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Authorial Intent in the Composition Classroom

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Ian Barnard

Abstract: This article examines the disjunction between, on the one hand, critical theory's critique of the privileging of authorial intent in protocols of textual interpretation, and, on the other hand, continued obeisance to authorial intent in composition textbooks and pedagogy. By unpacking the implications of this disjunction, I show the limitations that the reification of authorial intent creates for composition pedagogy and student writing. I conclude by suggesting how bracketing authorial intent in the composition classroom might enhance composition pedagogy and student writing, while also challenging fundamental epistemologies of the field.

> For writing, like a game that defies its own rules, is an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a "me" into language, but with creating an opening where the "me" disappears while "I" endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires. To confer an Author on a text is to close the writing.
> —Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 35.

What is composition's twenty-first century relationship to what Susan Miller in 1989 called "the now easily deniable claptrap of inspired, unitary 'authorship' that contemporary theorists in other fields have so thoroughly deconstructed" (*Rescuing* 3)? In particular, this article asks what the status is of authorial intent in composition. I answer that the "claptrap" is alive and well: not only is the lure of intent still very much with us, but it also marks a series of fissures that are particularly telling of the dysfunctional ways in which student writers are often constructed in composition theory and pedagogy.

I'll begin by invoking the specter of authorial intent in literary theory and literature pedagogy in order to establish both the limits of composition's own engagement with the question of intent (and with critical theory more generally) and the continuities between the two fields (composition and literature), as evidenced in the disjunctions between theory and pedagogy in each. Section II attempts to account for the resilience of appeals to authorial intent in composition pedagogy (and some composition theory), despite the discrediting of such appeals by critical theory. I conclude by asking what writing and pedagogical possibilities are foreclosed by these appeals, and where a deprivileging of intent might lead composition students, teachers, and writing (Section III). Ultimately, I hope that by taking up Marilyn Cooper's invitation to consider the question, "How do writers and readers develop ideas together?" (372), we can reimagine the ways in which texts of all kinds work in the composition classroom and, thus, also rework the pedagogies that interpolate these texts into (and out of) the classroom.

I

In literary studies, the commonplace that a text's meaning should be determined primarily in the context of the author's intention was famously debunked by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "Intentional Fallacy" as early as 1946, an assault on conventional assumptions about textual

interpretation that was, despite the many shattering differences between New Criticism and poststructuralism, developed and complicated by structuralist and poststructuralist theory, including much-anthologized essays such as Roland Barthes's 1967 "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's 1969 "What is an Author?"{1} [#note1]

This isn't to say that these theoretical understandings have been seamlessly translated into literature classrooms. Some students and faculty, whether out of habit, resistance, or ignorance, still may have recourse to discourses and constructions of the author's intent in their quest to find and create textual meaning. Some continue to value authorial intent because of their conscious or unconscious allegiances to liberal humanist ideologies of individualism—the invincibility of individual agency, the allure of writers' specialness. Sometimes teachers' theoretically unsound pedagogy is less a sign of willful resistance to the reign of theory than a mark of the disjunction between theoretical understandings and pedagogical practices, of not knowing how to translate theoretical understandings into pedagogical practice, of falling back on old models of teaching, of teaching the way we were taught. The chasm is even more apparent in many K-12 classrooms, where textbooks, bureaucracies, inadequate professional development, and outdated teacher preparation programs mean that classroom practices are often many decades behind scholarship in English Studies.

The chasms multiply and deepen in the case of composition. First, composition theory itself is fractured and has not unequivocally announced the death of the author. Second, the disjunction between theory and pedagogy is larger and more consequential in composition classrooms at all levels than it is in literature classrooms—this is hardly surprising, given that critical theory revolutionized literary studies several decades before it made an impact on composition scholarship and pedagogy. {2} [#note2] Third, as with the case of literature pedagogy, composition pedagogy still seems to be rooted in intent. Composition's allegiance to authorial intent takes many forms, as I shall adumbrate in the following section. These include an implicit privileging of intent in much composition theory that treats writing instruction, well-meaning assumptions about best practices in commonplace directions for responding to student writing, and the dispositions and practices of many composition instructors and student writers.

II

The ascendance of social constructionist theories of writing in composition studies,{3} [#note3] and the work of compositionists and linguists such as Linda Brodkey, Marilyn Cooper, Sharon Crowley ("Derrida"), Janet Giltrow, Rebecca Moore Howard, and Jasper Neel that critiques modernist assumptions about authorial solitariness, originality, and unity in composition pedagogy, would seem to complement work in literary and cultural theory that destabilizes the Author, the subject, and presence. Further, we might imagine that collaborative writing, a practice much theorized in composition and often practiced in composition classrooms, would muddy the meaning of intent, and that electronic technologies' dislocation of the "traditional subjectivities of classroom writers" (Faigley 200) would contribute to the erosion of traditional allegiances to writerly intent. However, in many ways that I will chronicle in this section, intent seems to hold sway in composition pedagogy, albeit sometimes conflictedly. Part of the attachment to authorial intent in the composition classroom is no doubt a function of what Lester Faigley in 1992 termed composition's refusal to surrender "its belief in the writer as an autonomous self" (15), in his analysis of composition's relationship to postmodernism. This refusal also informs composition's modernist conceptualization of authorial voice.

