

Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency

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Once you create something to do it will be original and unique because it came about from your own imagination and if any one else tries to copy it, it won't be the same because you thought of it first from your own ideas.

—Anonymous student placement essay (qtd. in Bartholomae, “Inventing the University”)

Rhetoric and composition scholarship shows renewed and growing interest in the implications of differences in language for the teaching and study of composition, as evidenced by recent publications and the devotion of recent conferences in rhetoric and composition and several special issues of the field's leading journals to the subject, and by awards given in the last decade to essays and books addressing these issues.¹ Much of this work, and interest, is prompted by increasing recognition of the linguistic heterogeneity of the students populating US composition courses (as well as of the faculty teaching them); the ongoing pluralization of English into more and more world “Englishes”; the explosion of cross-language communication accompanying changes in global migration patterns and global communication technologies; and the permeability of linguistic boundaries

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and impossibility of identifying specific languages as “native” or “mother” tongues as a consequence of such changes to migration patterns and cross-language communicative activities.² And much of this work aims to counter dominant culture’s denigration of differences in language: most obviously, ostensible manifestations in writing of languages and language varieties distinct from Standard Written English (SWE), and writing that appears to deviate from syntactic and notational conventions of SWE, to mix or mesh “codes” such as African American English (hereafter AAE) and SWE (see Young, “Nah”), or that somehow includes languages or language varieties other than English (see Canagarajah, “Multilingual,” “Place”). Against those who would treat such differences as language deficits—“errors” to be eradicated—compositionists have defended the logic, legitimacy, and right of students to write differently.³

The continuing denigration of subordinated groups through attacks on their language requires that such work continue.⁴ At the same time, however, we also need to challenge the assumptions about language responsible in the first place for rendering those differences recognizable as deviations meriting denigration. That is, when responding to attacks on specific language practices, we need to contest, rather than work within, the assumptions underlying the ideological frameworks of the arguments to which we are responding. In this essay, we identify those assumptions with the ideology of *monolingualism*, which treats languages as discrete, stable, internally uniform, and linked indelibly to what is held to be each writer’s likewise stable and uniform location and social identity (see Gal and Irvine). Within the governing terms of monolingualist ideology, linguistic difference is identified as a defining problem for and characteristic of the socially “different,” seen as both linguistically and socially embodying something other than “the norm,” and hence requiring a “different” approach—likely in a different location, curriculum, or program segregated from “normal” writers. Within those same terms, writers identified as and located in the “mainstream” whose writing deviates in recognizable ways from the norm are perceived as creative innovators, while deviations in writing by those identified as belonging to subordinate social groups are taken as manifestations of the writers’ lack of knowledge or fluency with “the standard.” Conversely, mainstream writers’ seeming iterations of standardized forms and meanings are perceived as evidence of their “native” status (on one hand) or of their conformity to “common sense” or orthodoxy, while the seeming iterations of standardized forms and meanings by “nonmainstream” writers are perceived as evidence of either their mastery of the privileged language or their betrayal of their home or first languages.

Insofar as the ideology of monolingualism associates language difference strictly with subordinated groups, the labor necessary to the language practices of members of those groups marked by dominant ideology as different is taken not as normal but, rather, as evidence of the need to quarantine them from the mainstream, cases at best meriting pity and regret. Conversely, the labor of writers “unmarked”—that

is, those identified as mainstream—itself goes unremarked. Thus monolingualism's ideological identification of language difference strictly with the language of those already marked as socially different from the dominant places a double burden on members of subordinated groups: not simply the burden of the actual linguistic challenges they might face, but the perception of this burden as evidence of deviant lack—in a word, trouble. Scholars who identify language difference strictly with the challenges such writers face reinforce these burdens through their unwitting alignment with monolingualist ideology's treatment of monolingualism as the norm.

In this essay, we address the problematic results of this paradoxical alignment of work honoring language difference with the very language ideologies responsible for producing ways of understanding and denigrating language difference against which such work is consciously directed. We argue that in focusing on what dominant ideology has already defined—and thus rendered recognizable—*as* language difference, other significant forms of difference go unrecognized, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of recognition/misrecognition (see Thompson 23, Bourdieu 223). Consequently and consequentially, difference in language remains understood as deviation from an assumed norm of language sameness, despite strong evidence challenging the validity of that assumed norm. Thus, ironically, a false sense of the stability and status of the norm is reinforced, rather than challenged, even in arguments for deviating from that norm. Further, mainstream writer agency comes to be identified solely with the production of such deviation—with “resistance” to the supposed norm—with all the risks conventionally attending such resistance. All students are thereby put in the unenviable position of seeming to have to choose between either submitting to demands for conformity to dominant conventions in order to survive academically and economically, but at the cost of having their writing devalued for its apparent lack of originality and creativity, on the one hand, or, on the other, resisting such demands in order to achieve originality and creativity and maintain their integrity, but at personal risk of academic and economic failure. And their teachers are caught in an equivalent impasse: torn between teaching “accommodation” to dominant demands or “critical resistance” to such demands, or else trying to maintain some uneasy balance between these (see, for example, Harwood and Hadley).

To counter these effects, we argue for an alternative conception of language difference in writing: one that, by insisting on the temporal character of utterances, recognizes difference not as deviation from a norm of “sameness” but as itself the norm of language use. Drawing on conceptualizations of the relationship between language, agency, and power advanced in Bourdieu's account of language and symbolic power, Judith Butler's theory of the politics of the performative, Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration, and Alastair Pennycook's theory of language as a local practice, we argue that agency is manifested not only in those acts of writing that we are disposed to recognize as different from a norm, but also in those acts

of writing that are ordinarily recognized as producing simply “more of the same”: conventional, unoriginal, ordinary, conformist. From this perspective, difference is an inevitable product of all language acts. Hence, all writers face not the dilemma of whether to be “different” in their writing, but the questions of what kinds of difference to make through their writing, how, and why. This is not to deny social realities that put the burden on those marked as linguistically different to conform to dominant demands (though in practice such marking often appears to serve as proxy for differences having nothing to do with language per se). Rather, it is to challenge the validity of the very basis for that marking. Without discounting the significant difficulties in working across languages as traditionally conceived, we argue that those difficulties must be recognized as, in fact, the norm rather than evidence of the deviance of those confronting them. Doing so can help us better address the extra difficulties historically shouldered by writers designated by dominant culture as “non-native” users of English.

