocation," "who benefits or is harmed by this invocation," and above all, "border of what"?

Borderlands as Pedagogy

Anzaldúa (2007) reflects, "Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create" (p. 95), a charge picked up by poets and artists, including Anzaldúa herself, to write and create the Borderland through their work. A borderlands pedagogy extends this affordance and authority to students.

Often, students at our institution write directly about their experiences in the borderland, intentionally responding to their geographic, political, and cultural region. This writing of the borderland occurs indirectly, as well, *by virtue of their being students writing in the borderlands*. Everything they produce will be read not only on its merits and theirs, but as something from the borderland, or as something from a Hispanic-Serving Institution, or as something written by someone who looks and speaks like them (or who is, at least, perceived to). In practice, many students recognize this double consciousness, even if the flattening of the material, corporate conditions of the region can imbue a sense of national belonging through hegemonic participation. Every border region initiates unique challenges for the navigation of physical and discursive space, and student writing can "throw light on the subjectivities that come into being through such conflicts" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2015, p. 516).

A borderland as methodology approach to teaching and tutoring writing is amenable to these potential differences and includes such practices as

- encouraging students and tutors for whom it is appropriate to
- "use Black language and its rhetorical practices to subvert and survive the predominantly White writing center" (Faison, 2018),
- accounting for digital networks and access to technology, especially during the ongoing pandemic (Bell, 2020),
- acting brave by "Trying something new, even if you might fail," and "Making spaces 'safe enough' so that people are comfortable taking

> risks, even if they are still not entirely comfortable" (Martini & Webster, 2017),
>
> - developing writing assignment and activities that are equitable and just (Poe, Inoue, & Elliot, 2018),
> - coordinating the networked support of writing classes and the writing center, along with programs like accessibility services, food pantries, and mental health counseling (García de Müeller et al, 2020),
> - citing and providing professional opportunities, with intention and without apology, for women, Black and indigenous people of color, multilingual speakers, LGBTQI+ folks, disabled folks, and other scholars and tutors from underrepresented and oppressed groups (Clary-Lemon, 2019),
> - and enacting and developing pedagogies—and larger educational systems—that are not just inclusive and equitable, but that are explicitly and intentionally anti-capitalist and antiracist.

Borderlands as Methodology

Border regions are rarely afforded their autonomous identifications by national political, media, and academic institutions. Instead, what we get is a sort of geographical enjambment, with each unique region flattened according to a grammar of center and periphery. As a result, the expanse connecting Mexico and the United States is typically referred to as "the border" in national media, with rare distinction afforded to individual regions like the Rio Grande Valley, El Paso del Norte Borderplex, or San Diego-Tijuana (Sparrow, 2001). When individual regions are mentioned, it is often to note that they are defined by poverty, cartel/gang violence, or undocumented border crossings.

Two paradoxes of these representations provide opportunities for rethinking how we teach and research borderlands. First, different border regions are comparable, but considering them as something other than as belonging to a border might prove insightful. Second, when contesting dominant articulations of borders in our search for contextual accuracy, we may inadvertently reinforce hegemony.

In order to more precisely respond to these paradoxes, we're exploring the idea of borderlands as folds (Rice, 2012), which may allow us to momentarily eschew the connectedness of a network in order to illuminate disparate nodes with similar features that we—or institutions, or the networks themselves—might otherwise not emphasize. This also recalls Anzaldúa (2007), who criticizes readers who appropriate

her convenient metaphors but ignore what she calls "the angrier parts" that are "too threatening and too confrontational" (p. 232). In a sense, the thing that Anzaldúa critiques is the thing that many border institutions do: appropriating the immediate and advantageous aspects of the proximal border but ignoring la frontera.

A Provocation

Next, a brief provocation by way of a distich of images. The first is the old main entrance to Runn Elementary School located in Donna, Texas (Figure 1). As indicated below the name, the school was established in 1904, making it the oldest school in the Mid-Valley area.