The residual pervasiveness of the intent-effect is evident, for instance, in Joseph Harris's 2006 book *Rewriting: How to Do Things With Texts*. While Harris cites Borges, Barthes, and other postmodern/poststructuralist writers, and emphasizes that he encourages students to read complex

texts in non-reductive ways and to respond to each others' work as they would to these published professional texts, he nevertheless focuses peer feedback on drafts of student writing around the question, "What is the author trying to get done in this essay?" (133). Here respondents seem to be invited to privilege their second guessing of authorial intent over the realities of language, effect, response, and readers' construction of meaning. I will discuss the pedagogical implications of this privileging in Section III. For now, I want to note that such gestures seem to be fairly endemic to composition pedagogy, and that the double consciousness that informs Harris's argument (the engagement with poststructuralism but the reversion to the humanist subject in the composition classroom) are also quite common, as I explain below.

The recourse to intent in the everyday lives of composition teachers and students is often predicated on practical concerns and well-meaning affiliations, albeit the cumulative force of these iterations can serve to mark composition pedagogy as theoretically naïve in terms of its conceptualization of authorial intent. When a colleague and I met with a student recently as part of a capstone interview with the student, we paradigmatically suggested to one another beforehand that we begin the discussion of the student's writing by asking the student "what were you trying to say?" The assumption seems to be that if we can get to intent, we can get to all the other issues and/or problems around a particular piece of student writing, and that we can do so by preserving the student's "voice."

My own localized survey of the dispositions and pedagogical practices of composition faculty at my institution suggests that my colleague and I are not alone in this assumption. In 2009, I conducted an anonymous paper survey of composition instructors in my English Department to determine what role authorial intent plays in their writing instruction and the ways they structure their composition classes. I placed the four-question survey in the campus mailboxes of 97 composition instructors, with a cover note indicating that the survey was anonymous and asking respondents to complete the survey and return it to my mailbox. The survey asked respondents to circle "very important," "somewhat important," "not important," or "unimportant" in response to each question, and it also included a place for comments at the end (see Appendix). I received 43 responses. I summarize the results in the table below:

Question	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important / unimportant
When responding (orally or in writing) to student writing, how important is it to you to establish the student's intention with the piece of writing in order to provide effective feedback?	24	15	3
When students give each other feedback on their paper drafts, how important to giving effective feedback is it that they establish the writer's intention with the paper?	18	20	4
When you discuss professional non-fiction texts (e.g., newspaper articles, essays published in readers)	26	12	3

Question	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important / unimportant
with your students, how important is it to try to figure out the author's intention in writing the piece?			
When you discuss sample student papers with your classes, how important is it to address what the student was trying to achieve in the sample paper under discussion?	24	14	2

Of the 43 composition faculty members who responded to my survey, then, 39 indicated that they thought it was "very important" (24) or "somewhat important" (15) to establish a student's intention with a piece of writing in order to provide effective feedback. One respondent used the space for comments to give a concise synopsis of the multivalent influence of intent in much composition pedagogy: "In order to provide effective feedback, it is essential to understand the writer's intention as a student, instructor, or professional writer." Another respondent confirmed the link between work on audience and purpose in composition studies and intent, checking "very important" in response to all questions about the relative need to consider intent in the composition classroom, and adding the comment, "I start with audience and purpose." Significantly, several of my respondents indicated that they were fully aware of the injunctions against privileging authorial intent in literary and cultural theory, and of the contradictions inherent in their composition pedagogy. One wrote, "Perhaps I'm harsh, but I try to teach my students that outside the classroom, their writing will be judged as effective or not solely based on product, not intent. It doesn't seem to help them ultimately to emphasize intent." Two respondents advocated adopting a mix of the two seemingly contradictory positions. One wrote, "'Intent' is an important focus in comp. classes as is the intentional fallacy—both should be discussed at length," while another insisted, "What an author/writer intends is important; however, I believe the actual effect of a piece of writing on the reader—the reader's response to a piece of writing—is equally important." Despite these demurrals, however, an overwhelming majority of composition faculty respondents in my English department indicated that authorial intent was an important component of their composition pedagogy.

The composition faculty members surveyed represent a mix of tenured and tenure-track faculty, lecturers, and Graduate Teaching Associates, and hold graduate degrees in various areas of English studies—composition, literature, linguistics, and creative writing. In other words, these faculty members are not unlike the composition faculty at many other public comprehensive universities in the United States.{4} [#note4] How, then, might we account for the resilience of authorial intent in composition? I have already gestured toward part of the explanation—composition's attachment to the modernist subject. But why does this attachment persist? My survey respondents point to some of the reasons for this resilience. I attempt to synthesize and categorize these reasons below.

Audience, Purpose, Genre

The faculty member above who begins "with audience and purpose" suggests one possible starting point for the accumulation of significance around intent in composition: the fairly recent increased attention to audience and purpose as an important component of genre awareness and assignment fulfillment, and, relatedly, assumptions made about the functionality of expository writing. Indeed,

articulation of writerly purpose has become de rigueur in today's informed composition classroom (Faigley 153 ff.). In discussions of fiction or poetry in literature classes, teachers seldom ask their students to focus on the purpose of the text in question or of the author's purpose in writing the text—the texts are seen as having value in and of themselves, in addition to, or even in spite of any purpose that occasioned their production. But discussion of purpose has become increasingly important in the analysis of expository writing. When it comes to students' own writing, most composition teachers are well-meaning in their efforts to encourage students to think of the purpose of a particular text they are working on: such reflection is supposed to make the writing more meaningful, more "real" for the student. In the reading of texts, though, purpose often gets conflated with intent and comes to signal not so much an effect of the text itself but extra-textual information about the author. And the homage to the functional colludes with the conceptualization of composition-as-service that many compositionists have been vigorously resisting for several decades.{5} [#note5]

