

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ELECTRONIC CIRCUIT: A VIRTUAL REMAPPING OF BORDER CROSSINGS

ABSTRACT: *Research in computers and composition has contributed to a multitude of insights important to scholars and educators interested in computer-supported writing instruction. However, the field has not yet engaged in critical discussions of nontraditional students' – especially African-American students' – interactive strategies in online communication. To provide a starting point for critical explorations of African-American students' computer-based interaction, this paper analyzes how an African-American male student negotiates his multiple subjectivities in a largely white university setting and in a male-dominated society. Specific examples from online transcripts generated in a basic writing class show that he is "otherized" in an anglophile environment but also "otherizes" in a patriarchal and homophobic society. By foregrounding the different voices he brings to the classroom, this study undermines oversimplified dichotomies of majority and minority discourses and instead argues for accepting diverse and sometimes contradictory subject positions of all participants in interactive communities.*

In the tradition of Western science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.

Donna Haraway, from "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 191.

In recent years, research in computers and composition has provided teachers and scholars interested in the theoretical and pedagogical applications of new computer technologies with a plethora of studies. Book-length explorations, articles in edited collections and jour-

Sibylle Gruber is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric at Northern Arizona University where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy studies, rhetoric and cultures, computers and composition, and the history of composition studies. She is the editor of Weaving a Virtual Web: Practical Approaches to New Information Technologies and is coediting a book with Laura Gray-Rosendale titled Alternative Rhetorics: Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition. Gruber's work on cybertheories, feminist rhetorics, composition, and cultural studies can be found in journals such as Computers and Composition, Computer Supported Cooperative Work, and The Journal of the Assembly on Computers in English, and books such as Feminist Cyberspaces: Essays on Gender in Electronic Spaces, and Global Literacy Practices and the WWW: Cultural Perspectives on Information Distribution, Interpretation, and Use.

nals, web-based publications, and conference papers discuss how computers influence our thinking about virtuality, reality, and truth; how classroom practices are influenced by conferencing software, the internet, and the web; and how teacher-student interaction is affected by new technologies (see, for example, Fischer; Gruber, *Weaving*; Haas; Hawisher and Sullivan; Johnson-Eilola; Selfe and Hilligoss; Selfe and Selfe; Stabile; Stone). Computer-based instruction, according to findings in various classroom-based studies, might shift but does not eliminate teacher domination or gendered discourse in online discussions (see, for example, Gruber, "Ways"; Regan; Romano; Takayoshi). These and other explorations have contributed to a critical view of how computers should be integrated into an instructional environment, cautioning teachers to look at technology as a tool that needs to be implemented carefully in specific settings to increase equitable student-teacher interactions and women's participation in online interactions.

What is largely missing from current research, though, is how students from different ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds situate themselves in a computer-mediated academic environment. Specifically, computers and compositionists have remained aloof to African American students' interactions in online composition classes. The near absence of qualitative and ethnographic studies in this area is especially surprising considering the heightened sensitivity to diversity in the educational system.¹ The debate over ebonics, for example, has raised awareness of language differences. Also, research on the success rates of minority students in college confirms that African Americans and students from other minority backgrounds often feel alienated because their experiences are not in accord with the white middle-class backgrounds of the majority of college students. As Mike Rose maintains, because of "tangled, disturbing histories of discrimination, skewed perception, and protection of privilege" (412), these students oftentimes encounter numerous problems with the educational system and the assumed literacy skills endorsed by the academic community.

Whether computer-based interaction, as part of the "alien" instructional environment, leads to additional problems for students already disadvantaged or whether it helps them move toward academic literacy has been touched upon briefly in A. Suresh Canagarajah's recent discussion of "safe houses" which African-American students established in a networked classroom. Canagarajah, unfortunately, only looks at African-American students as a homogeneous group that uses language on- and offline to "express their frustrations, display resistance, and seek emotional sustenance and solidarity" (179). Such a perspective, however, only exacerbates an indiscriminate labeling of students as "other" and "underprepared," looking from the outside in but unable to become part of the larger whole. Ignoring the diversity

among people from the same ethnic group would deny what Henry Louis Gates so aptly pointed out in a recent radio interview: "If there are 30 million African Americans, there are 30 million ways of being African American" (February 20, 1997).

