DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 960 CS 214 840

AUTHOR Brown, Stephen G.
TITLE Techo Tensions in an Athabascan Indian Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 34p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; American Indian Culture; *American Indian Education; Basic Writing; Biculturalism; *Cultural Context; *English Instruction; High Schools; High School Students; *Relevance (Education); *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Alaska; Athapascan (Tribe); *Composition Theory; Critical Pedagogy; Literacy as a Social Process

ABSTRACT

A compositionist teaching high school on an Athabascan Indian Reservation near Anchorage, Alaska, encountered considerable resistance from his students when attempting to see them through a college-prep program. Their initial hostility toward him masked their deep need for an adult role model who was not abusive, neglectful, or alcoholic. It was a preemptive strike against pain, bewilderment, and loss that attends the severing of close ties to teachers who leave after only a few years on the reservation. Eventually cognizant of the odds against any of his students attending college, the instructor found himself questioning the "cultural bleaching" he seemed to be engaged in. His experience with the Athabascan students reinforced Min-Zhan Lu's contention that the goal of helping students gain membership in the dominant culture was unrealistic given the impossibility of full assimilation, irrelevant given the nature of their aspirations (which did not include college), and unethical with respect to the traumatic effects of deracination it imposes on them. Engagement with composition theory revitalized and reoriented his teaching on the reservation. In the future, he would orient instruction away from the academic literacy of the classroom and toward the lived realities of the students, reasoning that a borderland classroom requires a pedagogy suited to the borderlands. Instruction would be aimed at fostering reculturation into a traditional, but renascent culture. It would encourage students to name their conflicted realities, to bridge the abyss between the classroom and the community. (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

Techno Tensions in an Athabascan Indian Classroom

Stephen G. Brown

University of South Florida

Department of English

4202 E. Fowler Avenue

Tampa, FL 33620-5550

Techno Tensions in an Athabascan Indian Classroom

"When we teach composition we are teaching culture."

--Terry Dean

Part One: Reality Bytes

To look out on row upon row of black-haired, brown-skinned, snuff-chewing students all staring at their desk-tops can be disconcerting to any novice English teacher, especially a white male from San Francisco, California. To discover retrospectively that my fly had been open only heightened my sense of public mortification. But to be interrupted five minutes into my opening lecture by an obscenity-shouting, mixed blood was more than either my poise or preparation could withstand.

"Why should we listen to you," she demanded. "You'll just be gone in two years anyway. Like all the other teachers who come here!"

"Here" was an Athabascan Indian Reservation in the Alaskan bush. The student's name was Jane Baker and she had recently

transferred back to the Reservation from Anchorage--bringing with her a resistant, contemptuous attitude not only toward the dominant white culture, but toward her residual native culture as well. She was indeed a citizen in search of a culture. Unlike most of her peers, she was light-skinned, and this too heightened her sense of alienation. Though genetically linked to two worlds, she belonged to neither.

Many of Jane's full-blooded classmates shared her feelings of anger, ambivalence, confusion and contradiction. They too evinced the unpleasant symptoms of deculturation and acculturation, like a school of salmon whose scales bore the scars of a migration from one habitat to another.

Attitudinal resistance such as Jane's is but one of many problems facing compositionists in a bicultural setting. The aim of this paper is threefold: to offer a detailed presentation of problems associated with composing in the contact zone; to proffer a critique of the basic writing solutions to those problems; and finally to advocate a radical repositioning of pedagogy foregrounded in the constructive uses of conflict in the writing classroom. While my experience teaching Athabascan students in Alaska serves as the pedagogical context, the arguments of Min-Zhan Lu and other compositionists provide the theoretical framework for the ensuing discussion. In the last analysis, this paper is a mongrelized "smorgasbord"--to borrow a phrase from Knoblauch and Brannon--of autobiography, praxis, and theory (15).

Praxis and Problems

The practitioner in a bicultural contact zone is often confronted with problems unique to that milieu. Likely, such a teacher has received little if any training on effective means of coping with those problems, having to adopt a learn-as-you-go, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants approach to problem solving. In order to negotiate such a pedagogical terrain, it doesn't hurt to have the nerve and daring, if not the actual know-how, of an Alaskan bush pilot.