Much of the energy around questions of purpose and audience have of late been gathered under the rubric of genre theory, and, indeed, the contradictions within composition when it comes to authorial intent seem to be synechdochally represented in the "new genre theory," which lays down an encouraging theoretical framework for understanding "how readers and writers develop ideas together," but then appears to fall back on old assumptions about intent when pedagogical application is at stake. Charles Bazerman, for instance, argues that genre determines common meanings (21-22), suggesting how meaning is outside the control of the individual writer's intent, and Anis Bawarshi agrees that writers are, to some extent, written, that genre "both organizes and generates" (8). But both Bazerman and Bawarshi seem reluctant to jettison the belief in individual agency that is the corollary of intent when it comes to composition pedagogy: the former in his utilitarian claim, "In understanding what is afoot in the genre, why the genre is what it is, we become aware of the multiple social and psychological factors our utterance needs to speak to in order to be most effective" (23), and the latter in his apparent desire to teach his students to gain mastery over particular genres (Chapter 6). As Bawarshi sums up his pedagogical imperative, "Teachers can and should teach students how to identify and analyze genred positions of articulation so that students can locate themselves and begin to participate within these positions more meaningfully, critically, and dexterously" (146). Genre, here, becomes just one more tool students can use in order to control more effectively the texts they produce and the meanings of these texts. Amy Devitt's influential article synthesizing recent work in genre theory, "Generalizing About Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept," notwithstanding its nods to poststructuralism, embodies the difficulty genre theory has in freeing itself from writerly intent as a central interpretive and instructive epistemology. Devitt begins by noting the influence of Derrida on the "most recent understandings of genre" (573) and emphasizes the social contexts of genre. But because, as Devitt notes, "the new conception of genre shifts the focus from effects . . . to sources of those effects" (573) in writing, and because it is concerned to recuperate the individual against charges that genres are overly deterministic (579), I would argue that the "new conception of genre" ends up merely returning our focus to the author's intent. In revision, genre awareness can come to stand for a way for writers to realize more successfully their original intent (Devitt 582).

It seems, then, that attention to audience, purpose, and genre has given, even if inadvertently, new impetus to the authority of authorial intent in composition. On the one hand, insistences around genre, purpose, and audience serve to document and entrench intent's place in composition pedagogy; on the other hand, they also become the rationale for the continued attachment to intent.

Reading

Another possible explanation for the endurance of intent as a framework for structuring writing and response in the composition classroom might lie in the special emphasis now placed on the reading of

expository texts in composition classes and on the renewed attention to reading processes and pedagogy in general in composition studies, as documented by David Jolliffe in a 2007 *CCC* review essay of recent scholarship on reading pedagogy ("Learning"). {6} [#note6]

In the case of published professional readings, some of the focus on intent can no doubt be explained by the predominance of non-fiction texts, in particular, in college composition classrooms (e.g., essays in ubiquitous readers developed for first-year college composition courses; newspaper articles used to prompt discussion, analysis, and writing; scholarly secondary sources used by students in research papers). Teachers and students may rationalize their conflicting treatments of fiction versus non-fiction texts by relying on the assumption that writers of imaginative literature have less control over the meanings of their texts than essayists, or that expository writing is more obviously an expression of a writer's intent than, say, a novel or a poem is. But these intuitions are equally as fallacious as those that equate meaning with intent in fictional texts, given poststructuralism's suspicion of "facts" and "truth," and since, as recent attention to memoir and other hybrid forms has suggested, the dividing lines between fiction and non-fiction are hardly clear-cut. In any case, poststructuralist critiques of language's supposedly transparent referentiality apply to language per se, irrespective of the genre enforming that language.

While readings have always played a significant role in college composition classrooms—even when instructors eschew textbooks they often envisage student-produced texts as the major reading of the course—the recent attention to processes of reading and reading instruction in composition scholarship and textbooks marks an exponential shift from product to process that is doing for reading what process theory did for writing half a century ago. The preface to *Reading Rhetorically* synthesizes the rationale for composition's attention to reading by explaining that the book is "shaped by the belief that students need explicit instruction in analytical reading, not because they have problems with reading, but because college writing assignments demand sophisticated ways of reading" (Bean et al. xiv). The problem of intent has mushroomed with this new emphasis on reading in the college composition classroom, and especially the recognition that students' writing difficulties are often the results of problems with reading, that reading needs to be scaffolded, that students need to be taught how to read. For now beliefs about the importance of intent in student writing are transferred to the structured and assisted readings of published expository writing that are gaining more pedagogical attention. My survey respondent who wrote, "In order to provide effective feedback, it is essential to understand the writer's intention as a student, instructor, or professional writer," points to the way in which composition has created equivalencies among what might be seen as different genera of writers in other disciplines or institutional settings. On the one hand, we might say that this continuity of writers in composition studies is informed by the sound argument that texts by professional writers should be read the same way student texts are read—this is part of the field of composition's process of resisting the canonization of any texts or writers and of undermining hierarchies that discourage students from identifying as writers. {7} [#note7] On the other hand, it also seems to rest on the less compelling axiom discussed above that makes non-fiction somehow fundamentally different from "literature," that imputes different rhetorical techniques to authors in the two modes, therefore suggesting that different interpretive strategies are called for when engaging with expository texts. Thus, the argument might go, while we may not foreground authorial intent in the study of literature, the fact that we do so in the composition classroom speaks to the foundationally different types of tasks and texts we are working with. This move to distinguish these two arenas is no doubt also tied to the recuperation of classical rhetoric by scholars in rhetoric and composition in the second half of the twentieth century, to composition's efforts to legitimate itself as a discipline, and to the injunction against using literary texts as the main source of reading in composition classrooms as the field established itself as a unique scholarly and pedagogical specialty. {8} [#note8]

From my own position as a composition instructor at a comprehensive public university in California, I see this attention to and particular ideology of reading enacted in the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) that the California State University system has introduced into high schools across the state, purportedly in order to better prepare California high school students to meet the demands of college-level writing.{9} [#note9] The course was developed by college and high school faculty, and the two groups collaborate in leading the workshops designed to prepare secondary school teachers to teach the new course and the principles embedded in it. The college/K-12 alignment here illustrates institutional crossovers in composition pedagogy and the ways in which college composition's current turn to reading and obsessive focus on persuasive writing is being enforced in K-12 settings.