To complicate the notion of "African Americans," and to explore the multiple discourse strategies they bring to computer-mediated environments, this paper analyzes how Bailey², an African-American male student from a mid-sized midwestern town, negotiates his position in a mainly white university setting and in a mainly male-dominated society. My analysis focuses on his interactions in a basic writing class and his comments on PacerForum, an electronic communication tool which was used for synchronous and asynchronous online discussions³. This contribution is intended to raise awareness among composition scholars and teachers that the various and sometimes contradictory subjectivities of African Americans—and all our students—can lead them to impose stereotypes, for example, while at the same time being stereotyped when interacting in class or when using an electronic communication tool.⁴

By foregrounding the different positions of an African-American student during online discussions, this study undermines the belief that the established dichotomy between majority and minority students can be upheld in a society that judges people not only by skin color but also by other, equally important factors. For example, gender, economic background, educational experiences prior to college, and sexual preferences also influence the interactions of students in the classroom. Thus, instead of ignoring the diversity among people from the same ethnic group, I will emphasize Bailey's many voices, his ability to walk "out of one culture and into another" (Anzaldúa 77), and, consequently, his ability to employ multiple positions during his interactions online. Race, therefore, is no longer seen as an easily definable hegemonic concept but instead as a social and rhetorical construct which, as Keith Gilyard points out, needs to undergo critical reevaluation.

Asking Questions

If we consider at the outset where our speech is going and what it will do there, and if we enlist the voices of others to guide us along the way, trusting the other to teach us what we need to know, we will be less likely to fall prey to the temptation ever before us as academics to view research as an end in itself and the knowledge we produce as its own justification.

Patricia A. Sullivan, from "Ethnography and the Problem of the 'Other,'" 112.

This paper is an attempt “to bring stories not yet heard to the attention of the academy” (Brodkey 48). Essentially, I want to foreground Bailey’s experiences, acknowledge the many different voices he employs, and explore the reasons for these differences. Thus, instead of asking “What are the differences between black and white discourse strategies?” or “What are the differences between the discourse strategies of basic and mainstream writers?” — questions which assume set properties independent of the person and the situation — I will pose different questions: “How does Bailey’s economic, social, cultural, and ethnic background influence his discourse strategies in specific situations?” and “How does the electronic medium used for class discussions influence Bailey’s interactive behavior?” Emphasizing specific instances of interaction acknowledges that communication strategies are never absolute but are, on the contrary, relative to the situation in which any interaction is realized, and relative to the person who is participating in any given situation. Such in-depth studies of individual students are especially important when trying to avoid generalizations about groups of so-called “basic writers,” “African-American students,” “women,” or any other group usually identified as adhering to some easily identifiable traits.

The specific setting in which the study takes place is a computerized section of Rhetoric 103 — a writing course for students whose ACT, SAT, and essay test scores are considered “below average” by university administrators — which was taught by the researcher⁵ in the Fall of 1994 at a large midwestern university. For an in-depth study of participants’ development in Rhetoric 103, I used questionnaires at the beginning and end of the semester, conducted interviews, analyzed PacerForum transcripts, and also analyzed the research papers that they wrote for class. I also observed them in class and noted their participation and general attitudes towards their peers and the class. This study focuses specifically on Bailey’s online strategies and the multiple positions he occupies as an African American, a man, and a heterosexual, all of which influence his discursive behavior and his responses to the three online discussions analyzed in the following sections.

Starting to Participate

We approach our maturity inside a larger social body that will not support our efforts to become anything other than the clones of those who are neither our mothers nor our fathers. . . . As we learn our way around this environment, either we hide our original word habits, or we completely surrender our

own voice, hoping to please those who will never respect anyone different from themselves.

June Jordan, from "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," 123.

"My immediate goal is to adapt well to college life and to start off on the right track in my classes. My long-term goal is to graduate with a substantially high G.P.A., and to attend Law School." Bailey, the main actor in the story unfolding over the next pages, wrote these well-articulated sentences during the initial day of class in Rhetoric 103, the first of a two-semester basic writing course. Despite his ability to write grammatically correct sentences, he was placed into Rhetoric 103 because his ACT and essay test scores were below the average test scores of students entering this midwestern university. Thus, although Bailey was self-confident about his ability to achieve academic excellence and to enter law school, university admissions considered him to be "at risk" and less prepared for academic success than most entering first-year students. Bailey was found lacking in academic discourse skills, and Rhetoric 103 was intended to serve as a place where he could learn how to "extend [himself] into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of the 'what might be said' and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community" (Bartholomae 278; see also Bizzell). And Bailey, according to his answers on the initial questionnaire, did not show any resentment about his placement and seemed to be quite willing to "adapt" himself to the new environment.

However, before we look at Bailey as simply a basic writer with a set number of characteristics—for example, a lack of necessary writing skills but a willingness to work hard to achieve success—we have to look at the individual and how he presents himself in an academic setting. Looking closely at how Bailey interacts with his peers, we can see that he moves beyond the global description of a basic writer who is characterized by Patricia Bizzell as someone with "differences in dialects, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking" (296). These differences might indeed be present in some students; however, they play out in various ways in the student population rubriced under "basic writer." Bailey's participation and his expressions of his opinions (he does not use a "different dialect," for example) is unique and idiosyncratic, and we would do injustice to him and other students if we considered his comments without considering the specific situation in which these comments were written.