We begin by articulating the theoretical basis for our alternative perspective on difference in language, a perspective we identify with a *translingual* approach to language difference. The term *translingual* is often associated with language practices, and arguments defending the language practices and rights, of those deemed linguistically “other”: writers identified as outside the sociolinguistic mainstream who regularly confront the challenge of working across languages—in composition studies, with writers designated ESL (English as a second language), EFL (English as a foreign language), or at least “second language.” From such a view, a translingual approach is simply another permutation of a catalog of arguments for conventional multilingualism and for tolerating diverse language “codes” and “varieties” and the mixing of these. Such a view sees arguments for a translingual approach as addressing the language practices and needs of only those writers defined and recognized by dominant culture as different from the sociolinguistic norm—the bi- or multilingual, the ESL student, the second language writer, the NNSE (non-native speaker of English). Conversely, those identified as English monolinguals are seen as beyond the purview or concern of teachers and scholars taking a translingual approach.

By contrast, we define a translingual approach as one that recognizes difference as the norm, to be found not only in utterances that dominant ideology has marked as different but also in utterances that dominant definitions of language, language relations, and language users would identify as “standard.” As we and our colleagues have argued elsewhere, a translingual approach is best understood as a disposition of openness and inquiry toward language and language differences, not as a matter of the number and variety of languages and language varieties one can claim to know (Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur 311). Such an approach recognizes translation and the renegotiation of meaning as operating in all language acts, including those seemingly working within as well as across language boundaries (Horner, Donahue,

and NeCamp 287). For, from a translingual perspective, all writing always involves rewriting and translation, inevitably engaging the labor of recontextualizing (and renewing) language, language practices, users, conventions, and contexts.

We advance such a perspective in order to counter the temptation to simply repackage existing arguments about language difference, as defined by dominant culture, under the seemingly new guise of being translingual. Until we learn to see all language practices as negotiations across asymmetrical relations of power, we cannot do full justice to the extraordinary art and risk involved in the deliberative language work of members of subordinated groups in their efforts to produce meanings and forms that seemingly iterate or deviate from the norm. That is, until we see translinguality as relevant to and operating in the learning and writing of all writers, whether marked by the dominant as mainstream or nonmainstream, the art and struggle of writers from subordinated groups will always be dismissed as irrelevant to the work of mainstream learners.

Following our articulation of the theoretical frame for this alternative perspective, we illustrate what this approach might yield for an understanding of writer agency by considering a student text that appears to be highly conventional: the “White Shoes” essay discussed by David Bartholomae in his well-known essay “Inventing the University.” We have deliberately chosen to focus on the “White Shoes” essay because of its standing as representative of the conventional: as an anonymous placement essay, it would appear to be disconnected from a specific location and, thus, to have a generic, universal significance unlike, say, an essay whose provenance is easily traced, and identifiable, as distinguishable, specifiable, “local”—tied to a particular time, place, context, writer, and language. The apparent conventionality of “White Shoes” has encouraged the tendency Kurt Spellmeyer critiques to read it as an illustration of “the normative stability of discourse at the expense of both the writer’s situation and the eventfulness of language itself” (76). But we need to learn ways to recognize the locality and difference of the seemingly universal, as well as the greater significance of what the dominant trains us to mark as “merely local,” “different,” “parochial,” or “exotic” (see Lillis and Curry, Ch. 6), and to recuperate the “eventfulness” of seemingly conventional uses of language. By arguing for the need to acknowledge the labor of a mainstream writer to negotiate and construct language differences, we hope to illustrate the usefulness of attending to difference in the production of the seemingly same for all students, “mainstream” or “not.”

We end by addressing anxieties that adopting such a translingual perspective might put at risk both efforts to help students to learn SWE and efforts to preserve and maintain the status, integrity, and defining boundaries of threatened languages. We argue that in adopting a preservationist stance, these anxieties engender a problematic transmission pedagogy at odds with the agency of writers in contributing to

both SWE and threatened languages as living languages, an agency foregrounded by a translingual approach to writing.

**I: AGENCY: RELOCATING LANGUAGE, PRACTICE, CONVENTION,
AND CONTEXT IN SPACE AND TIME**

Dominant conceptualizations of language (and language users), language and literacy practices, conventions, and contexts adopt a spatial framework to locate these, identifying them in terms of insides and outsides, borders and margins; and identifying relationships between them in terms of degree of distance or even overlap, and hierarchy. In this spatial framework, language, language users, practices, and conventions are identified with stable contexts that individuals either write “(with) in” or deviate “from,” and which writing is either bound by or on the “cutting edge” of. These contexts themselves are located in relation to one another in terms of proximity (near-far), overlap, and hierarchy, and conventions identified with a particular context are probed for how or whether they might be “exported” from or “imported” to a context other than their proper originary context. Such a framework sets writerly agency against structure, measured by the degree to which the writer resists or works “against” the constraints of convention and/or context.

By contrast, the translingual approach we are advocating adopts a framework that locates language and language users, practices, conventions, and contexts in terms of time as well as space. Thus, instead of treating these as discrete, preexisting, stable, and enumerable entities, a temporal-spatial frame treats all of them as always emergent, in process (a state of becoming), and their relations as mutually constitutive. Even time itself is seen as emergent. As Karin Tusting observes, “[P]ast’ and ‘future’ are emergent in ‘present’; a continually revocable past is constructed in an emergent present, which is at the same time constructing and extending into the future” (37). Applying this temporal dimension to our understanding of literacy practices, Tusting observes, counters the danger of seeing them “in a rigid, structural way,” “freeing us from the tyranny of imposing a static structure on dynamic events” (39). In the following, we articulate what is yielded by adopting a temporal-spatial perspective toward language and language users, practices, conventions, and contexts.⁵

Language and Language Users

From a temporal-spatial perspective, language and language users are best understood as a dynamic process of *structuration*—the term Giddens uses to counter the tendency to locate either social structures or individual actors outside history, where they are imagined to operate on the other. For Giddens, structure and agency are instead

mutually dependent and co-constitutive. As he states, “The structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems” (69). From such a perspective, the structural properties or patterns of relations we observe in social or linguistic systems are best studied in terms of their co-constitutive relation with the practices that both deploy and produce them. As Butler puts it, “If such a [social] structure is dependent upon its enunciation for its continuation, then it is at the site of enunciation that the question of its continuity is to be posed” (19). Language is thus the ongoing emergent product of practice: “We do things with language,” Butler states, and “produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. [. . .] a name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences” (8). In short, language is the achieved outcome of the everyday doing of language by ordinary people (Pennycook, *Language* 115; cf. Calvet 7).