Figure 1: Old Main Entrance to Runn Elementary School in Donna, TX

Recent records indicate that over 99% of the students at Runn are Hispanic, about 95% are coded as "economically disadvantaged," and 70% are coded as "English Learners," which in this context means that Spanish is the predominant language spoken in the home. It also has the best attendance rate in the district—nearly 96% for the full year (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

If you look outward from that door, you will assume the vantage in the second photo (Figure 2). Taking up most of the view is an agricultural field, most recently farmed for cotton. To the left is a Casa de Cambio, where you can exchange pesos for U.S. or Canadian dollars and back. Along the horizon are segments of the infamous— and incomplete—border wall. You might be able to make out the road, Salinas

Boulevard, which was rebranded as International Boulevard, in line with the naming convention. To the far right is the Donna–Río Bravo International Bridge and the Donna Texas Port of Entry.

Figure 2: View Outward from Old Main Entrance to Runn Elementary School in Donna, TX

Collectively, these scenes illustrate the contrasting yet intertwined consequences of this borderland region: manual labor, commerce, capital, security, transnational movement, and education.

Developing a Pedagogy of Attending

Thomas King's (2010) oft-quoted line from the book *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* tells readers that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). King references Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong who says, "Through my language I understand that I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths...I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns" (p. 2). Stories, thus, are relational, historical, cultural, and embedded reflections of a community's lived experiences. Stories enact both theory and method, which allows for (as King reminds us) the epistemological function of narrative.

In the spring 2019 semester, Marlene, along with three of her colleagues, Val Ortiz, Britt Ramirez Carter, and Thomas de la Cruz, all lecturers in UTRGV's First Year Writing Program, set out to design a new course. This pedagogical shift was energized by Asao Inoue's 2019 CCCCs address, "How do we language so people stop

killing each other, or what do we do about white language supremacy?," in which Inoue calls to mind Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk and social justice activist's conception of deep listening as a mindful attending to others (p. 363). This is Inoue:

> "Imagine this kind of assessment practice in your classrooms with your students. Assessment might be a problem-posing process that continually attends to questions like: 'Do I understand you enough? Am I making you suffer? Please help me to read your languaging properly'" (Inoue, 2019, p. 363).

> "So I reiterate and reframe Royster's questions: How are you attending, exactly? What are the markers of your compassionate attending? How is your attending a practice of judgement that your students can notice? How is it a practice that recognizes their existence without overly controlling them?" (Inoue, 2019, p. 364)

UTRGV as a B3 Institute

Inoue's anti-white-language-supremist call to action forced us to revisit UTRGV's stated goal to emerge as a "bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate [B3] institution" and as "an authentic Hispanic-serving Institution that builds on regional cultural and linguistic assets...as an integral part of how it transforms the Rio Grande Valley" (The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley). However, it is wise to be wary of language choices such as "assets" and "transformation" that implicitly place the border's value on the capitalistic validation of educational and economic outcomes steeped in neoliberalism.

First Year Writing Course Pilot

The constellating influence of Inoue's call to action and our institution's ambition to develop UTRGV's long-term institutional identity as "bicultural, bilingual, and biliterate" led to the development of a first-year writing course pilot, incorporating in no small way the tenants of cultural rhetorics. As we worked through ways to develop a course using a culturally responsive lens that leveraged language diversity, a cultural rhetorics methodology seemed the best starting point for a new syllabus design. This is cultural rhetorics scholar, Les Hutchinson-Campos, appearing on an episode of Shane Wood's *Pedagogue* (2020) podcast:

> So, the way I was taught cultural rhetorics follows four sort of tenets of practice, and that's really a way we view research, but also just knowledge. And so, those four tenets are story, relationality, decolonization, and constellation. There's no sort of ranking, all four of those things work together at all times.

This new course design was piloted in the fall 2019 semester in ten sections of ENGL 1301 Rhetoric & Composition I, the first course in a two-course, first-year writing sequence at UTRGV. This course design functioned as a pilot for an emerging pedagogy we called at the time the Latinx Attending Composition Classroom. The following guiding questions and outcomes emerged from conversations and planning, and are eloquently articulated below by Val Ortiz:

Preliminary Guiding Questions

- Who has the power to language and in what ways? In the classroom? In the community?
- How is knowledge created? In the classroom? In the community?
- How is knowledge shared? In the classroom? In the community?
- How does deep attending and reflection support sustained, productive action? In the classroom? In the community?