Although I was dealing with high school students, the problems encountered are just as relevant to the bi-cultural college student, if not more so--and by extrapolation, to the college instructor of those students. Of the many problems extant in the bi-cultural contact zone, perhaps the most persistent are those associated with the processes of deculturation, acculturation, and reculturation. These processes are characterized, respectively, by the negation of a traditional culture, by assimilation into a dominant, alien culture, and by repatriation into a renascent native culture. Further, each process can be arrested at one of several stages. Thus, while none of the Athabascan students had been fully assimilated into the dominant Western culture, all manifested varying degrees of assimilation. In appearance, attitude, and modes of discourse, they occupied the entire spectrum of the deculturation-

acculturation-reculturation continuum. For instance, there were those, like Daniel and Wes, who were extremely acculturated and receptive to further acculturation. On the other hand, there were students like Jane and Mike, who while quite aculturated, were resistant to further acculturation and who, as in Mike's case, evinced a strong predilection for reculturation into the traditional Athabascan culture. Then there was a group--represented by Leonard, Harry, and their peers--that was poorly aculturated and apathetic about the prospects of either acculturation or reculturation. A fourth group, comprised of white students from the timber camp, accelerated the process of acculturation among some of the Athabascan students, even as they added to the racial tensions of the student population.

I don't proffer this taxonomy from any desire to impose a reductive, totalizing schema upon the dynamics of the bi-cultural student population I encountered. It is at best a partial representation of the realities, a selective versus an exhaustive interpretation of actualities, but one which nevertheless calls attention to the varying degress of deculturation, acculturation, and reculturation present in any given student.

Whether they were receptive, resistant, or apathetic toward further acculturation, all of the Athabascan students were experiencing what Irving Howe identifies as "the tension of biculturalism" ("Living" 110). Many scholars have noted the adverse effects of bi-culturalism upon borderland learners. John Ogbu and Min-Zhan Lu, for example, have written about the effects

of "deculturation" and "acculturation" upon marginalized students, as well as "the accompanying sense of contradiction and ambiguity" (Lu 889). In her article "Conflict and Struggle," Lu cites numerous scholars whose research documents the prolonged effects of acculturation, including Thomas Ferrell, who observes that the move from "orality" to "literacy" will "inevitably be accompanied by anxiety." Further, "the psychic strain entailed in moving from a highly oral frame of mind to a more literate frame of mind is too great to allow rapid movement" (252).

Lu utilizes Ferrell's findings to interrogate the assumptions upon which contemporary basic writing pedagogy has been predicated: that marginalized students can be fully assimilated into dominant culture; that full assimilation into the dominant culture should be the goal of education; and that student anxiety in the transition from orality to literacy is temporary and can be mitigated by such practices as collaborative learning. My experience working among Athabascan students in Alaska, however, contradicted these assumptions, reenforcing Lu's interrogation of them.

Unlike their timbercamp peers, none of the Athabascan students had been, nor could look forward to being, fully assimilated into the dominant culture. The process of acculturation had been arrested in midair as it were--leaving the Native American learner suspended in a no man's land between an abandoned and an adoptive culture, a residual and a dominant discourse. As with earlier generations of Athabascans, they were

willing to forget their Indian-ness if that was the price for admission into the dominant culture; the problem was that many in the dominant culture were unwilling to relinquish their racist stereotypes of the American Indian, were unwilling to let them forget their indian-ness, while at the same time doing all in their power to "bleach" the Indian out of them. The result of this cultural hypocrisy for the Indian student attempting to negotiate the transition from a residual, traditional culture to a dominant, alien one is a condition in which deculturation is not accompanied by acculturation. The situation for many of these borderland residents is identical to that of Tayo, the protagonist in Leslie Silko's Ceremony, as Paula Gunn Allen observes: "Invisible and stilled, like an embryo, he floats, helpless and voiceless, on the current of duality, his being torn by grief and anger" (128). In other words, while the work of tearing down his or her traditional culture is carried to completion, the work of assimilating them into the dominant culture is left incomplete. In this we have failed to profit from the lesson of the French Revolution: To bring an axe for tearing down without also bringing a hammer for building does violence to those we would purport to help.

For Daniel, Mike, Jane and their peers, the process of deculturation had been thorough, but the process of acculturation had been arrested half-way. Consequently, when regarding them I was reminded of the ptarmigan I saw that November, whose plumage was a motley mixture of brown and white, of summer and

winter markings--a half-molted condition which left them ill-adapted to either season, to either the brown leaves of a dying Autumn or the white snows of an impending winter. Likewise, these boundary-dwelling students betrayed all the anxiety and self-consciousness of ptarmigan that are conscious of their exposed condition, that lack the deep cover of an environment to which they are adapted. Unable to blend into either culture, they stood out from both.