Practice

A translingual approach to language and language users shifts attention to the constitutive work and politics accomplished through everyday language *practice* (Pennycook 23–24, 28). Scholars taking the “practice turn” treat practice as neither reducible to individual activity nor to socially, culturally, historically determined behavior (see Schatzki). Instead, practice is seen as giving meaning to what we do because it connects us socially to others, as we respond to social relations and conditions demanding meaningful responses. Those taking such an approach understand agency as neither eviscerated by the social nor operating on the social from some privileged “master” position outside it. Instead, as Butler observes, “[T]he subject is neither a sovereign agent with a purely instrumental relation to language, nor a mere effect whose agency is pure complicity with prior operations of power. The vulnerability to the Other [. . .] is never overcome in the assumption of agency (one reason that ‘agency’ is not the same as ‘mastery’)” (26).

From this perspective, the seeming regularities of language can best be understood not as the preexisting rules determining language practices but, rather, as the products of those practices: an effect of the ongoing process of sedimentation in which engagement of language practices participates, a process of building up over time (Pennycook 47, 125). For example, from this perspective, grammar is “the name for certain categories of observed repetitions” in language practices (Hopper 156; qtd. in Pennycook 46). In this sense, the apparent regularity of language and grammar is the achievement of recontextualizing (Butler) or re-forming that contributes to the ongoing sedimentation of language practices.

Convention

The notion of language sedimentation invoked by both Pennycook and Butler draws attention to the temporal dimension of convention as well as context, language, and identity, and thus to the inevitability of difference, even in iteration. To explain how what is commonly viewed as doing the same thing again in fact represents doing something different, allowing the possibility of simultaneous sameness and difference, Pennycook draws on the proverb that we can never step into the same river twice (35). From this perspective, that which we do is both the “same” and “different,” just as the river is and is not the same, and just as we ourselves are and are not the same when we step, seemingly again, into a river.

Adopting this temporal-spatial perspective enables us to see how language, texts, and discourse that we have learned to recognize as simply the same—merely “conventional”—differ, and acts of apparent repetition exhibit agency, for they produce simultaneously sameness and difference (Pennycook 138). Thus, far from representing an exception to the norm, difference is itself the norm of utterances, produced in repetitions as well as apparent deviations (Pennycook 33). This counters the dominant tendency to identify agency and creativity strictly in terms of recognizable divergence from what has gone before while marking repetition, mimicry, and similarity as noncreative, mechanical, unthinking reproduction, and hence evidence of a lack of agency (Pennycook 35, 39, 49). For if, as Giddens observes, “Every instance of the use of language is a potential modification of that language at the same time as it acts to reproduce it” (220), then every instance of the use of language, including what is recognized as repetition, represents an exercise of agency, a choice, whatever the level of consciousness in the making of it, and a contribution to sedimentation.

Through what Homi Bhabba refers to as *fertile mimesis*, two interrelated forms of difference emerge through what we are disposed to think of as merely repetitive uses of standardized codes: (1) semiodiversity, or differences in meaning; and (2) differences in the meaning and order of power relations as we recontextualize linguistic patterns, such as what has been identified as a standardized lexico-grammatical code, across time and space. These differences are illustrated by the ways in which ostensibly identical utterances carry significantly different meanings in different contexts. As postcolonial theories have taught us, mimicry of dominant powers, arts, discourses, and colonizers by the subordinate creates new meanings and new relationships between colonized and colonizer with the potential to undermine the status and distinction of the dominant (Pennycook 44; compare to Bhabba; Pratt, “Arts”). The specific differences between the temporal-spatial contexts of individual instances of iteration by definition recontextualize—and hence re-form—the very feature or meaning we appear to borrow from (our own and others’) previous instances of language use (Pennycook 45).

Further, as Pennycook observes, we “can make intentional changes to what we do, and these changes may [themselves] become sedimented over time” (49). Even “small, unintentional slippages, changes to the ways we do and say things,” may start to be repeated and become sedimented practices when social, cultural, and economic reasons for change recur as demands to be addressed in instances of language acts (Pennycook 49; cf. Tusting 42). And this sedimentation affects the formation of not only language but also our subjectivities, life trajectories, the world we live in, and our relations with others and that world.

Context

Just as language is seen as emergent, resulting from interactions rather than preceding these, from a translingual perspective, contexts are understood as always emergent, exerting enabling and constraining pressures on but also being actively shaped and reshaped by individual language practices. As James Gee has observed, “Situations (contexts) do not just exist [. . .] [but] are actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted, and transformed moment-by-moment through ongoing *work*,” explaining that “[a] word or deed takes its meaning from a context which it, in turn, helps to create” (190; see also Fox 16).