One of the popular text books that emblematizes the renewed attention to reading, *Reading Rhetorically,* is used in these workshops and informs much of the philosophy of reading instruction in the assignment templates that form the basis of the ERWC. The book nicely illustrates the schizophrenic position composition inhabits with regard to intent. It seems theoretically-grounded in recognizing "reading as an interactive process of composing meaning" (Bean et al. xiv) rather than constructing the goal of reading as merely the reader's dutiful discovery of the author's (intended) meaning, and in conceptualizing "persuasive strategies in a text" (20) rather than searching for the writer's conscious effort to realize a certain intent. By looking at the *effects* of rather than the *intentions* behind particular textual features, readers can read closely without making presumptions about or circumscribing interpretation according to authorial intent. However, the book simultaneously incorporates the notion of the writer's purpose from composition, reading purpose in the strong sense of "authors having designs on their readers" (10). And in Chapter 3, "Listening to a Text," the book advises readers, "When you listen attentively to a text, you are reading with the grain, trying to understand it in the way the author intended" (Bean et al. 36), a prelude to a more skeptical reading of texts.

These reading strategies revolve around a false binary centered on authorial intent: one is either trying to read a text according to the author's intent or one is looking at what the author might not have intended. What is occluded here is a recognition that each of these readings is a projection of the reader and that writing is not always transparently autobiographical (a lesson that students of literature seem to understand better than composition students). Trinh's accusation, "Charged with intentionality, writing is therefore disclosing (a secret), and reading is believing" (30), points to the reductiveness of this kind of intentional conflation, to the conflicts between authors and their texts that *Reading Rhetorically* seems to want to suppress. While it might be useful to read texts multiple times, first sympathetically and then skeptically, to structure these reading strategies around authorial intent is not only to mislead students into believing that intent is ascertainable and quantifiable but also to set up a sympathetic reading of a text as the reading that converges with the author's intent, a strategy that can prove particularly problematic when these templates are applied to the reading of student texts as well (more on this later). Thus much of the ERWC course falls back on authorial intent when it comes to analyzing mainly non-fiction texts, unwittingly encouraging students to make arguments about authorial intention as they analyze particular rhetorical strategies or word choices. Given the connections the course makes between reading and writing, these strategies are then supposed to inform students' own writing.

Students *versus* Authors

In the above discussion, I alluded to the imperative in composition to construct students as "real" authors, but Amy Robillard shows that it is precisely composition's failure to fulfill this imperative that has left the discipline in the pre-structuralist past.{10} [#note10] Robillard argues that conventional scholarly citation practices in composition, such as the identification of students by first

name only or the omission of student texts from the list of Works Cited, reproduce the student/author distinction that the field is invested in maintaining, despite its protestations to the contrary. Why do such separations continue to structure composition's construction of authorship? In her articles "*Young Scholars* Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Citation Practices" and "Students and Authors in Composition Scholarship," Robillard offers an explanation by charting the unique place of student writing in composition studies, noting, "Students of other disciplines do not reflect the nature of the field itself" and insisting that Composition Studies could not exist without students ("Students and Authors" 42).{11} [#note11] Composition, then, has its identity invested in the category of students if it is to explain its *raison d'être* in terms of student writing and its attendant objects of analysis (e.g., student voice, student learning, student subjectivity, student interventions into the academy and the sociality).

After all, if students circumscribe composition, then we need to preserve our understandings of students as material beings in our classrooms, not as Author effects. If, as Sharon Crowley puts it, "[L]iberal composition pedagogy insists that student identities *are* the subject of composition" (*Composition* 227), then the student as liberal humanist subject must be retained/recuperated in order for composition as a discipline to maintain its liberal affiliations and agendas, and its (contested) identity as student-centered (see footnote 11).

We can connect the apparatuses of composition pedagogy and its axioms about student writing to this desire for students and, its corollary, the need to distinguish students from authors. After a discussion of Barthes and the ways in which authors lose control over their texts, Robillard pointedly continues, "To insist on students' retaining control over their texts is to deny them authorial status" ("Students and Authors" 48). Paradoxically, it is precisely composition's insistence on student agency that marks its failure to construct students as authors. Student textual control is intricated in many layers of composition pedagogy, including those that treat revision, error, and process models of composing. Composition pedagogy's focus on the thesis statement, for instance, can be seen as implicated in this desire for textual control (on the part of both writers and readers). A successful thesis statement is supposed to signal the writer's fully realized intent applied retroactively to a complete text, showing that the student writer has managed every detail of the text by marshalling it in the service of the thesis statement. Often the thesis statement is presented at the beginning of the text, even though it cannot be accounted for until after the text's end, thereby completing the ruse of pre-meditated mastery.

In the last section of this article, I will discuss the implications of students "losing control" over their texts. For now, I want to highlight composition's need to construct students *qua* students as one explanation for its dependence on the outdated notions of subjectivity and agency upon which the appeal to authorial intent relies. However, student agency also holds valences beyond those articulated by Robillard, and so its denial encompasses more than the circumscription of Composition's subjects, as I explain below.