No wonder these students were suffering the effects of "contradiction and ambiguity." Unlike the second and third generations of European, Asian, and Latino immigrants, this younger generation of Athabascans never had been, nor would be, assimilated into the dominant culture. Further, given the adverse effects of acculturation upon these borderland learners, and the irrelevancy of participation in the dominant culture to the fulfillment of their needs and ambitions, assimilation into that culture was as unethical as it was unlikely. Unlike other marginalized students, a growing number of Native American students don't want admittance into the American dream; they want out of it--because for them it has been, and continues to be, a nightmare.

Nevertheless, some Athabascan students shared the same feelings of resentment toward their ancestral culture as did the Jewish immigrants Irving Howe writes of in World of Our Fathers, as Lu observes (897). After undergoing the processes of deracination and acculturation, they too came to regard their

traditional culture as "alien" and to "unconsciously resent and despise those traditions" (Howe 243). Daniel was by far the most contemptuously outspoken in this regard, which is ironic, considering that his father, Max, was not only the gatekeeper of Athabascan lore in the village, but the "resource person" for Alice Taff, who was spearheading the "reculturation" movement in the school through the bilingual education program and an embryonic Foxfire project. Max was the medium through which Alice hoped to reintroduce Da'naina, the Athabascan mother tongue, to the younger generation. Ironically, Max and Daniel rarely spoke to one another, reflecting the cultural abyss that separated generations of Athabascans, the elder as intent on spreading the word as the younger was on renouncing it, often with a sneer and a snide comment that masked a deep sense of shame about his heritage. Like his peers and his immigrant counterparts, Daniel also had to cope with the tension that arose between the "minority subculture" in which he was raised and a "dominant" "Western" "host culture" (Howe 110) "with which they are trying to establish deep contact through education" (Lu 897). Daniel, like Mike, Leonard, and Jane, had developed a tolerance for contradiction and ambivalence. They were the victims of a sort of cultural schizophrenia, neither identifying with the residual nor assimilating into the dominant culture. However, if these borderland learners had "learned to sustain contradiction," they had thus far been unable to "turn ambivalence into a new consciousness" (Lu 888).

If apathy, confusion, and ambivalence were some of the byproducts of the "tensions of biculturalism," another was the attitudinal resistance evinced in students like Daniel and Jane. Both had attended school in Anchorage. Consequently, they regarded practitioners, peers and parents with a big-fish-in-a-litt -pond contempt, with a resentment born of forced displacement. They regarded the reservation school as backward and their return to it as a step backwards, into a past they were trying to escape.

The hostility in Jane's voice was as much a defense as a protest. It masked her deep need for an adult role model who was not abusive, neglectful, or alcoholic. It was a preemptive strike against the pain, bewilderment, and loss that attends the severing of close ties to a teacher, who for many students in a borderland contact zone is the only positive role model they have had and whom they often regard as a surrogate parent.

Another problem associated with learning in the contact zone is the heightened sense of difference, of otherness, of alienation experienced by students attempting to make this migration from a dying to a dominant culture. Contrary to the assumptions of Bruffee, Shaughnessey, and Ferrell, Lu argues that the traumatic anxieties associated with basic writers in a bi-cultural setting are persistent, not transitory. To strengthen her case, she again cites Howe (898), who observes that students reared in a "subculture" experience "pain and dislocation" when struggling to "connect with the larger cosmopolitan culture."

For these borderland learners, "there must always be some sense of difference, even alienation" ("Living" 110). These anxieties were experienced to a greater degree by those students, like Wes, who desired full assimilation into the dominant culture, yet in whom the process of acculturation was less complete than it was in Daniel and Jane because they had been schooled entirely on the Reservation. They looked to Daniel and Jane with envy and admiration, aspiring to the same degree of acculturation, conscious of their shortcomings in this regard, and doing everything in their power to address the problem, to efface their Indian-ness from their accents, their mode of dress, their slang.

Though forty-five minutes removed by bush plane, Anchorage exerted a strong influence upon these bi-cultural borderland residents. Though technically "absent," the metropolis was "present" in many regards. Patterns of student behavior, speech, and dress all reflected the cosmopolitan influence of the city. For students like Mike, who value their traditional Athabascan culture, the thought of leaving the reservation for this alien, alluring realm is intimidating. For these students the problem is the same as that faced by many African-American students: the acquisition of academic literacy is accompanied by the loss of cultural identity. Consequently, they resist learning standard English, as Shelby Steele asserts, because they "wouldn't be black no more" (70).