A recent study by Roz Ivanič and her colleagues on relations between and among those literacy practices associated with “everyday” domains and those associated with “school” domains documents both the limitations of understanding contexts in purely spatial terms and the need to locate these temporally as always emergent (Ivanič et al., *Improving Learning*). The study initially focused on possible interactions among these practices and the possibility of everyday literacies supporting those required in college courses through “border literacy practices” and “border crossing” of literacy practices across domains (Ivanič et al. 22–23). On reflection, however, Ivanič and her colleagues found that although “[they] had assumed a border space, [. . .] as [they] moved to bordering as a practice rather than identifying border literacy practices as entities, [they] saw that the relationship between domains and practices was more complex and messy: they co-emerge” (172). For example, as Ivanič herself has observed elsewhere regarding this study, she discovered that “the social domain changes the practice” (“Bringing” 114) and, it would seem by implication, vice versa. Hence, Ivanič and her colleagues eventually came to question their conceptualizations of border literacy practices (Ivanič et al. 169), “context,” “domain,” “site,” and “setting” (Ivanič et al. 23), as well as the associated metaphors of “boundaries and borders, and of boundary zones, boundary objects and border-crossing” (23, 24): they concluded that such metaphors lead to a “static two-dimensionality about the Venn-diagram representations and mapped spaces which follow from talk of ‘borders’ and ‘border-crossings’” (172). Alternatively, as Tusting explains, “patterns” of literacy practices that would ordinarily be identified with specific, stable contexts

do not exist beyond the recurrent present events that constitute them. Instead, they emerge through these present events “in” time, rather than being imposed from “outside” time. Memories of these recurrent events make up a constructed past, which is reconstructed [recontextualized] every time it is recalled or drawn upon as a resource; it is through drawing upon this resource of a constructed past, drawing on memories of recurrent events, that it becomes possible to construct these patterns. And the constructed patterns are themselves drawn on in the constitution of future events. (40)

As Tusting’s explanation suggests, our knowledge of contexts is itself a consequence of specific, temporally located practices, practices that engage—in the sense of reconstructing and producing—specific ways of making sense of the past, present, and future; the self; others; the world; and the relations among all these. Writers can thus be seen not as writing *in* a language or context, but as always writing, or rewriting, language, context, and subjectivity. Culture, ethnicity, nationality, race, geography, and environments are likewise seen as emergent and relational, in a state of becoming, not only informing but also informed by how we negotiate—reconstruct, re-member, and reconfigure—identifications or “knowledge” of “the context” of our life and work and our practical senses of the relations and conditions most urgently requiring meaningful responses. For example, dichotomized relations of power (man versus nature or white versus black and brown) operating in the contexts of our life and work are seen as not only mediating but also mediated—formed and ordered—by individual instances of languaging. By foregrounding the mutual interdependence of structure and language practices, a translingual approach shifts attention to matters of agency—the ways in which individual language users fashion and refashion standardized conventions, subjectivity, the world, and their relations to others and the world.

Agency

A translingual approach thus defines agency operating in terms of the need and ability of individual writers to map and order, remap and reorder conditions and relations surrounding their practices, as they address the potential discrepancies between the official and practical, rather than focusing merely on what the dominant has defined as the exigent, feasible, appropriate, and stable “context.” In defining agency in this way, a translingual approach marks reading and writing and their teaching as what Pennycook terms *mesopolitical* action: action that mediates the “micro” and the “macro” in light of the specificity of relations, concerns, motives, and purposes demanding meaningful response in individual writers’ past, present, and future lives (29).

Butler highlights the political work accomplished through iteration by addressing potential tensions between the “authorizing context for sedimented practices” (159)—e.g., official accounts of the “context” for a particular kind of writing, such as academic writing—and one’s lived experience or practical sense of that context (for

instance, one's experience of the asymmetrical relations of race, gender, class, and age operating in a context that urgently demands meaningful responses and challenges official accounts of that "context"). Butler's theory of the social iterability of linguistic practice thus treats all linguistic practices as recontextualization—"rehearsals" that try out or practice conventional formulae in different temporal-spatial contexts. Butler thus highlights the potential of all acts of recontextualization to create nonconventional ways of rehearsing the very convention being iterated by dislodging (164) or "unmooring" (165) the convention from its ostensible "originary" or authoring context (or, the prior territory of its operation) (147).

By adopting a temporal-spatial frame, Butler's theory of the social iterability of linguistic practice defines discursive agency in two ways. First, it marks all acts of iteration as processes of decontextualization, breaking with a prior context to recontextualize, that is, to assume (take on, begin to have) new contexts (Butler 150). Second, it emphasizes the conditions of possibilities of gradual sedimenting of alternative conventions—collective uptakes across time and space—of new meanings and functions produced in individual acts of recontextualization, constituting a building up motivated by a shared sense of what count as meaningful responses in our lives, including those systematically dismissed in prior contexts. By grounding agency in the mutually constitutive relation of the individual and the social, the official and the lived or practical, Butler's theory marks repetitions as acts of recontextualization that might exceed and confound the authoring contexts associated with any convention and open up the possibility of constituting contexts yet to come (160). It centers attention on the possibility of social transformation—breaking open the possibility of future iteration of what has no prior legitimacy, such as, for instance, reappropriating "queer"—the very term used to perpetuate homophobia—*through* iteration in order to configure a different future (161).⁶

II: REWRITING DIFFERENCE AND AGENCY IN STUDENT WRITING

Adopting a temporal-spatial framework for locating language, practices, conventions, and contexts makes it possible to recognize difference and agency as in fact the norm for all writing—indeed, to see iteration as agentive—and to resolve the dilemma that adopting a strictly spatial framework postulates of seeming to have to choose between exercising writer agency through recognizable breaks with ostensibly stable language practices and conventions—and thereby putting one's academic and economic survival at risk—and purchasing such survival by submitting to demands for conformity. The question a temporal-spatial framework poses is not whether to be different, given the inevitability of difference, but what kind of difference to attempt, how, and why.

What might be the pedagogical implications of taking a translingual approach

to iterational agency in a course using student writing and students' reading of one another's writing as primary sites for the teaching and learning of writing? We see such a course proceeding recursively along the following directions: (1) foregrounding the sedimented nature of social and discursive practices; (2) examining the processes of recontextualization involved in iterations of conventional ways of doing language; (3) considering the possible short- and long-term consequences, often unintended and not always immediately observable, that individual instances of recontextualization might bring to conventions iterated, the contexts of iteration, and the subjectivity and life of the person using them; (4) making decisions and taking actions on whether to use textual cues to explicitly or implicitly foreground alternative meanings, functions, and contexts resulting from a specific instance of iteration. The emphasis would thus be put on writers' inevitable engagement in revision and translation, not only in their production of what dominant culture has disposed readers to recognize as "new," but also in what is commonly identified as writers' iterations of the conventional and "the same."