We Wear the Mask: Being an African American in a White World

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

Laurence Dunbar, from "We Wear the Mask" (223)

Bailey is determined to succeed in college and to learn how to do well. But despite wanting to fit in, he is also suspicious of his environment. He is enrolled in a predominantly white university where racial slurs still find their way onto walls⁶ and where students from different ethnic backgrounds do not generally mix with each other. Fortunately, in Rhetoric 103 the 16 students came from many different backgrounds and had to interact with each other in order to participate in class and also in online discussions. In terms of ethnic backgrounds, African American students constituted the majority (6), followed by Anglo Americans (4), Asian Americans (2), Hispanics (2), a student from India (1), and a Persian American student (1). In terms of socioeconomic status, most students in this class grew up in households with an income below the average family income of their college peers. Furthermore, students came from many different areas in the state and also from out-of-state.

The various backgrounds of students, for one, provided a diversified audience for discussions on race-related issues. Thus, during an online exchange⁷ on minority representation in advertisements, Bailey seems to feel comfortable discussing his viewpoint on racial tensions and injustices. After reading an article on race discrimination in higher education as well as an article delineating stereotypes in advertising—both intended as a starting point for a writing assignment—he agrees with the opinions brought forward by the authors. His first comment illustrates his position:

90.⁸ Bailey

The white-man is in control, so how he views things in society is going to be accepted as right even if it is wrong.

Bailey's statement, presented as an indisputable fact, is based on the readings and—according to subsequent postings and comments he make in class—his sentiments can be seen as the result of his own experiences in American society as a black person who, because of his skin color, feels excluded from many positions occupied by the "white-

man." Accordingly, Bailey sees himself in a subordinate position which, as he makes it clear, is beyond his control to change. Bailey's negative opinion about his own impact on how "things are viewed" is not only an expression of past experiences as a member of a minority but can also be related to his experiences at the university. In 1994, when Bailey entered as a first-year student, the African-American student population numbered only 6.1 percent (1994 Student Enrollment Table) whereas the State of Illinois' African American population amounts to 12.1 percent. Most of the administrative positions at the university were—and are—held by whites, and his professors during his first semester—in his Economics, French, Math, Kinesiology, and Rhetoric classes—were also white.

Although minority issues are often relegated to the periphery of academic discussions, and although minority students' voices usually don't carry much weight, Bailey's position as a non-white person in Rhetoric 103 establishes his authority on race issues. He becomes the "host" of the online exchange and finds support from other class members who validate his opinion and who substantiate his underlying comments on his position as a minority person who suffers from discrimination. For example, Carla, John, and Egan, two white students and an Asian-American student, wholeheartedly endorse Bailey's statement:

93. Carla

Bailey That is soooooo true. I think we all need to change that

97. John

I agree with Bailey the white man still has most of the control.

105. Egan

I think this is still a white man's world.

In subsequent comments, most of the students agree that the country is run by white men and is thus hostile to African Americans and other minorities.

This grim picture of reality presented by many students in the class does not appeal to Miriam, one of the white students in class. She argues:

96. Miriam

Bailey I disagree I feel that times have changed. I don't think the white man is in control.

Miriam challenges Bailey's assumptions based on her experiences with ethnic diversity. Miriam grew up in a mainly white, middle-class sub-

urban neighborhood and did not experience racial tension—or diversity—before she came to the university. For her, racism—defined by Audre Lorde as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (282)—does not exist. She is not willing to admit that anything is wrong in American society and that race relations are less than ideal. However, Miriam’s opinions are not the opinions of the majority in this class, and Bailey is supported among others by Langston, an African-American student who grew up in the inner city of Chicago, and Carla, a white student who was raised in Georgia. Their comments and the comments of other students lead to an involved discussion on the political and economic situation in the States.

100. Langston

Who’s president, Miriam? Most of our mayors and governors? The people that run the show are usually white.

101. Carla

Miriam, He may not be in control as much as he used to be, but he still has a pretty tight hold on things.

106. Bailey

Miriam, if the white-man wasn’t in control we probably wouldn’t be having this discussion. Who runs these advertising companies?

109. Carla

Yeah Langston, and the majority of them (governors, senate) are still white males

113. Bailey

I don’t think this issue is subject to change unless we change who is in control of these operations and that won’t happen any day soon.