For Daniel the problem was just the opposite: he resisted Da'naina, while embracing standard English, because he didn't

want to be Athabascan anymore. For the compositionist, this dynamic presents not only a serious pedagogical problem, but a significant ethical dilemma as well. The realities of the situation forced me to question not only the content and methods of my praxis, but the theories and assumptions on which they were predicated, as well as my motives for coming to teach here in the first place. To what extent is "cultural bleaching" justified, especially in a setting where assimilation into the dominant culture is never a strong likelihood (Howe 243)? Is partial assimilation worth the price extracted from students in the form of confusion, anxiety, contradiction, and conflict? Are not teachers unwitting accomplices in the destabilizing process of deracination, producing an inordinate number of dysfunctional human beings who end up in adulthood as alcoholics, drug users, convicts, suicides, or wards of the state? Instead of being the solution to their problem, was I not in fact part of the problem itself? Was not my mission to rescue them from illiteracy merely a reinscription of the messianic, holier-than-thou mission of the Russian orthodox evangelists who first ventured into these contact zones?

Another problem confronting bi-cultural students is the either\or approach that forces them, in the words of Richard Courage, to declare "allegiance either to the students' own language or to academic literacy" (484). I had arrived on the reservation at a time when this policy was showing some signs of movement after decades of bureaucratic stagnation. This was

evidenced in the implementation of the bilingual program; now that the administrators had been convinced of the ethical correctness of this move, they were quick to construct a rationale for it.

The alarming rate at which the old Athabascan ways were disappearing had prompted the bilingual education movement in the school. The younger generation of Athabascans was the only thing standing between the old ways and oblivion. As Kathleen Mullen Sands oberves, these tranditional native narratives "are in danger of being lost to the future because they are always just one generation from extinction" (56). The theme of generational alienation among Indians is given voice as well by the poet northSun. In "what gramma said late at night," she observes:

> gramma thinks about her grandchildren \they're losing the ways\ don't know how to talk indian\ don't understand me when\ I ask for tobacco\ don't know how to skin rabbit\ sad sad\ they're losing the ways. (qtd. in Smith 118)

The threat of cultural extinction was no less real among the Athabascans. Instead of speaking Da'naina, as their forebears had, the youth of the Reservation were speaking MTV-ese in the hallways and standard English in the classroom. Instead of mushing dogsleds and paddling umiaks, they were driving snowmobiles and three-wheelers. Instead of dressing like their elders, they attired themselves in Brittania and Dockers and Nikes. Instead of dancing in the round to the beat of a drum,

they hip-hopped all over the gym to the synthesized pulse of a boombox blaring top forty tunes. Thus, I found myself in the midst of a recruiting war for the hearts, minds, and souls of the students, who were viewed by elders and educators alike as the vessels for the preservation of contradictory cultural values.

Instead of alleviating the tensions of bi-culturalism, however, the mandate of bilingualism only exacerbated them. Forcing students to learn Da'naina merely produced new tensions, new resistances, and new anxieties, merely inflamed the latent shame some felt toward their heritage. If there were students like Mike who saw the values traditionally taught in E.L. Bartlett School as the "negation of the home" and "its values, the negation of their values" (Holzman 165)), then there were also students like Daniel, who saw the bilingual program as a futile attempt to resuscitate what they would mercifully allow to die, and who resented being forced to learn what they were resolved to forget. Finally, there were those educators, like Alice Taff, who preferred the new bilingual approach to the old either/or policy, which reduced a potentially rich plurality of literacies to a univocal, homogenized academic literacy.

Then there were those like Leonard and Harry who simply didn't care, who had been reduced to a state of apathy by the process of deracination without acculturation, by the irrelevancy of a college prep curriculum to their lived realities and their future plans, by the marijuana they smoked, the alcohol they

drank, and the hard drugs they consumed to cope with the contradictions and ambiguities of their bi-cultural existence. They were actively recruited by the 18-35 year old group, many of whose members espoused the consciousness-raising ideology of the American Indian Movement and for whom nihilism was a legitimate means of protest.

Thus, the students of the "Rez" became the locus of a contestation not only between the elders and teachers, but between the elders and teachers on the one hand, and this more political, nihilistic faction on the other. They were caught between instructors wanting to teach them academic literacy, elders wanting to repatriate them into the traditional Athabascan culture, and the 18-35 group wanting to conscript them into the more radical ranks of the AIM movement. Each was pushing its own brand of literacy in order to perpetuate itself through the recruited students.