Agency

Some of the critiques of poststructuralism's evacuation of authorial agency in literary studies (most famously, Barbara Christian's 1987 article "The Race for Theory") saw this evacuation as especially troubling in an historical moment when previously marginalized subjects were finally coming to voice, when literary canons in English studies were being challenged for their exclusions of white women writers and writers of color, and when literary studies were undergoing radical paradigm shifts as a result of these challenges.{12} [#note12] Doesn't the death of the author come only after centuries of white male Western authorial consolidation? Should we call for the death of all authors when some authors are only now for the first time getting their chance in the sun? Aren't

poststructuralist insistences on subjectivity as fragmented and constructed, these critics asked, a way of warding off the decentering of white Western men by the Other?

A related argument might be made *vis-à-vis* the question of student agency in composition classrooms. Isn't it especially important that students starting to gain confidence as writers feel that they can control their writing and can plan on having something to say as authors? In the context of questions such as these, might a poststructuralist destabilization of authorial intent instantiate a retreat for the field of composition—a return to the privileging of product over process, a re-erasure of questions of purpose and audience that have lately informed composition's commitment to "real" writing in which students are invested,{13} [#note13] and, most importantly, a failure to honor the agency of student writers? The apologia, "Perhaps I'm harsh," that prefaces the comment of my survey respondent who wrote "Perhaps I'm harsh, but I try to teach my students that outside the classroom, their writing will be judged as effective or not solely based on product, not intent. It doesn't seem to help them ultimately to emphasize intent," signals this intrication of intent with honoring student agency and subjectivity. This commitment might be said to distinguish composition pedagogy most dramatically from the teaching of literature, given many compositionists' attention to student work as primary texts in the composition classroom, and given composition's stated commitment to recognizing students as writers. The advocacy of student agency is also imbricated in the process movement and the political contexts of its emergence in the United States in the 1960s that interrogated hierarchical education pedagogies and institutions (Faigley, Chapter 2)—some composition teachers have a sentimental and/or ideological attachment to that history.

These dispositions about agency and subjectivity shape pedagogy and frame the possibilities of response to student writing. Brooke Horvath's 1984 synthesis of prevailing imperatives in composition studies regarding teachers' responses to student writing still holds true in composition classrooms today: as a rule, teachers are urged not to "appropriate" student texts; the goal of responding to student writing should usually be to help students develop what is already there. This injunction stems from attempts to honor student agency and subjectivity, and to recognize students as writers with individual ideas and motives. In warning teachers against co-opting student texts, Horvath makes the connection to intent quite explicit: "If this happens, students may too readily conclude that success depends not upon fully realizing one's intentions, fully conveying one's meaning, fully expressing one's feelings or actualizing one's voice, but upon aping the teacher" (210). Here Horvath suggests the relationship between intent and the problematic of voice: a unique voice comes to be an expression of individual intent. In both cases (voice and intent), the liberal subject is unified and seemingly independent of the sociality that shapes her. One of my survey respondents gave a sense of how attention to intent continues to be informed by composition's student-centeredness, the desire to "guide" students to express their own ideas rather than to impose ideas top-down in her comment, "I feel knowing the intention of the writer is an essential part of understanding how to guide [students] in expressing their thoughts effectively—to help them get their intent across successfully."

Other than a knee-jerk, reactionary anti-theory position that dismisses the problematization of authorial intent out-of-hand, there are several possible avenues of responsible response to these concerns. One might assert that given its particular focus on students and pedagogy, composition studies is a special case, and that work in critical theory is not appropriate or relevant to composition pedagogy, or, indeed, that composition studies suggests a critique of theory's literature-centeredness in English departments at U.S. universities. One of my survey respondents seemed to be making the argument for composition as a special case in her justification of the apparent contradiction between composition pedagogy and literary/critical theory: "Yes, we're up to our eyebrows in what C. Brooks might call 'intentional fallacy,' but the emphasis on argument in our freshman comp curriculum makes author's intent/purpose key." Another response to the concerns I've listed in the previous

paragraphs might adapt some of the defenses of theory (e.g., Bhabha; hooks; Trinh, "Interview" 96-97) to argue that it would be patronizing, dishonest, and hypocritical to perpetuate the lie of student writers' agency while deconstructing authorial intent in the work of published authors, that such a dichotomization reinforces the very distinction between student writers and "real" writers that compositionists are committed to contesting.

It seems to me that compositionists might complement these political and theoretical framings of the debate by asking specifically what harm there might be for students and their writing in privileging intent, and, conversely, what value there might be for students, student writing, and the teaching of writing if we were to abandon our attention to intent in the composition classroom. I address these questions in the following section.

III

Up to this point I have traced the resilience of authorial intent in composition and discussed possible explanations for this resilience that inform composition's identity as a field and its cherished ideals. But we need also to interrogate the effects of this resilience on student writing and on composition pedagogy—this will be where we make our own contributions to the topic of intent and discourses of authorship and subjectivity that are distinct from those of literature scholars. I will suggest here that, paradoxically, the honoring of intent creates specific theoretical and pedagogical barriers to student writing and revision. However, this is not to assume simplistically the possibility or efficacy of an uncomplicated and complete abandonment of intent-focused response. Rather, any alternate apparatus must account for intent's recursivity and for the intersectional implications of its hold on teaching and writing.