115. Miriam

NO SEE THAT IS WHY PEOPLE DO NOT GET ALONG . . .
THE WHITE MAN IS NOT IN MY OPINION IN CONTROL
. . . HOW MANY BLACK PEOPLE RUN FOR PRESIDENT ??
VERY FEW MAYBE IF THER WAS MORE EFFORT PUT
FORTH THINGS WOULD CHANGE . . .

117. Langston

I agree Bailey. Other races need to come together first and settle their own differences to change the way things work.

118. Alex

Miriam it does not matter if a black man runs for president. The majority of businesses are run by whites.

125. Tashi

No Miriam I have to disagree with you. A lot of effort is put in but look who is the majority. You can't say effort isn't put in because there are so many trying to achieve a higher level of status in society.

Tashi, an African-American woman whose mother teaches high school students and who is usually very quiet and reserved in class, opposes Miriam's efforts to blame African Americans and other minorities for their social and economic situations in society. Tashi's comment and other voices in the class support and underscore Bailey's argument. Even more importantly, his voice, which expresses his perceptions concerning the discriminatory practices of white men in a "white man's world," exists in unison with other voices and also depends on them. In Bailey's case, the interactions with his peers on PacerForum were necessary to express his ideas and respond to other participants' postings. His relationship with his classmates and their comments made a dialogue on a hard issue—experiencing discrimination—possible.⁹ The postings on PacerForum thus strengthened Bailey's feelings of belonging in the classroom environment despite his outsider status in the larger context. And although one of the participants disagreed with the premise put forth by Bailey and other students, the idea that this is a white man's world which subordinates African-American men was reaffirmed.

PacerForum and the electronic discussion thus became a means for participants to bring into the open the perceived systematic discrimination which is still a part of minority groups' day-to-day lives. They were also able to critique the perceived bastions of the "white man's world" by appropriating a tool—the computer—which is often seen to represent dominant power structures (see Selfe and Selfe). Bailey, as one of the participants, positioned himself as a member of an ethnic minority who is frequently exposed to racism and discrimination, but who at the same time is able to use his background in connection with the new technology to gain authority and a voice in the classroom. This complicates Henry Louis Gates' notion that many African-American students feel "like visitors, like guests, like foreign or colonized citizens in relation to a traditional canon that fails to represent [their] cultural identities ("Transforming" 35). Instead, Bailey uses his position as a "colonized citizen" to assert himself; he uses the "master's tools"—in this case electronic communication technology—to speak up for minority groups.¹⁰

Putting Down the Ones Who Are Already Down: What Is Rape Anyway?

Prosecute? No, I just want to get home. While I'm pickin' some guy out of some line, who knows who's messin' around with my momma and my baby.

Altamese Thomas, rape survivor; qtd in Fine, 115

Being a black man in a white man's world is at the forefront of Bailey's entries in the previous online discussion on race-relations and discriminatory practices of white America, and his perspective on the "oppressed" leads his classmates to show compassion and understanding for Bailey; it also shows his use of language to transgress power relations. However, his position shifts once the conversation moves in a different direction and focuses on issues less directly connected with racial discrimination: sexual harassment and rape.

To provide students with a variety of opportunities to think about date rape and rape before discussing it as a group and before writing a critical argument on gender issues, they were asked to go to the Union Building and "study" a wreath put up in memory of victims of rape and date rape.¹¹ Additionally, participants in Rhetoric 103 watched a documentary about a University student who had been date raped and had, after a long silence, agreed to talk about it openly. Using a wreath and a documentary as reading material before engaging in an online discussion was intended to provide students with information that they could connect to their own lives and their own environment, which would then engage them in active and critical participation.

Despite the "preparation" intended to raise awareness of a real problem, Bailey confirms the unwillingness of some men to "own up" to a societal ill. He, like others in the class, sees rape as the fault of the woman. He shows himself as a person who is willing to put blame on those already victimized by a stranger or an acquaintance, thus moving away from being the victim of an alien and racist society toward victimizing women who have been raped.¹² Alex, another African-American man, supports Bailey's opinion:

38. Bailey

I feel that most rapes occur because women put themselves in situations where they lead a man to the point where he won't take no for an answer.

45. Alex

I agree with Bailey, if you don't want a person to get the wrong impression, let them know where you stand. I would [rather] want to hurt a person's feelings than get raped

For Bailey and Alex, it's a clear-cut issue: if a woman gets raped, it is her own fault because she was leading the man on. Bailey confirms this stance in another entry:

60. Bailey

I believe that sometimes women get to a point where they feel that they are obligated in having sex for whatever reasons. After the fact these women feel as though their rights have been infringed upon, therefore justify their actions by calling rape.

Although many of the men participating in the discussion—from minority and majority backgrounds—agree with Bailey, their ideas do not go uncontested. Miriam, for example, counters these opinions, although they seem to be the opinion of the majority up to this point:

62. Miriam

If we are talking about other than just date rape then how does a women who has been kidnapped or grabbed and raped say Gee excuse me I dont think I want to go this far . . . the jerk just does it.