To illustrate what a pedagogy pursuing these directions might look like, we discuss a student placement essay reproduced in David Bartholomae's widely circulated and cited essay "Inventing the University."⁷ Identified by Bartholomae as the "White Shoes" essay, it was written in response to an assignment asking students to "describe a time when you did something you felt to be creative. Then, on the basis of the incident you have described, go on to draw some general conclusions about 'creativity.'" The student wrote,

During the football season, the team was supposed to wear the same type of cleats and the same type socks. I figured that I would change this a little by wearing my white shoes instead of black and to cover up the team socks with a pair of my own white ones. I thought that this looked better than what we were wearing, and I told a few of the other people on the team to change too. They agreed that it did look better and they changed their combination to go along with mine. After the game people came up to me and said that it looked very good the way we wore our socks, and they wanted to know why we changed from the rest of the team.

I feel that creativity comes from when a person lets his imagination come up with ideas and he is not afraid to express them. Once you create something to do it will be original and unique because it came about from your own imagination and if any one else tries to copy it, it won't be the same because you thought of it first from your own ideas. (qtd. in Bartholomae, "Inventing" 73)

This student essay has an ambiguous status within the framework prevailing in Bartholomae's essay and much of the scholarly debate surrounding and responding to Bartholomae's argument.⁸ Unlike, say, the "Clay Model" or "Composing Songs" essays Bartholomae also discusses, "White Shoes" seems to evince no discursive struggle, hence it would seem to serve primarily to illustrate "the normative stability of discourse at the expense of both the writer's situation and the eventfulness of

language itself.”⁹ For this very reason, however, it is particularly apt for our purposes: it appears to exemplify writing that, far from being vulnerable to being dismissed because of its deviation from norms, appears to iterate norms with a vengeance—to wallow in conventionality.

First, as Bartholomae notes, the “White Shoes” essay conforms closely (if not completely) to conventions of SWE in its syntax and notational practices (“Inventing” 80); thus its “low” placement cannot easily be accounted for in terms of the writer’s lack of command over such conventions. Further, its argument iterates a conventional set of commonplaces about creativity tied up with what Bartholomae identifies as the discourse of the “Great Man” theory of history (73). To be more highly ranked (placed), the writer would need to set himself against that discourse rather than merely iterate its commonplaces, for, as Bartholomae observes, “the university [. . .] is the place where ‘common’ wisdom is only of negative value—it is something to work against” (“Inventing” 78). Perhaps most strikingly, the writer’s claimed creative exploit of donning white shoes on the football field appears to iterate exactly that of American football athlete Billy “White Shoes” Johnson, who—long before the anonymous student’s composition of the “White Shoes” essay—gained early notoriety and his nickname when playing football in high school by deciding to wear white shoes instead of black (see “Billy”). In short, the essay represents the obverse of writing that readers are disposed to recognize as somehow “different”; instead, it epitomizes iteration of “the same.”

Teachers adopting the temporal-spatial framework of a translingual approach would of course address the conventionality of the discourse iterated in the “White Shoes” essay. However, they would not approach such conventionality as evidence of the writer’s location in a stable discourse from which he would need to be removed. Instead, those adopting a temporal-spatial framework would address the essay’s conventionality in terms of the difference the recontextualization of that conventional discourse might potentially accomplish by its temporally different iteration of it, asking what kinds of semiodiversity, and difference in power relations, that iteration might produce, and how and why the writer of the essay might find it meaningful to work toward such potentialities. Highlighting the sedimented nature of all linguistic practices, a teacher could ask students not whether the essay was conventional, as opposed to somehow resisting conventionality in its syntax or discourse, but instead what kind of discourse the essay might be contributing to sedimenting, how, and why (compare to Fox 23).

Teachers adopting this approach to difference and agency in student writing might well take as their starting point an identification of the essay’s iteration of both Billy “White Shoes” Johnson’s exploits on the gridiron specifically and the great man theory of history more generally, as Bartholomae suggests doing, perhaps leading students to observe, as Bartholomae speculates, that the writer

“copied [from Billy “White Shoes” Johnson] the very thing he said was his own idea, ‘original and unique.’” (“Inventing” 73)

The point of such identifications would not be to chastise the student for “copying” and claiming as his own the commonplaces and exploits of others but, rather, to ask what difference might be accomplished through such identifications and iterations, and hence recontextualizations, of these in a placement essay on “creativity.” Following Tusting’s reminder of the constructed character of the past and of “recurrent” events and patterns in those events (40), students’ identification of iterated commonplaces and ideas—themselves constructions subject to revision—could serve as possible starting points for acknowledging the constitutive roles of writers’ and readers’ iterational agency and for experimenting with ways of further mobilizing the writer’s (and his or her colleagues’) agency.

Treating these as contingent starting points would require examining the small, ordinarily unrecognized, often unintended shifts in meaning, function, and context produced through iterating-recontextualizing a certain convention. In a discussion of the “White Shoes” essay, for instance, we might ask students to consider how the writer’s apparent iteration of the discourse of the great man theory of history might shift their sense of the originary context in which they have encountered that discourse: their sense of who is authorized to tell such histories, under what conditions, and who might ordinarily be authorized to serve as the representative so-called great men of history. A discussion of students’ previous encounters with that convention (or others) in history textbooks, fiction, or movies could then be used to tease out the shift in meaning, function, and context produced by the “White Shoes” writer’s deployment of such a convention in a placement test and in an account of his role on a school football team—for example, how might his deployment of a patently borrowed story of wearing white shoes on the gridiron serve as a sly thumb in the eye to the readers of his placement essay asking for a description of “creativity,” thereby overturning ordinary power relations between the evaluated and the evaluators? How might it change those readers’ perception of Johnson’s own exploits? Or how might the writer’s recontextualization unsettle expert/novice, grand/ordinary people’s power relations implied by iterations of the great man theory of history in textbooks and mass culture, posing alternative meanings for *great*, *author*, and *history*, and thus unmooring official stories of who and what makes, and constitutes, history? The purpose of such discussions would, of course, not be to impose a settled, “true” meaning to the text nor the intention of the writer (what the writer is saying or intending to say), nor would it be to render the writer’s text immune from critique or revision. Instead, such discussions would aim at foregrounding student agency and responsibility by involving students in acts of reading-writing that consider their prior engagement through those acts in the production of differences to

meaning, conventions, and contexts, including writing that appears merely to iterate “the same,” and also the potential, often unintended, consequences to these created through writers’ acts of iteration.¹⁰

Discussion of the possible consequences of a particular iteration of a convention would need to be accompanied by reflections on whether the writer might want to actively pursue such possibilities when revising an essay. Further, such reflection would need to be grounded in a consideration of the potential discrepancy between official accounts of the context of the writing being produced—say, a college placement test or an essay for a first-year writing course—and the student’s practical sense of the conditions and relations appearing to demand responses at the micro-macro scene of her life in the past, present, and future. Addressing the difference to language, convention, and context produced through iterations in writing would enable exploration of the social logic of linguistic iterability: what sense of the past, present, and possible social future writers might imagine for themselves and others that might be accomplished, and iterated, through their writing, how, and why.