The disparity between the realities of classroom and home compounded the "tensions of bi-culturalism." The more I learned about students' home conditions, the more I understood its influence upon their classroom performance, and the more sensitive I became to classroom disruptions. For instance, I adopted a more tolerant approach to Punky's disruptions when I discovered that the rope burns around his throat were the result of a failed suicide attempt from his basement rafters. Not surprisingly, the confusion and conflict engendered by the disjunction between the realities of classroom and community have

an adverse effect on students' ability to learn. As Michael Holzman affirms in Writing as Social Action, "the contrast between the culture of the school and that of the community creates an interference pattern . . . more and more successfully blocking communication, teaching, and learning of skills and knowledge" (164-65).

Instruction in a bicultural borderland is problematized in other ways as well. How, for instance, does one motivate students to master a college-prep curriculum or to acquire the academic literacy necessary for success in college if those students have no plans or aspirations whatsoever to attend college? And if this is the case, what is the rationale for imposing a college-prep curriculum and academic literacy on students who in all likelihood will never leave the reservation, will never have any use for either? As one colleague cynically put it: the real reason this school is here is to give these kids at least one decent meal and a place to keep warm during the day. It's more of a shelter for the needy than a school. We're here to provide humanitarian care for neglected children, not to teach them. Their education is incidental. Too many of them have no one to fix them breakfast in the morning, to put clean clothes on them. This assessment was reenforced by the school nurse who documented outbreaks of head lice among second graders, in addition to other problems, such as snuff-stained teeth among fifth grade girls.

I was shocked to discover that not only were the assumptions and theories that informed my praxis false, but that the entire

curriculum upon which my long range pedagogical plans were based was irrelevant to the needs and ambitions of these students. Several aspects of their lived realties mitigated against the need or desire for a college education. First were the strong kinship ties on the Rez. Outside of a few trips to Anchorage in the company of parents, most students had never been away from the Reservation for any length of time. Additionally, the American ethos of the rugged individual, so inbred in students Outside, was foreign to the more communal lifestyle practiced by Athabascans. Most students dwelt within an extended family that included ties to virtually every family on the Reservation. Brothers and sisters, half brothers and step sisters, cousins and second cousins, relatives legitimate and illegitimate were seemingly everywhere.

A simple example from the classroom will illustrate the situation. I was in the midst of disciplining one of three Chuitts in the classroom, when a Constantine on the other side of the room erupted: "Hey watch your mouth. That's my half sister you're talking to." Consequently, the thought of severing these ties, of moving away from the reservation, let alone Alaska, to further an education among strangers of a different ethnicity made little sense to these residents of the borderlands.

The second factor mitigating against a college education was economic in nature. Every man, woman, and child in the village received a series of monthly allotments from oil, timber, and electric corporations in exchange for the rights to these

resources on the Rez. Currently, a settlement was being negotiated to sell the rights to the vast coal deposits recently discovered on Reservation land. In addition, students received monthly checks from the government as a result of the Native Alaskan Land Claims Settlement of 1967, which also resulted in the construction of modern schools, such as E.L. Bartlett, in every native settlement in the state. Consequently, every student received a custom built redwood home upon reaching the age of eighteen. In short, most of them were more financially secure than I was. The financial security that normally accrues from a college education was already assured them, rendering such an education less desireable that it would have been otherwise. Further, the increasing failure of a college education to deliver on the promise of financial security for graduates in general, and particularly for marginalized students, only intensified their resistance to acquiring such an education. The daily lives of these borderland learners evidenced the accuracy of Holzman's assertion that their "immediate economic survival does not seem to require the active use of literacy skills and the ideology of the community does not emphasize them" (163). In the final analysis, acquiring academic literacy for its own sake was not enough to offset the effects of deracination, displacement, and alienation on the one hand, or the economic security enjoyed by these borderland students on the other.

The third factor mitigating against a college education was an innate fear of losing their identity as Athabascans. For

marginalized students dwelling on the cultural borderlands, college arouses some very ambivalent feelings. As Mina Shaughnessey asserts about her basic writers at CUNY, "college both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking about the world, but threatening them at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world" (292). Shaughnessey's findings receive strong endorsement from Labov, who asserts in Language in the Inner City that "the social bonds between children mean more to them than the opportunities presumably presented by school" (qtd. in Holzman 165). For students who have rarely been alone, who are ambivalent about the effects of further acculturation, and who have no economic incentive for leaving the Reservation, the prospect of living in a strange metropolis to pursue a college education was about as appealing as a plunge into the frigid, February waters of the Cook Inlet.