Bailey, however, is not deterred by this comment, and he still insists that women unjustly call sex "rape." His responses, of course, are colored by his own experiences as a man who does not want to be called a rapist. This becomes apparent in one of the entries he sends to the group:

70. Bailey

No means No and yes means yes to a certain point. I have been in many situations where I have been told no but upon further actions ends up leading to having sex, so does this mean that I'm a rapist, after all she said no.

Clearly, Bailey is trying to justify his own actions, and by doing so, he puts all responsibility on the woman.

Despite Bailey's dismissive statements, the conversation on this topic continues, prompting Alba, a Latina, to get involved. She asks Bailey to reconsider his opinions, but Bailey is adamant about his position:

85. Alba

Bailey? If women regret sex they will call it rape? Look unless you know that for a fact, that is a very strong comment to make. Why would a woman want to put herself

through that? I've seen trial proceedings on rape cases and the defendants strategy is always to portray the woman as a slut "who asked for it". I don't know about anyone else but I'm sure I would rather just deal with regret, than have someone come out and try to portray me as a slut with no credibility as a human being!

103. Bailey

Alba, in every rape case one side will view the victim as a slut, but on the other hand she will receive sympathy from the other side and be looked upon as a goody goody. So take your choice which one outweighs the other. I didn't say all women who regret having sex with someone call rape, I said sometimes this occurs and you can't tell me that it doesn't.

123. Bailey

I feel that more women should get the picture on how rape can be interpreted many different ways and understand that rape is hard to prove under most circumstances. Since rape is such a hard thing to prove then women should take it upon themselves to stay away from unfavorable conditions.

Bailey's last comment in this exchange expresses his sentiments most clearly. His posting is a response to Alba's narration of a serial rape that happened to a friend.¹³ Alba had to defend her friend from a number of accusations, and she finally responds to the probing questions which Bailey and two other men in the class posted on PacerForum. The response to Alba's post, however, is in line with previous comments Bailey made:

181. Alba

She lived right next door. They lived right next door. Let me just say that these questions are a good reflection of what a victim would have to go through, defend her actions. Besides she consented to only one boy the others just joined in, and she didn't or couldn't refuse.

193. Bailey

Alba, what do you mean she couldn't refuse? If she would have refused then she would have had a case but since she didn't, END OF STORY.

"End of Story." For Bailey, the conversation has ended, and like some of his male colleagues, he is all the more convinced that it is the woman's

responsibility to prevent rape. Furthermore, he faults the woman in cases of rape, absolving men from any accountability. What is apparent is that Bailey is no longer subjected to an outsider position who suffers from discrimination; instead, he becomes a defender of current attitudes toward women whose bodies have been violated and who have become victims of male aggression. Bailey's feelings of subordination and being dominated, and his use of language to transgress existing power relations, disappear when he takes on the role of a man in a mainly male-dominated world, becoming part of the patriarchal structure dominating western ideologies.

Excluding the Excluded: Homophobia Revisited

I don't blame you for letting gays upset you. I know I'd be extremely upset. We're taught that homosexuality is a sin among other things, and can suffer great shock when actually approached with it in any way.

Maria Garcia, qtd in Regan, 16

Bailey's "roles," so far, have been that of the victim of "white America" and that of a man who grew up believing that rape is the fault of the woman. During the course of the semester, Bailey did not show any change in attitude concerning these two issues. However, his opinions on another topic—sexual preferences—underwent a remarkable development. Like many heterosexuals in a homophobic environment, Bailey first uses his heterosexuality to show that he is "right" and "straight" and that he can decide what is wrong. During a synchronous discussion¹⁴, Bailey is one of the students who is grappling with the question of sexual preference and its impact on the family:

14. Bailey

I think the whole family plays a part of one being homosexual. "A bad apple spoils the bunch", and homosexuals are many times considered bad apples.

According to Bailey, gay and lesbians should not discuss their sexual preferences publicly and instead "stay in the closet":

46. Bailey

I do feel that homosexuals should have a private identity because they would only be hurting themselves by making their way of life public business. By living this private identity homosexuals would protect themselves from society and its backlash against homosexuals.

Bailey sees this "backlash" as the problem of those who do not conform to the sexual preferences of heterosexuals, and he does not question the assumptions about society which he is making in this statement.

In the above entries, Bailey's position is the "position of society," and he tries to approach homosexuality from the perspective of righteous concern for the deterioration of American morals on the one side and the safety of homosexuals on the other side. Later on, however, Bailey moves away from using "society" as a front for his opinions and very clearly expresses his own ideas on the subject, and his homophobic tendencies become very succinct:

85. Bailey

I'm sorry I just don't understand how a man or woman could be in any way attracted to another man or woman sexually. Would somebody explain it to me.