If the privileging of intent can come to limit what can be done with a published professional text, we also need to recognize that it can do so with student writing. Deconstruction and other epistemological challenges to the linear trajectory author-text-meaning have shown us that sometimes the most interesting work with texts needs to bracket intent, but students sometimes have a hard time imagining reading a literary or other text in ways that are at odds with their perception of the author's intent. In the composition classroom, intent is a product of particular material conditions, in addition to the ideological baggage discussed in the previous section. For students and their teachers, it is often especially difficult to bracket intent when they are talking about classmates' work, when the author is sitting in front of them. Material, subject, agent. Why should we want to resist these identificatory urges?

Part of the problem with privileging intent in student writing is that intent often becomes the bottom line that controls dispositions, pedagogies, and epistemologies of writing. It restricts response. When students are asked to respond to or analyze a fellow student's paper, it's often in order for the writer to ascertain if she successfully conveyed her intended meaning. And intent, it seems, must always be honored. This attitude derives from liberal pluralist ideologies of individualism and individual agency, and serves as a testament to U.S. academia's incorporation of the mantra that no one has the right to question someone else's beliefs—everyone is entitled to her own opinion—or, the composition classroom version of this axiom, it doesn't matter what you say, as long as you say it well/convincingly.{14} [#note14] To fail to honor intent seems to be breaking a taboo in the writing classroom, to be fundamentally dishonoring the implicit or explicit contract of trust and respect set up between student and teacher, and among students. So sometimes any gesture that can appear to complicate, disregard, sideline, question, threaten, or undermine authorial intent is seen as hostile, pedagogically unsound, and socially inept.

On the other hand, what kinds of blockages to writing and revision does such reverence for authorial intent create? It might be helpful here to recall and rework David Bartholomae's (in)famous response to Peter Elbow in the former's 1995 *CCC* article, "Writing with Teachers." In making the argument for the political and pedagogical efficacy of teaching "academic" rather than "personal" writing, Bartholomae gives the example of the student whose "personal" writing moves the author to tears but seems rather clichéd to the teacher, and who would feel insulted if a teacher or fellow students were to question the text's authenticity or originality—somehow that personal voice is always-already immune to critique. Student intent often suffers the same fate. Bartholomae's point is that the student's "personal voice" is socially constructed—we are not born with these voices and the ideas that constitute them—but the ideology of individualism in the United States works precisely to conceal the enabling of the personal by the social and political. Students usually want to believe and do believe that their "personal voice" is original and uniquely theirs. For Bartholomae, academic writing focuses on analyzing precisely the power relations that structure such ideologies, and so can reveal the apparatuses that mask the socially constructed nature of "personal" writing. On the other hand, the investment in the "personal" can be a way of foreclosing critique. The honoring of authorial intent in student writing can serve a similar silencing function that not only precludes certain kinds of critique of the work but also stifles the author's own development as a writer.

The lure of the author function thus situates respondents to student writing in theoretically and ideologically problematic positions. Given composition's ubiquitous belief in the importance of student writers' intentions, and the obeisance to those intentions, teachers or fellow students who find a student's intent morally or politically objectionable are often faced with two unenviable options when responding to the student's writing. They might feel obligated to honor that intent, and so find themselves squirming ethically as they give a student advice on how to "improve," how to make a morally objectionable argument more persuasive. Or, if teacher and/or students are advocates of critical pedagogy or *engagé* writing, they might find themselves trying to persuade the writer to change her intent. That battle entails a host of problems around issues of critical pedagogy and student resistance that have been well-documented.{15} [#note15]

The fetishization of intent also hedges in composition and composition pedagogy more generally. The problem with the kinds of teacher response to student writing that Horvath characterizes as informed consensus in the discipline (see section II above) is that they do not account for instances where the respondent believes that the writer might benefit from rethinking her intent, or cases where a writing's originating impetus might not offer a productive route for the writer to complete the assignment. Composition teachers come across cases like these all the time and often suggest to student writers that they may want to rethink their topic or thesis, sometimes under the guise of helping the student more fully realize their original intent, and sometimes in defiance of the obeisance to intent.

But what if students were not taught that the goal of revision was to realize more fully their initial intent? What if intent were also up for revision? Such an expectation might allow for a greater range of writing processes and revisions. Writers might imagine themselves as facilitating a range of possible meanings rather than as attempting to fix meaning ever more narrowly as they revise. Less focus on writerly intent might also initiate different kinds of pedagogical practices and dispositions. Teachers could encourage student readers to play with the language of their colleagues as much as they do with the language of published professional writers. And perhaps then exchanges of ideas wouldn't only be read as "veiled attacks" on the writer's "opinions and interests" (Horvath 211). Peer workshops might take on different functions and tones if writers imagined revision as an opportunity to perhaps pursue their colleagues' "misreadings" of their texts rather than as the duty to correct those misreadings. The bracketing of intent could ultimately make discussions and negotiations around student writers' meanings and potential meanings less threatening, thus more fully realizing the purpose and potential of revision itself.

