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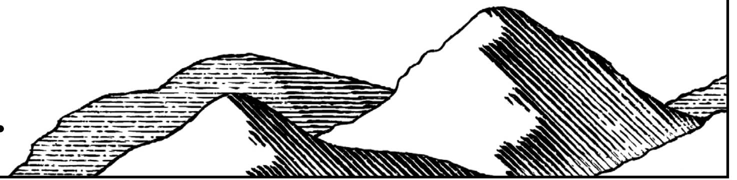

THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE WRITING CENTER
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FOREWORD TO *"BUT I WRITE THE WAY I TALK"*

I am on a tightrope made of wire. I am walking the line between the writer and the writing. My clothes are covered in hooks connected to ropes that lead back to figures in the distance. As I trace two ropes with my gaze to their source, I can just make out this elusive form called Voice. I can feel the power of Voice and continue to walk with its presence pulling me. Illuminating Voice's beautiful nuances from behind, I see a mirror-like figure, Context. Context humbles me by its complexity. I see myself in relation to the world around me reflected in Context.

Also, through the reflection of Context, I am able to locate the source of the ropes drawing me, with assertive force, in another direction. Two sharp and familiar figures, Academic and Standardization, are enmeshed, pulling me away. I feel their weight, their muscle, their leverage. I cannot hear parts of Voice anymore, so I start to test what it feels like to pull back without falling off.

Walking on this wiry path, I become aware of Standardization's potential to pull me until I cannot see Context's illumination of Voice. I am slowly realizing that Academia and Standardization control more ropes than I can see.

So here I stand precariously balancing on this wire. I am still walking the line between the writer and the writing, struggling to balance. I want to walk confidently, keeping Voice and Context in clear view. I must take the next step.

- MARISA SCHNEIDMAN

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"BUT I WRITE THE WAY I TALK": INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN AMERICAN ACADEMIC WRITING

MARISSA LUCK

Not many people can say they were sent home on the first day of first grade. But this is what happened to my father who was punished for speaking Hawaiian Pidgin to his peers in a classroom where only "Queen's English" was tolerated:

> I thought that, since I was with my peers that were my age, that I could speak Pidgin English (since that's what I did with the kids in my neighborhood); and I was sent home and given a spanking by my mother because she said, "We're paying for private school."[1]

His mother did not want their family to have "any traces of the dialect" in order for them to "navigate successfully in society." My father explained that in that generation, succeeding in society meant "screening out the ethnic identity of my mother's past."[2] While this drastic measure may not happen today, the implications of my father's story linger. A certain type of English is accepted in American academia that is culturally and socioeconomically specific. This standard of English privileges and excludes certain groups of people.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AMERICAN ACADEMIC RHETORIC

Writing is a personal and social act that happens in the context of our cultures. Each culture has acceptable styles or rhetorics of writing. Multiple styles of writing may exist within a culture, but it is likely that one rhetoric is privileged over others as reflecting cultural values and norms.

American academic rhetoric is particular about writing. Cut to the point in the beginning with the thesis, then spend the rest of the paper convincing your reader. The responsibility for clarity and meaning rests on the writer who must hold the reader's hand through the process or risk being called confusing or off-topic. This is known as a *writer-responsible* approach to writing versus a *reader-responsible* approach to writing that exists in some other cultures.[3]

My early experience writing academic essays illustrates the nature of American academic rhetoric. In the sixth grade, I learned the art of "CHUNKing." CHUNKing was a new approach to teaching

1. Robert Luck (author's father) in discussion with the author, December 2008.
2. Ibid.
3. Anna Habib, "Cultural Awareness in the Tutoring Room: Alleviating 'Cultural Shock' in Student Writing." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 31, no. 3 (2006).

writing that was intended to train students to write academically. I remember sitting in Language Arts class staring at my teacher writing the formula in green marker on an overhead projector:

> **Introduction Paragraph**
>
> **Thesis:** This is the last sentence in your Introduction Paragraph.
>
> **Body Paragraph–"CHUNK":** Topic Sentence, Commentary, Fact, Commentary, Concluding Body Paragraph Sentence. Repeat body paragraph "CHUNK" twice.
>
> **Concluding Paragraph:** Restate thesis.

This method demonstrates core values of American academic rhetoric: individualism, focus, and rationality. Students are to indicate their individual opinion through a thesis and prove it without divergence. Individualism exists within accepted conventions.

I followed the rules. I learned to "CHUNK," using fifty-cent words along the way.[4] Eventually, I spent the latter part of high school learning to break away from this formula. Yet the confines of this approach had sunk into my writing. I saw my sense of confinement reflected in the experiences of another writer named Ella whom I worked with at the Writing Center. She told me, "When I'm doing academic writing, I feel like I'm writing to some external standard or bar that's being set. I don't know what it is."

Although this narrow external standard can limit all academic writers, Ella and I have a distinct advantage over some of our peers: we are both native English speakers from middleclass backgrounds who grew up immersed in standard English.[5]

THE ROLE OF PRIVILEGE IN AMERICAN ACADEMIC RHETORIC

I started to understand my advantage while working with writers who had different experiences with the English language. For instance, Jerry is a middle-aged African-American man, veteran, and father who is soft spoken and determined. He wrote sentences like, "The professor go to his office" or "She don't do that" or "I seen how a community can be divided." I crossed through the words and wrote "goes," "doesn't," and "saw," moving on to what I thought were more important things.

Jerry is clearly an intelligent, native English speaker who grew up with a specific cultural and regional accent. He laughed nervously as he told me, "I write the way I speak," like many other students have told me before. But what if the way he speaks is not accepted in American academia?