Of course, the accomplishment of such imagined social futures would be contingent on the subsequent and specific kinds of uptake of those iterations by readers and other writers. Teachers and students thus would also need to consider whether and how to “cue” the recontextualizations hoped for: why others might contribute to further sedimentation of the practice in which the writer has engaged. This might involve exploring ways to try to textually head off readings that would deem the writer’s iterations evidence of either the writer’s unwitting entrapment in conventional discourse or her “naïveté,” either because of what is iterated, the recontextualization such iteration proposes, or the social positioning of the writer—in the case of the “White Shoes” essay, a prospective student of first-year college writing. What might the “White Shoes” writer do, for example, to encourage readers’ serious engagement with his concluding claims about the relationship between copying and production of “the same” as a justification for his own creativity in appearing to copy exactly the exploits of Billy “White Shoes” Johnson, despite the writer’s low status as the writer of a placement essay? Would cuing readers to engage the writer’s claims more seriously be worth undermining the possible slyness of thumbing the eye of placement essay readers at which the writer might also be aiming? For whom, and why?¹¹

Taking this approach to difference and agency in student writing assumes the exercise of agency, and production of difference, as an inevitable characteristic of all students’ utterances. Thus, rather than putting students in the unenviable position of seeming to have to choose between being either submissive victims to demands of the dominant for conformity or tragic heroes resisting those demands against all odds, and at personal academic and economic risk; and rather than treating language difference as a characteristic distinguishing some students as deviations from the norm, teachers can pose more productive and, we argue, valid questions to students

about what kind of difference to attempt to make through their work with and on conventions in their writing, how, and why: questions that should resonate with students' own sense of writing, and with the choices all writers face.

Indeed, we take students' expressed disinterest in producing writing that deviates in recognizable ways from conventional academic writing, and the apparent determination of most students to learn dominant conventions—both of which are frequently remarked on—not as evidence that students are satisfied with status quo social relations, nor that they embody the pure pursuit of economic self-interest (Ivanič, “Bringing” 112; Wingate; compare to Lu and Horner, “Composing” 113–14 and following). Rather, we take such expressions to suggest that students have a more complex and practical (realistic) understanding of what social change, and the deployment of conventions, might mean. By saying that students are practical, we do not mean they are resigned to what the dominant has determined are the limits of the possible—“limits meaning,” as Raymond Williams observes, “*bard facts*, often of power or money in their existing and established forms” (259; emphasis added). Instead, we suggest they are practical in the sense of grasping “‘the whole truth of this situation’ (which can allow that an existing reality is changeable or is changing)” (259), including the changing, changeable, always emergent reality of language, conventions, and contexts of writing. In other words, taking a translingual approach to language and language practices, conventions, and contexts recognizes—in the sense of honoring and bringing to conscious awareness and action—students' practical sense of agency. And it is thus likely to help those students frustrated by powerful dominant ideological beliefs that they lack agency and that they are doomed, as students, to engage in the demeaning (and impossible) act of mechanically copying conventions as a means to chimerical “mastery” of them. Seeing iteration as a site for producing the simultaneously different and the same can help students explore options, make decisions, and take actions on how to work with and on and to rework particular conventions in their writing.

III. AGENCY AND DIFFERENCE IN ITERATION, AND STUDENTS' LANGUAGE NEEDS AND RIGHTS

We have argued that adopting the temporal-spatial framework of a translingual approach to understanding agency and difference in (student) writing offers a more productive approach to working with writing that appears “merely” to iterate the conventional by acknowledging, and addressing, the difference obtaining, and agency exercised, in every iteration. Taking such an approach can also enable us to move beyond debilitating debates pitting students' language “needs” against their “rights”: debates that assume a stability not only to students' identities, desires, beliefs, and values, but also to the languages they need, and have a right, to use. Such arguments

are directed at combating the injustices arising from the unequal status assigned to languages and language varieties, and from unequal access to language education, associated with the ideology of monolingualism. Paradoxically, however, these arguments also reinforce tenets of that same ideology.¹² Earlier in this essay, we explained how a focus on what dominant ideology has already defined, and thus disposed us to recognize, as language difference renders other differences unrecognizable—the differences arising from the temporal location of utterances—and grants a stability and sameness to language, language varieties, and languages that identifies deviation as the only apparent form by which writer agency might be exercised. Here, we suggest that in recognizing languages as always emergent and difference as the norm of utterances, a translingual approach better enables us to meet students' need and right to learn to iterate conventions, and likewise their felt need and right to iterate subordinated languages, than do arguments that paradoxically reinforce tenets of monolingualism responsible for the language discrimination they aim to counter.

Such arguments locate what is to be safeguarded in purely spatial terms. The concern to give students "access" to SWE assumes a stable SWE as the "power language" to which teachers can give students access (see, for example, Janks). As comforting as such a framework appears to be, we would argue that it is both invalid and less practically and pedagogically effective than approaching SWE from a temporal-spatial framework. Most problematically, such arguments reinforce the literacy myth holding that students' language is the primary reason for their subordinate social, academic, and economic status, despite the plethora of evidence demonstrating that language difference serves primarily as a proxy to justify racial and ethnic prejudice. At a practical pedagogical level, moreover, the bargain offered students is the rather grim one of submission to a putatively stable SWE as the price of access to putative success (or at least survival): a strategy that offers students the comfortable chimera of stability in return for abandoning their agency.