Min-Zhan Lu's article "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone" treats some of these ideas and suggests one model that might help us to think about what such a pedagogy might look like. Lu, working specifically with the texts of students who are English Language Learners (or, to use her term, "borderland" writers), encourages her students (and readers) to resist reading "aberrant" usage in these texts in terms of error, but instead to look at the productive possibilities of meaning in these non-standard forms—after all, Lu argues, this is the way we read innovative language forms in the published work of professional writers. Lu writes that she is interested in "complicating but not denying the relationship between style and the writer's knowledge of and experience with the conventions of written English" (451), suggesting that the student writer may come to new realizations about her prose and about the possibilities of language through this process of analysis, realizations that may have been unavailable to her before. But, as the above quote suggests, Lu's article does not advocate ignoring student authors' intentions altogether. In fact, in some ways Lu's strategy might appear to be designed to enable writers to articulate more fully and/or realize their original intentions (by seeing the different connotations of various language possibilities, the student writer discussed in Lu's article is able to revise her text to convey her meaning more precisely, whether this meaning was her original intent or is something new). However, by encouraging teachers and students to see beyond conventions and expectations, Lu brackets intent for the duration of the particular discussion, allowing for meanings to develop from the student paper beyond those initially envisaged by most fellow students, and probably beyond some of those imagined by the writer at the time of composition and after. This kind of reading of student work draws attention to language as a generative site of meaning, and shows how language and readers produce meaning alongside writers—such readings move beyond the composition commonplace that writers discover ideas in the act of writing, a valuable understanding that nevertheless still privileges the coherent author as writer and reader of her work, as maker of meaning.

Writing teachers at all grade levels might encourage students to reflect on their own writings as well as the writings of other students in terms of the suggestiveness of language, looking for interesting or surprising meanings that arise alongside, in addition to, or even despite what they think the author's intention might be, and inviting authors to pursue these meanings if they are resonant and productive. Many writing instructors enact some version of this practice already, persuaded by Donald Murray's idea of "writing as discovery," and recognizing that "[w]riting does not so much contribute to thinking as provide an occasion for thinking—or, more precisely, a substrate upon which thinking can grow" (Bizzell 486). Instructors encourage students to discover ideas as they write, ideas generated by the writing itself rather than ideas that are pre-planned in an outline, ideas that may, indeed, supplement or contradict an original thesis or plan. In fact, many writing instructors see the pursuit of such discoveries as the central task of revision. Why is it, then, that we finally fall back on intent when the writing is done (for now)? And what would it mean to also look at finished products as spaces of discovery? For one thing, it might embody a recognition of the permanently messy but exciting relationship between language and thought (Crowley, "Evolution" 344), between language and reality, between writing and thought, and between writers and their thoughts/language/writing. These relationships constantly produce new meanings, are never finite. For another, it would finally give the lie to the liberal humanist delusion of the unqualified efficacy and unlimited potentiality of individual agency—the writer as reviser who is better able to control her meaning, her language, her text.

Although I am less interested in honoring intent than Lu is, I am not insisting that intent and student agency should be ignored altogether. If this were the case, we'd all be doing automatic writing and nothing else. While writing and revision can be (and inevitably is) about intent for the writer, revision should not only be about realizing one's original intent, and readers should recognize the ways in which their own reading practices are as social and unexplainable as are the texts they interpret. Marilyn Cooper's question, "How do writers and readers develop ideas together?" (372), speaks not

only to the generating of ideas, but also to the interpretation of texts, suggesting the kinds of collaborations involved in writing in postmodern places, spaces, and hyperspaces, where readers, writers, texts, and their material, historical, and social contexts collide and intersect to produce meanings that can't always be controlled, and that are often unexpected. "In the classroom I envision," Lu explains, citing Cornell West, "the notion of `intention' is presented as the decision of a writer who understands not only the 'central role of human agency' but also that such agency is often 'enacted under circumstances not of one's own choosing'" (447). Here intent takes on a very different meaning from its modernist homonym, given that it now encompasses contexts beyond and against the author. The bracketing of traditional authorial intent in this case does not signal a return to the reactionary formalism championed by the New Criticism, since this bracketing engages with the very sociality of authorship that the New Criticism suppressed. However, I would recast the somber tone of the last phrase of Lu's point so that it allows for greater multivalency: while we are inscribed in language and in the social relations that words describe and create, language also surprises. Readers surprise, too. Writers should be open to the possibilities of these surprises.

My claim is not so much that writers can or should write without intentions—indeed, my own metacommentary in this article suggests my impetus for initial control of this text, and certainly that I had a certain intention in mind as I (re)wrote it. My point, rather, is that readers can, do, and should interpret texts without privileging authors' (imagined) intentions, and that these interpretations might productively encourage writers to reimagine (their) intent. Intent itself is as much a textual construction as are the text's meanings that follow from that intent. After all, what you might be reading as my intention in this article is itself a construction of language and convention, and my metacommentary may, in fact, be a retrospectively created fiction of intent based on readers' reports and editors' suggestions, or on a new intention on my part to create an intent or a particular intent in my text.

But when the writer revises after incorporating readers' surprises, doesn't she hold a new intent that must surely be realized by the revised text? I would say no. Writers can go a step further, recognizing that revision is not only a realization of an original and new intent, but also a creation of new meanings unforeseen by the writer. In this sense there is only process. There can never be an intentionalized product. Intent should never be a bottom line. Even when a "final" paper is turned in, readers/teachers/graders may read things in it that the writer did not envisage. They can't be sure. They won't always know where intent and effect overlay and converge. And they shouldn't lament the writer's inability to predict all meanings or their own uncertainty.

It seems to me that such an openness would truly unlock the radical possibilities of genre theory's insight that "[w]riters invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres" (Bawarshi 7)— writers always write within constraints, and these constraints both allow for the writer to create meaning but also create meanings beyond the writer's control. If a writer does have any intent that remains meaningful in the long term, it can only be, as D. Diane Davis puts it, to "aim to amplify the irreparable *instability* and extreme *vulnerability* to which any writing necessarily testifies" (139). Bawarshi, Davis, and Robillard all champion some formulation of worldy writing, the latter two lamenting the ways in which composition's ties to the modernist subject suture it to ideologies of individualism that thrust it away from the communal. If we can suspend our allegiances to authorial intent, Cooper's question about how writers and readers develop ideas together would find a response in a communitarian literacy where writer, reader, genre, and other political and social identifications and impositions intersect and overlay to create meaning unevenly, not necessarily in the sense of a willed and controlled collaboration, but in a continuing interplay over time and space.