4. "Fifty-cent words" is a phrase used in some American classrooms to describe advanced vocabulary words.
5. The phrases "standard English" and "nonstandard English" distinguishes the style, dialect, and rhetoric of English accepted in classrooms. The term "standard" also reveals what American society considers normal and acceptable.

Working with students like Jerry, as well as with English Language Learners (ELL), I was struck by how hard it was to explain things that seemed so natural to me. I realized there was something more to my writing than work or skill.

Growing up in a middle class household, as a mixed race person who could pass as white, my childhood was riddled with privilege. I used to spend my summer afternoons in the living room with the sun dancing through our cathedral style windows as I escaped in the stories of *American Girls* and *Ella Enchanted*. My parents, who both had masters' degrees and worked in administrative positions, would discuss their social work, politics, and religion at the dinner table. I came to college knowing how to write a thesis, arrange a five-paragraph essay, and make a MLA bibliography.

My fluency in standard English acts as a base for me to strengthen my academic writing. On the other hand, writers like Jerry or ELL writers have a different base language or dialect. Unfortunately, their different experiences with the English language are treated as a deficiency in academia. Students are expected to overcome this deficiency by changing the way they communicate to fit into academic standards.

In one Writing Center workshop, I heard a man reflect on his experience learning to adjust to college academic writing. He explained how it was challenging to write in academia because he did not grow up exposed to affluent university culture. For him, academic writing felt like "a different language" than the way he spoke at home or with his peers.

Not only are students with nonstandard language experiences grappling with college coursework, they are faced with learning a new way to speak, write, and express themselves within American academic rhetoric.

LEARNING TO ADAPT TO AMERICAN ACADEMIC RHETORIC

While working with an ELL writer, Rachelle, I realized some of the difficulties students learning English may face while writing in a new cultural context. Rachelle is an advanced English speaker but feels less confident with her writing. She was writing an essay comparing two texts.

"I don't get it," she shook her head, staring down at an intricately annotated article. "I spent so long looking up words I forgot what it's about. How am I supposed to write about it?" She continued, "I have too many quotations. I need to add opinion. How do I add opinion?"

"Well, what do *you* think about this?" I asked. "Well…this is…uh…this is not good… and…" She looked at me, waiting for my approval.

I realized her anxiety may have come from a variety of sources: her difficulty understanding the theoretically complex text, her worries about writing a college-level English essay, and her recognition of needing to add opinion but not knowing how to go about it.

Fan Shen, an author and college English professor originally from China, had trouble learning to express his individuality in American academic writing. He was accustomed to writing in the Chinese rhetoric that required that the use of the word "I" be "somewhat hidden or buried in writings and speeches."[6] Shen learned to recognize that incorporating individual opinion was a key concept in American academic writing when he acknowledged that:

> Rule number one in English composition is: Be yourself. (More than one composition instructor has told me, "Just write what you think.") The values behind this rule, it seems to me, are based on the principle of protecting and promoting individuality (and private property) in this country. The instruction was probably crystal clear to students raised on these values, but, as a guideline of composition, it was not very clear or useful to me when I first heard it.[7]

My question to Rachelle ("What do you think about this?") strikingly resembled the advice Shen's teacher gave him ("Just write what you think").

Yet this may not be a simple question for students accustomed to writing in different cultural rhetorics. In order to learn how to write in American academia, Shen needed to learn "the values of Anglo-American society," and learning to write in American academia involves a degree of cultural adaptation.[8]

Anna Habib, a writing tutor fluent in multiple languages including English, pointed to the challenges ELL students face in the process of cultural transition:

> My clients were finding themselves trapped in a discourse that was misunderstood in their new cultural context. I could see their frustration and understood that they were focusing all of their energy on grammar and syntax…. What they don't know, and rightfully so because I don't think tutors mention this enough, is that organization and argument is different in English than it is in Arabic or Korean or French or Mandarin.[9]

These students were learning to balance cultivating individuality within the accepted conventions as well as learning to adapt to the writer-responsible expectations of American academic writing. Since American academic rhetoric is narrow, it does not open space for the integration of other cultural rhetorics or methods of writing. Instead of allowing students to determine how to balance different cultural rhetorics, academia requires students to unquestionably adopt American academic rhetoric in order for their writing to be considered seriously.

Although each student's experience with academic English is unique, everyone from these stories (except Ella and I) is facing a similar challenge: they are learning a new way to express themselves

6. Fan Shen, "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 460.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Anna Habib, "Cultural Awareness in the Tutoring Room: Alleviating 'Cultural Shock' in Student Writing." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 31, no. 3 (2006): 10.

within American academic rhetoric. Because they are pressured to alter their voices to fit the standard of Academic English, they may experience exclusion and marginalization.

CONCLUSIONS: MARGINALIZATION AND VOICE

This year, I was reminded of the unconscious marginalization that takes place in the classroom as a result of language differences. "I'm usually quiet in seminar because the conversation is very fast," an old classmate of mine from Korea who is an ELL student studying social sciences told me. When he did speak in seminar, I noticed my classmates' eyes glazing over and my own mind drifting into space. Unconsciously, we stopped attentively listening when we heard him. Expertly trained by society, we had learned whose voices were to be taken seriously and whose were not.

American academic rhetoric operates within a linguistic hierarchy that values standard academic English while devaluing variations of English or other cultural rhetorics. The presumably neutral standard is actually culturally and socioeconomically specific. While not discussed fully in this article, I have noticed intersections of class, culture, and race within this linguistic hierarchy. Students who are expected to alter their voice are frequently not students who grew up in American middle- or upper-class (often, but not always, white) cultures. In effect, the linguistic hierarchy in academia reinforces the power of dominant middle-and upper-class (mostly white) groups. By excluding or devaluing nonstandard rhetorics or English variations, American academia marginalizes students who don't fit into the narrow standard. In doing so, academia denies these students the validity of their voices.

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