Alternatively, a translingual approach sees students as agentive, and producing difference, even in their iterations of what many readers are disposed to recognize as SWE.¹³ Thus, the question posed to students is not whether to submit to a putatively stable SWE but, rather, what to do with what might pass as SWE, how, and why: what specific language practices (in syntax, notation, diction, organization, and so on) to contribute to sedimenting, to what ends, and by what means. In other words, we can argue for teaching students from subordinated groups to produce standardized forms of English not in terms of their need to submit to dominant expectations, but instead in terms of the fertile mimesis and critical agency these students' (re) production and recontextualization of that English might constitute. For example, we can learn to identify the semiodiversity such engagement yields as a consequence of who is using what language forms when and how: its recontextualization and the

potential that recontextualization has for transforming the conditions in which the writers, as well as everyone else, live.

By the same token, efforts to preserve the language practices of subordinated peoples—which are at risk of disappearance—would, from a translingual perspective, also be understood to engage in such recontextualization of always emergent practices. We see such recontextualization and emergent character in recent arguments by Scott Lyons on the “sovereignty” of indigenous languages (“Fine Art”; “There’s No Translation”).¹⁴ We take Lyons’s own account of the culture maintained through language to be aligned with a translingual approach in its emphasis on the living and changing nature of culture and language: he identifies the “idea of culture” indicated by various Ojibwe words and expressions for culture as expressing “a single overarching concern: the desire to make *more* life. [. . .] Living in a certain manner [. . .] [that] allows a community to see, use, decide, and make clear judgments that are geared toward the production of *more* life” (“There’s No Translation” 135; emphasis added). *Anishinaabe bimaadizi*, translated as “living as an Indian,” Lyons notes, “possesses connotations of movement,” leading Winona LaDuke to translate the noun form of the expression as “continuous rebirth” (4; qtd. in Lyons, “There’s No Translation” 136). Thus it is that Lyons makes the seemingly oxymoronic, but from a translingual perspective merely paradoxical, claim that “[t]he Ojibwe are pure, if changing” (“There’s No Translation” 86) because, as he explains elsewhere, “Indians don’t assimilate; they modernize” (“Fine” 93).

Such “modernizing” is distinct from the hybridity often celebrated by postcolonial theorists (Lyons notes that Native Americans remain in a pre-postcolonial—that is, a *colonized*—state, hence their interest in decolonization and sovereignty [“Fine” 86–87]). Consequently Lyons ultimately argues for maintaining borders between Ojibwemowin and English (and against code-meshing) in a way that would seem to locate both Ojibwemowin and English in purely spatial, stable terms, despite recognizing the invalidity of such a conceptualization of languages.¹⁵ But we take this as a further illustration of the dominant tendency to associate writerly agency with recognizable difference in language, whether that language be the dominant (English) or the subordinate (Ojibwe), whereas the rhetorical sovereignty for which Lyons continues to argue is fully aligned with maintaining a collective writerly agency and specific linguistic practice, in which both Ojibwemowin and English are necessarily constantly in movement and rebirth through the labor of those recontextualizing them (*modernizing*, to use Lyons’s term).¹⁶

This is not to dismiss those arguments for honoring the legitimacy—from both a linguistic and social justice perspective—of those language practices that dominant ideology has disposed many of us to recognize *as* different. So, for example, we would grant the legitimacy, from both a linguistic and social justice standpoint, of arguments against code segregation, which in education circles is identified as

code-switching (see Guerra, “From”), and of the right and need of students as well as other writers to *mesh* codes—that is, to incorporate into a single text or utterance language practices we are disposed to recognize as belonging to disparate spheres.¹⁷ Code-switching is commonly understood to represent submission to the norms of specific codes, whereas code-meshing is seen as deviating from these norms through (unauthorized) mixing or meshing of them.

However, from the translingual perspective we have been advancing, these arguments are problematic on two counts: first, insofar as they invoke fixed notions of languages and language varieties as codes, they would seem, again, to reinforce the very assumptions about languages as static tools with fixed meanings—as in the writing of computer code, or decoding encrypted text—that their proponents oppose (see Lu, “Metaphors”; Vance). And second, both arguments locate agency spatially, in specific textual forms removed from history and practices of reading and writing, leading to a fetishizing of those forms as themselves exhibiting agency or not. Alternatively, adopting the temporal-spatial framework of a translingual approach identifies agency in the production of what is recognized as code-switching and also what is recognized as code-meshing, as writers contribute in both these types of writing to the ongoing process of language sedimentation and the production of difference through recontextualization. To assign agency to only one of these kinds of practices results from a failure to locate the practices themselves temporally, as always emergent and necessarily subject to recontextualization with every utterance.

Thus, adopting a translingual approach to difference and agency in iteration would understand students’ efforts at iterating either SWE or subordinated languages as inevitably producing (simultaneously) sameness and difference as writers contribute to the process of language sedimentation through their efforts. The survival “needs” thereby met would be not simply those of the students but those of the languages as always emergent practices (see Lu, “Living”). Students’ iteration of any language would thus constitute legitimate mesopolitical work manifesting writerly agency. Such work is likely to improve the chances of the survival of endangered languages, cultures, and peoples (that is, all of us) by helping to reshape the contexts in which we all live, and to advance the interests of the very peoples, languages, and cultures at risk (see Cooper, “Sustainable”). But a translingual perspective requires that we treat writers’ expertise and attachment to any language, dominant or peripheralized, as emergent rather than fixed, and that we do so in light of the emergent character of the contexts of their lives and work. In teaching, this would involve engaging students in exploring what they care to advance about the people, language, and culture with which they are identified and may identify, and how and why and when to do it. In short, rather than asking writers to bank on what they are imagined to already have, a translingual approach requires the development of teaching designs that will bring forward the emergent character of the sedimented practices students are invested in

and contributing to, and, as well the emergent character of their expertise, attachment, and commitment to these.