180. Bailey

If homosexuality is wrong then there should be some limits on what can be stated about it. It may violate the freedom of speech right but we cannot enhance wrongdoing.

229. Bailey

God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. Evidently for some reason he created man and woman. Why? To produce other offspring. If being gay isn't wrong what if everyone turned gay that would prove detrimental to the world because no one would produce other children and how could that be right.

Bailey's concluding statement at the end of the online discussion expresses his belief in the fundamental "wrong" of homosexuality, using the Bible to prove his point.

Opinions on this issue were divergent, and the online exchanges were heated and passionate. One of the students, for example, also used the Bible as her source of authority, but this time to argue a different point:

93. Alba

People are "coming out of the closet" because they're making it a point that they are going to defend themselves voluntarily and they don't want to have to hide anymore.

...I agree immensely with the bible and the belief that God did not ordain homosexuality but it also says in the bible that no

one shall judge but the Lord, and everyone's time will come - but we "are all children of God in the meantime"

Many issues remained unresolved, and feelings were running high during and after the online discussion. To provide participants with a chance to continue the conversation and clarify some of the comments made on PacerForum, the discussion was continued face-to-face in class two days later.¹⁵ During this exchange, emotions were still at a peak. However, this time, defenders of equal rights for homosexuals brought up connections between racial discrimination and the discrimination of homosexuals, a comparison which Bailey and many of his peers resisted. According to Bailey, his race was not a choice whereas homosexuals choose their sexual preferences. Furthermore, he resisted any mention of the similarities between racial and sexual discrimination because, as he pointed out, a black person will always stand out whereas a gay person is not distinguished by skin color.

The in-class discussion only seemed to strengthen Bailey's views on homosexuality and sexual preferences. However, although it was not apparent at the time of the discussion, his final project shows that he listened to the arguments brought forth by some of his peers, and Bailey decided to write his final paper on what he called *Homosexual Discrimination in American Society*. In this project he reexamined his position on sexual preferences and instead of seeing homosexuals as a threat to procreation and the survival of humanity, he now argued that "a country divided cannot prosper." More distinctly, he points out in his paper:

if we continue to judge people by such facets as race, culture, and/or sexual preference we as society will divide ourselves, and the division of a nation leads to a number of internal conflicts that tend to weaken a country.

In his concluding remarks he says:

If we . . . begin to understand that everyone isn't the same . . . the better off we will be in coping with minority preferences such as homosexuality.

Here, unlike in the discussion on rape and date rape, Bailey reconsiders his opinions and is able to see the connection between his position as a black man in a "white-man's world" and the position of homosexuals in a homophobic environment.¹⁶ Bailey's changing attitude, of course, implies that his ideas—in all three discussions—did not develop in a vacuum, nor would his opinions have been expressed and changed without the influence of other participants in the online and

off-line exchanges. The interactions online and offline helped Bailey to move beyond his fear and beyond his preconceived notions of homosexuality by listening and participating in an exchange of conflicting ideas put forward by him and other members in the class.¹⁷ His interactions online also show that he is not only an African American oppressed by white society; instead, he inhabits several spheres, among others the sphere of a minority and the sphere of a man in a largely patriarchal and heterosexual society.

Coming to Terms with Difference

The residual distrust of conflict and struggle in the field of Basic Writing is sustained by a fascination with cures for psychic woes, by two views of education—as acculturation and as accommodation—and by two views of language—essentialist and utopian. We need more research which critiques portrayals of Basic Writers as belonging to an abnormal—traumatized or underdeveloped mental state . . .

Min-Zhan Lu, "Conflict and Struggle" (910)

Unlike much other work on African-American students in an academic setting, this paper tried to complicate Bailey's position as a minority student in a largely white environment by excerpting his online comments on race discrimination, rape, and homosexuality. Bailey, according to the excerpts, encompasses a number of subjectivities, determined by his background, his race, his gender, and his sexual preferences. His positions constantly shift, partly showing him as somebody who is oppressed but also as somebody who oppresses others, excludes them, and discriminates against them. To summarize, Bailey uses PacerForum and also his position in the face-to-face environment and the written paper to fit a number of purposes:

- * He discusses his status as a black person who does not have access to positions of power, signifying the continuation of black subordination.
- * He argues against men's responsibility and blames women for being raped, promoting the continuation of male domination.
- * He condemns homosexuality, agreeing with the continuation of heterosexual prejudice.
- * He is able to reconsider his position on homosexuality and to connect prejudices against people with different sexual preferences to racial prejudice.