Recognizing the probability that readers will continue to create new meanings—even after "final" revision--may have startling implications for writing and teaching, and for the grading and evaluation

of student writing. It might mean that rubrics have to be reconsidered. It might mean that we must acknowledge that we are grading our reading of a text as much as we are grading an author's writing of it. It might mean that we can't grade student writing any more. And it might also mean that teachers have to rethink our relationship to and representation of our own writing.

Appendix: Survey of Composition Faculty at California State University, Northridge

Dear Colleague,

I am doing some research on the role of "intent" in composition classes, and would greatly appreciate it if you would assist me by filling out the brief anonymous survey below, and place your completed survey in my mailbox by 15 November 2009. Feel free to email me if you have any questions or concerns about this survey: ian.barnard@csun.edu.

Thanks so much for your help,

Ian

Ian Barnard

Please answer the following questions about your composition classes by circling the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. When responding (orally or in writing) to student writing, how important is it to you to establish the student's intention with the piece of writing in order to provide effective feedback?

Very Important   Somewhat important   Not important   Unimportant

2. When students give each other feedback on their paper drafts, how important to giving effective feedback is it that they establish the writer's intention with the paper?

Very Important   Somewhat important   Not important   Unimportant

3. When you discuss professional non-fiction texts (e.g., newspaper articles, essays published in readers) with your students, how important is it to try to figure out the author's intention in writing the piece?

Very Important   Somewhat important   Not important   Unimportant

4. When you discuss sample student papers with your classes, how important is it to address what the student was trying to achieve in the sample paper under discussion?

Very Important   Somewhat important   Not important   Unimportant

Comments:

Notes

survey. I am also grateful to Michelle Ballif and two anonymous reviewers for *Composition Forum* for their invaluable engagement with earlier incarnations of this essay.

1. For other articulations of the critique of authorial authority and the privileging of authorial intent, and arguments for and against this critique, see Bakhtin; Belsey; Burke; Faigley, Chapter 1; Miller, *Rescuing*; Knapp; Trinh, *Woman* 29. (Return to text. [#note1-ref])

2. See Barnard, "Anti-Ethnography?" for further discussion of this chasm. (Return to text. [#note2-ref])

3. See Faigley (especially Chapter 1) and Gee for accounts of this ascendance. (Return to text. [#note3-ref])

4. I do not claim that my survey respondents are representative of all composition faculty in the United States, but I do believe that their perspectives on authorial intent represent some themes on the topic that are quite common to our field. (Return to text. [#note4-ref])

5. For some critiques of the ideology of efficiency in composition and of the emphasis on the functionality of student writing, see Albrecht-Crane, Kastely. For an interrogation of the emphasis on composition's service function, see Colomb, Schilb. (Return to text. [#note5-ref])

6. See also Adler-Kasner; Jolliffe and Harl; Roskelly and Jolliffe. (Return to text. [#note6-ref])

7. For some arguments for and about constructing composition (and other) students as writers, see Barnard, "Whole-Class Workshops"; Elbow, "Being"; Horner, "Students" and *Terms*; Isaacs and Johnson; Lu; Miller, *Textual*. (Return to text. [#note7-ref])

8. See Brady and Ianetta for overviews and histories of the conflicts between literature and composition, the debates about literature's place in the composition classroom, and recent attempts to recuperate literature for composition. Bizzell (494-95) also sees as part of this legitimating effort cognitive work in composition by Linda Flower et al. that developed "inner-directed" models of writing, and attempts to make composition research "scientific." (Return to text. [#note8-ref])

9. For more on the ERWC, see http://www.calstate.edu/eap/englishcourse. (Return to text. [#note9-ref])

10. I am grateful to one of the anonymous *Composition Forum* reviewers for pointing me in the direction of Robillard's arguments here and for suggesting that I tackle some of the issues raised in this section. (Return to text. [#note10-ref])

11. For some composition theorists (e.g., Colomb, Lunsford, Olson, Williams), understanding the discipline of composition as focused solely on the teaching of (student) writing is problematic. While they do not question the importance of studying student writing and the teaching of writing, these scholars suggest that to make these subjects the field's only purview is reductive and denies composition's significance as a discourse about, *inter alia*, writing and other literacies and discourses in academia and in the world outside of academia. See Worsham (102) for an explanation of this dispute in composition studies. (Return to text. [#note11-ref])

12. See Jarratt (especially 1394) for an effort to complicate this binary. (Return to text. [#note12-ref])

13. For discussion of the imperative in composition scholarship and pedagogy that students write to a "real" audience, see Isaacs and Johnson; Lu. For a discussion of this imperative in high schools, see "Writing." For a rejoinder to composition's fashionable insistence on audience awareness, see Peter Elbow's meditation on the pleasures of not writing for an audience and on how constructing an audience in the early stages of the writing process can be paralyzing for (student) writers ("Closing"). (Return to text. [#note13-ref])

14. Ellen Rooney incisively notes in her *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* that liberal pluralism allows for any opinion as long as it is compatible with liberal pluralism! For further discussion of liberal pluralism in the context of academia, see Barnard ("Civility"). (Return to text. [#note14-ref])

15. See Gorzelsky for an overview of composition scholarship on critical pedagogy and student resistance to it. (Return to text. [#note15-ref])

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