We have argued that a translingual approach identifies the issue we face not as a question of whether to teach standardized forms and meanings, but, rather, as the need for all of us to deliberate over how and why to do what with language in light of emergent and mutually constitutive relations of language, practices, conventions, and contexts. This requires a more fully articulated approach to the agency of acts of seeming repetition, one that recognizes the production of difference through temporal-spatial recontextualization of what might pass as “the same.” Such an approach counters dominant, monolingualist ideological conceptualizations of language, language difference, and writer agency that have hampered our efforts to combat language discrimination, honor our students’ efforts, and engage with them in the important task of working on and with language. We need to learn to recognize, and help students learn to recognize, the kinds of difference they are already making in their writing, and that they might wish to make, and how.¹⁸

NOTES

1. For example, the themes of the 2011 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition and the 2010 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition were, respectively, Rhetoric and Writing across Language Boundaries and Working English in Rhetoric and Composition. The July 2006 issue of *College English* was devoted to Cross-language Relations in Composition. A 2009 issue of *JAC* was devoted to Working English in Rhetoric and Composition (Horner, Lu, NeCamp, Nordquist, and Sohan); a 2011 issue of *Across the Disciplines* was devoted to WAC and Second Language Writing (Cox and Zawacki); and a 2006 special issue of *WPA* was devoted to the topic Bridging the Disciplinary Divide: Integrating a Second-Language Perspective into Writing Programs (Matsuda, Fruit, and Lamm). The growing number of books and articles challenging monolingualist ideology in composition include Bean et al.; Canagarajah, “Multilingual”; Elbow; Fraiberg; Guerra, “Writing”; Hall; Hesford, Singleton, and García; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue; Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur; Horner and Lu; Horner, Lu, and Matsuda; Horner and Trimbur; Jordan; Kells, Balester, and Villanueva; Martinez and Young; Matsuda, Fruit, and Lamm; Nero; Severino, Guerra, and Butler; Smitherman and Villanueva; Tardy; Trimbur; Valdès; and Young, “Nah,” *Your*. Essay recipients of the Braddock Award focusing on language difference in composition in the past ten years include Canagarajah, “Place”; Horner and Trimbur; Lu, “Essay”; and Pedersen. *Cross-Language Relations in Composition* (Horner, Lu, and Matsuda) was one of two recipients of the 2012 CCCC Outstanding Book Award. Matsuda’s essay “The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition” was recipient of the 2006 Richard Ohmann Award.

2. See Brutt-Griffler; Chiang and Schmida; Cope and Kalantzis; Crystal; Guerra, “Writing”; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Hawisher and Selfe; Horner and Lu, “Resisting”; Kramsch; Lam; Leung, Harris, and Rampton; Pratt, “Linguistic”; Rampton; Rubdy and Saraceni; Singh; Yildiz.

3. In addition to the flagship organization’s landmark statement on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (Conference on College Composition and Communication), see, for example, Bartholomae, “Writing” and “The Study of Error”; Gilyard, *Voices*; Hull; Hull and Rose; Hull et al.; Shaughnessy; Smitherman and Villanueva; Villanueva.

4. We refer here to ongoing efforts in the United States to make English the official language; school policies forbidding students to use languages other than English; attacks on individuals’ and groups’ use

of languages other than English; the underfunding or elimination of education in languages other than English; the unidirectional (subtractive) language programs for English language learners; the failure of schools to grant academic credit for learning English; and, more broadly, equivalent policies and practices that restrict uses of language globally.

5. For an earlier account of the perspective on which we build here, see Horner and Lu, “Translingual.”

6. For analyses of comparable examples of such recontextualization and appropriation, see Marlon Riggs, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*, and Yasemin Yildiz's discussion of the renegotiation of *Kanake* as a reference to Germans of Turkish origin (175 and following; see also Engel).

7. Originally published in 1985, “Inventing the University” has been reprinted at least seven times in widely used sourcebooks for writing teachers and literacy scholars. It has been cited in over 900 books and articles.

8. For an analysis of the reception given Bartholomae's essay, see Horner, *Terms* Chapter 5.

9. Spellmeyer is critiquing compositionists' tendency to understand Michel Foucault's question “Who is speaking?” as highlighting the “institutional orthodoxy of an utterance, its approval by a body of recognized practitioners.” Spellmeyer notes that, in fact, Foucault's question underscores how the subject “always speaks from a ‘discontinuity,’ from a point of intersection between divergent interests, channels, and communities” (Spellmeyer 76). We see this emphasis on discontinuity to be aligned with the emphasis on temporality in what we are calling a translingual approach.

10. Bartholomae notes that “a writer can shape history in the very act of writing it.” He identifies such writing in terms of the ability of a writer “to enter into a discourse but, by stylistic maneuvers, to take possession of it at the same time” (“Inventing” 74). Here, we highlight the way in which such stylistic maneuvers, rather than distinguishing writers (and writing) that shape history from those that don't, can better be understood as iterations of discursive maneuvers that our training has disposed us to recognize as history-shaping—as, in other words, “different”—unlike history-shaping maneuvers of essays like “White Shoes,” which tend to go unremarked.

11. We see the pedagogy we outline here as aligned with the pedagogy that James Slevin, in a particularly insightful analysis of Bartholomae's “Inventing the University,” suggests Bartholomae is advocating. Slevin writes that Bartholomae's pedagogy would engage students

in the kind of analysis [of their writing] in which Bartholomae himself is engaged. [. . .] Students need consciously and rigorously to examine their discursive predicament as he does, and with the same unsentimental eye. They need to think about the form, think about the situation in which they find themselves, and think about the various alternatives open to them. This critical examination is more important than the production of the form and is, at any rate, crucial to its mastery. Students might conclude that apprenticing themselves to this form is the best or only alternative, but it would help if they were fully aware, through their own investigation and analysis, of the situation that makes it so. (150)

12. For critical reviews of such arguments, see Horner and Lu, “Resisting,” and Joseph and Ramani 27.

13. On the problematics of such recognition, see, for example, Horner, “Rethinking”; Lees, “The Exceptable Way”; and Joseph Williams, “Phenomenology.”

14. See also Lyons, “Rhetorical Sovereignty.”

15. Lyons's essay “The Fine Art of Fencing” alludes to the proverb that “good fences make good neighbors,” the Robert Frost poem memorializing that proverb, and the poem's point that fences are always in need of mending.

16. On the necessity of such labor, see Lu, “Living-English.” On the confusion of language policy with language practice, see Guerra, “From.”

17. See, for example, Canagarajah, “Multilingual” and “Place”; Martinez and Young; Young, “Nah.”

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