Guiding Outcomes

- **Inclusive Communication Skills:** Students will develop the understanding that language and writing are inseparable from cultural identities and develop texts that demonstrate respectful rhetorical choices tailored to varying purposes, audiences, and mediums of writing.
- **Anti-racist Research Methodologies**: Students will critically analyze popular research methodologies, explore alternative and culturally embedded methodologies, and make informed choices about which approaches to research they should employ within specific research situations.
- **Social Awareness and Responsibility:** Students will recognize and describe cultural diversity and the ways their own cultures are celebrated, recognized, ostracized, or ignored within specific social contexts and the implications for these behaviors.
- **Critical Counter-thinking:** Students encounter, examine, and question concepts surrounding reading, writing, and literacy from the perspectives of various discourse communities and intersectional identities.

With permission from the course designers, we share the first major course project called *(Des)conocimientos*. For students, the sequence begins with a discussion of the project's goals, including the use of narrative and positionality to engage students in their development of theories regarding language and identity. Then, we begin the iterative work of engaging readings (with a focus on BIPOC scholars). Drafting the project is a three-part process, beginning with the exploration and interrogation of identity markers. Students then focus on *their* goals for the project and how the readings connect to their emerging theories. All throughout the process students engage in feedback and revision, working as a community to develop a complete draft. An example of borderland methodology in action, the project seeks to respect students' autonomy while allowing them space to grapple with the complexity of who they are, where they come from, what they want to say, and how they want to say it.

Writing Spaces in/as Borderlands

In the fall 2020 semester, Marlene transitioned into a new role at the University, that of Writing Center Director. Thrust into a familiar liminal space, she found herself thinking anew about institutional, cultural, and linguistic borders of languaging.

As in the writing classroom, within and between approaches to teaching and serving Latinx students, remnants of historically maintained deficit models of learning are present in the Writing Center, as well. Tensions exist between the construction of the neoliberal academy and the lived experiences of the students (and faculty and staff) who reside, who grew up in these border towns.

Next, a set of rhetorically paired quotations, though lengthy, are vivid in the pictures they paint and the opportunities they inspire.

In his pivotal essay, "Unmaking Gringo Centers," Romeo García (2017) writes, "As a site of place, meaning, and knowledge-making, the writing center is about interactions and encounters, co-existing histories and trajectories, and is always in the process of being made" (García, p. 48). García continues,

> If we listen, well and deeply, writing centers are not stable or fixed, but the degree to which we offer up this space to be changed and transformed by student writers has yet to be observed. Writing centers have spatial and temporal attributes, and because of this, they are always becoming in the sense that centers are made through the particularities of bodily movements and actions. The degrees to which these actions are attributed to student writers,

as makers of space and negotiators of macro and micro contexts, have remained to be discussed. (p. 41)

In his essay, "Dismantling Neutrality: Cultivating Antiracist Writing Center Ecologies," Eric Camarillo (2019) invokes powerful if simultaneously unsettling and heartbreaking imagery when he writes,

> Academy, the University, as a different country with its own language, traditions, and culture. The writing center then becomes, essentially, a border processing center. In 2018, I fully intend to invoke all of the political ramifications and disturbing imagery that accompanies discussions of the border, especially here in Texas. The news is filled with horror stories of (brown) children ripped from their parents' arms, (brown) children in cages, (brown) children abused, (brown) children killed. (para 7)

Camarillo continues,

> In what ways do these types of stories impact the way universities, writing centers, and classrooms interact with (brown) students? The old way of thinking of writing centers, as neutral sites full of non-evaluative, non-directive questions and prodding, is no longer appropriate for the modern writing center. In order to answer the question of how writing centers serve minoritized students, particularly at minority serving institutions, writing center administrators must begin thinking of changes that can occur at the system level, at the level of the ecology. (p. 2)

A borderland as methodology approach affords teachers and administrators tasked with teaching and supporting students writing in the borderlands (with all its prospects and realities) the opportunity to directly confront that which is difficult (neoliberal academic agendas), painful (destructive reinforcement of language hegemony), and beautiful (the resilient ways our students exert their voice and agency within these landscapes).

Final Provocation

Given the array of potentials in this moment, it is imperative to ask: what can a writing center be, symbolically and materially? How can a writing center help students and

contribute to the community when it practices the deep attending Inoue advocates, when it allows itself to be changed and transformed, as García writes, by student writers? What can a writing center be, symbolically and materially, when, as Camarillo reminds us, as in the classroom, the languaging used in the borderlands is never neutral? What can a writing center be, symbolically and materially, when a University attends to how knowledge is created and shared in the borderlands, and we are all moved to share in language's possibilities for healing?

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