In other words, Bailey shows that he feels “otherized” by the “white-man” but he also uses PacerForum to “otherize” women and people with different sexual preferences. As the PacerForum excerpts show, he occupies many subject positions. To use Gloria Anzaldúa’s words, Bailey is “on many shores at the same time” (77), being discriminated against by others but also discriminating against others. Bailey’s online behavior and his final project are clear examples of “virtual heteroglossia” which, in this specific case, shows itself in Bailey’s varied but connected online subject-positions and in his need to fight against discrimination of African Americans, not only the discrimination he experiences but also the discrimination he imposes on others. As teachers, then, we need to work toward a pedagogy which takes into consideration individual students varied and shifting identities and “demystifies” a reductionist analysis of nontraditional students’ use of language.¹⁸ Instead of one-dimensional judgments, we need to make a concerted effort to appreciate the multi-dimensional natures of students’ interactive approaches in our classrooms. It is not enough to acknowledge “contact zones” – a term phrased by Mary Louise Pratt to connote the “spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (“Arts” 34) – among different cultures and among students in a classroom, but we also need to apply these contact zones to the spaces within a culture. Even more importantly, we need to broaden – or narrow – the term to apply to the conflicts within one person’s heterogeneous self. Without attention to the shifting – sometimes contradictory and even incompatible – nature of students’ language practices, we are in danger of continuing teaching practices which inhibit students from using their voices to explore their own positions as participating members in educational, political, and social communities.

Notes

My heartfelt thanks for reading drafts of this article go to the members of my reading group – Laura Gray-Rosendale, Jean Boreen, and Cynthia Kosso. I also want to thank the *JBW* reviewers for their helpful comments.

1. Sirc and Reynolds’ articles in *Computers and Composition* (1990) and in *Network-Based Classrooms* (1993), and Susan Romano’s and Todd Taylor’s articles in *Computers and Composition* are some of the few explorations of nontraditional students’ online interactions.

2. To insure confidentiality, actual names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

3. PacerForum is an electronic communication tool that allows students to post at anytime from on- or off-campus locations that have networked computer equipment. It is organized by topic of discus-

sion to which all students have access and to which they can contribute as frequently or infrequently as they desire. In the class discussed in this paper, PacerForum was used synchronously as well as asynchronously for discussions of texts and how these texts relate to students' experiences.

4. On a related topic, see Laura Gray-Rosendale's piece in the *Journal of Basic Writing* for an analysis of basic writing student discourse and her suggestions for rethinking current approaches to basic writing scholarship.

5. My positions as a teacher, researcher, and woman in a large midwestern university provided challenges but also brought rewards. Like Cathy Fleischer's, my question was: "How can I separate my participant self from my observer self to write about the experience in ways which will be read kindly and seriously and help effect some change?" (28-29, qtd in Ray). My immersion and participation in the environment I studied enabled me to see my research for its "transformative potential for [myself] and [my] classrooms" (Ray 292). Studying classroom interactions in one of my classes has given me insights I would otherwise not have gained.

6. For example, students found "Niggers go home" scribbled on one of the walls in the English Department, and although the university's operations and maintenance personnel were quick to paint over the insulting phrase, it remained visible long enough for many students to see.

7. During these exchanges, students were logged on at the same time but were not in the same room with each other. Instead, they took part in the discussion while being at various locations on or off campus which had computers with network connections. Students constructed my role in the online forum—after discussing it among themselves in the classroom—as a participant who would not be given any "teacher" privileges (authority to lead the discussion). Instead, students elected the discussion leaders from their peers.

8. The numbers indicate the chronological order of the postings. The excerpts used in the following pages are postings pertaining to Bailey's interactions. Other discussions focusing on related issues but not involving Bailey went on at the same time.

9. The synchronous nature of PacerForum and the ability to post comments at the same time allowed for a very engaged and vivid discussion. In face-to-face interactions, participation depends on turn-taking which makes it usually more difficult to engage all students in the discussion.

10. For a more detailed description of the appropriation of dominant discourse and the notion of transculturation, see Mary Louise Pratt, "Transculturation and Autoethnography."

11. This wreath is put up every year in December with an in-

scription intended to raise people's consciousness of the issue. Each person who knows a rape victim is encouraged to tie a ribbon on the wreath.

12. Bailey's unwillingness to reconsider his position on rape issues show interesting similarities to Miriam's unwillingness to see race discrimination as a problem in the previous discussion.

13. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Just recently, a 15-year old girl was gang-raped for 18 hours by 21 people in Phoenix, AZ. The mother of one of the perpetrators insisted that "this girl was not raped." The victim received death threats and was put in protective custody. (ABC news at 10, March 1, 1997).

14. The texts students read for this session were taken from the reader *Writing about Diversity*. The articles were: "Family Values" by Richard Rodriguez (566-571), "Gays Under Fire" reprinted from Newsweek (671-676), and "The Love That Dare Not Speak" by Gara La Marche and William B. Rubenstein (821-823).

15. Bringing the online discussion into the classroom was also part of the two previous discussions.

16. Students were not restricted to any particular topic and could choose freely from their various interests.

17. It is interesting to note that many of the online discussions and also the face-to-face discussions were based on a highly argumentative style. Bailey, for example, tended to attack his classmates' position and defend his own, an interactive style that often prevents students from showing a change of mind. In the written paper, however, Bailey was able to move beyond his defensive attitude and develop his perspectives based on his own ideas and the ideas of his classmates without attacking them.

18. Cornel West calls reductionism "either one-factor analyses . . . that yield a one-dimensional functionalism or a hyper-subtle analytical perspective that loses touch with the specificity of an art work's form and the context of its reception" (214).

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Perspectives on Literacy*. Ed. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. 273-285.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?" *College Composition and Communication* 37 (October 1986): 294-301.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. "Safe Houses in the Contact Zone: Coping

- Strategies of African-American Students in the Academy." *CCC*, 48.2 (1997): 173-196.
- Dunbar, Laurence. "We Wear the Mask." *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*. Ed. Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985, 223.
- Fine, Michelle. "Coping with Rape: Critical Perspectives on Consciousness." *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*. Ed. Mary F. Rogers. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.
- Fischer, Katherine M. "Down the Yellow Chip Road: Hypertext Portfolios in Oz." *Computers and Composition* 13 (1996): 169-183.
- Freire, Paulo, and Donaldo Macedo. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1987.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Transforming of the American Mind." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 44 (1990): 33-44.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Fresh Air." Interview on NPR, February 20, 1997.
- Gilyard, Keith. "Higher Learning: Composition's Racialized Reflection." CCCC presentation, Phoenix, AZ, 1997.
- Gray-Rosendale, Laura. "Revising the Political in Basic Writing Scholarship." *Journal of Basic Writing* 15.2 (1996): 24-49.
- Gruber, Sibylle. "Re: Ways We Contribute: Students, Instructors, and Pedagogies in the Computer-mediated Writing Classroom." *Computers and Composition* 12 (1995): 61-78.
- Gruber, Sibylle, ed. *Weaving a Virtual Web: Practical Approaches to New Information Technologies*. Urbana: NCTE, (in press).
- Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 190-232.
- Hawisher, Gail E., and Patricia Sullivan. "Women on the Networks: Searching for Presence in Online Discussions." (1995, unpublished manuscript)
- Jordan, June. "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston, MA: Southend Press, 1985. 123-139.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing." *College English* 54.8 (1992): 887-913.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 1991. New York: MLA, 1991. 33-40.
- — —. "Transculturation and Autoethnography: Peru, 1615/1980." *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen. New York: Manchester University Press, 1996. 24-46.
- Ray, Ruth E. "Afterword: Ethics and Representation in Teacher Research." *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*.

- Ed. Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. 287-300.
- Regan, Alison. "Type Normal Like the Rest of Us': Writing, Power, and Homophobia in the Networked Composition Classroom." *Computers and Composition* 10.4 (1993): 11-23.
- Romano, Susan. "The Egalitarianism Narrative: Whose Story? Which Yardstick?" *Computers and Composition* 10.3 (1993): 5-28.
- Rose, Mike. *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.
- Selfe, Cynthia L., and Susan Hilligos. *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology*. New York: MLA, 1994.
- Selfe, Cynthia L., and Richard J. Selfe, Jr. "The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones." *College Composition and Communication* 45.4 (December 1994): 480-504.
- Sirc, Geoffrey, and Thomas Reynolds. "The Face of Collaboration in the Networked Writing Classroom." *Computers and Composition* 7 (1990): 53-70.
- — —. "Seeing Students as Writers." *Network-Based Classrooms: Promises and Realities*. Ed. Bertram Bruce, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and Trent Batson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 138-160.
- Stabile, Carol. *Feminism and the Technological Fix*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1994.
- Stone, Allucquère Rosanne. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Sullivan, Patricia A. "Ethnography and the Problem of the 'Other.'" *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*. Ed. Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. 97-114.
- Takayoshi, Pamela. "Building New Networks from the Old: Women's Experiences with Electronic Communication." *Computers and Composition* 11 (1994): 21-36.
- Taylor, Todd. "The Persistence of Difference in Networked Classrooms: Non-Negotiable Difference and the African American Student Body." *Computers and Composition* 14 (1997): 169-178.