Low teacher morale, to which I was not immune, was another problem that had to be surmounted on a daily basis. The hostility, bewilderment and apathy of my students, the irrelevancy of my pedagogy, and the strangeness of my surroundings left me feeling somewhat shell-shocked. Every time I heard Oren's Cessna buzz the village, I looked up, fantasizing about being aboard it, longing for the day when I could hurl myself, my dog and my duffel bag aboard and be done with the Reservation, with Alaska, and with teaching. What mad, misguided impulse had prompted me to become a teacher in the first place,

let alone a teacher in the Alaskan bush? What was the purpose of preparing for college those students who had no plans of ever leaving the Reservation, nor any financial incentive to do so? Of what practical value to them was the academic literacy I was trying to impose upon them? I believed the basic writing premise that "the goal of education was to acculturate students to the kind of academic community" that had molded me, and where success was a precondition for success in the marketplace, for realizing the American materialist dream (Lu 890).

I had to ask myself what was the value of pseudo-acculturation, of semi-assimilation, of quasi-academic literacy if they only heightened the students' bewilderment, only produced dysfunctional human beings without a culture to call their own, and in the end left them wandering the streets of the Reservation or Anchorage in an alcoholic haze, like so many wildebeests infected with the "circling" disease--a crippling, debilitating condition caused by a parasite that destroys the host organism's sense of balance by burrowing into its inner ear. Was not my praxis in effect parasiticial, undermining my students' sense of balance by crippling their sense of self? Was the living academic word I sewed in their ears in reality a parasitical instrument for colonizing their native literacy? As one of my colleagues said: if you want to see their future just look out the window, at their elders circling the gravel streets in a drunken stupor. That's where they'll be five years from now.

Was there anything I could do to prevent such a future from becoming a reality? The academic knowledge I possessed and was eager to disseminate was geared to help students succeed in my world, not theirs'. In this borderland milieu, my knowledge had no currency. I realized I would have to abandon not only the knowledge I possessed, but the messianic desire to transmit it. It struck me, too, that the other model for my proselytizing mission was the army recruiter, singing the praises of the system that had molded me, and could mold them to be just like me.

Was I then trying to reproduce myself in my students? Was my teaching a form of replication, a vicarious substitute for parenthood, for fulfilling the biological duties of propagation? Instead of reproducing in the name of my family, was I replicating myself in the name of the educational system; instead of passing on my genetic seed, was I transmitting my ideological genes to a new generation, in the process doing my bit to perpetuate it for another era, even as I had inherited the legacy from my mentors, from Mr. Dessler and Douwe Stuurman, from Bruffee, Rose and Shaughnessy? Was the messianic desire to transmit knowledge merely a disguise for the desire to eternalize myself in lieu of having a family and children of my own? Was I in fact motivated by the same desire that drives artists to immortalize themselves in their work?

With a second shock of recognition, I realized that I too had been an unwitting accomplice in what Leonard Kriegel terms the process of "cultural colonialism" (180). Thus, I found

myself first questioning and then renouncing the goals of basic writing pedagogy which aver that the object of instruction should be, as Bruffee affirms, to help students "gain membership in another such community" through mastery of its "language, mores, and values" (8). My experience with Athabascan students reinforces Lu's contention that such a goal is unrealistic given the impossibility of assimilation facing such students, irrelevant given the nature of their aspirations, and unethical with respect to the traumatic effects of deracination it imposes upon them. Consequently, not only was my praxis rendered irrelevant by the bicultural context but by the theory on which it was predicated.

I began to question not merely the assumptions underlying the goals of basic writing instruction, but the assumptions underlying its methods as well. Part of the rationale for collaborative learning was predicated on the false assumption that placing students in small peer groups would relieve the "anxiety" or "psychic strain" inherent to the process of acculturation" (Bruffee 8)--an assumption that was itself based on the questionable assumption that the "tensions of biculturalism" experienced by borderland students are transitory, and not persistent, as Lu argues in her interrogation of these assumptions (895). Again, my experience in the conflicted contact zone of an Athabascan Indian Reservation reiterates the accuracy of Lu's observations. The averted eyes, angry outbursts, resistant or apathetic attitudes, attempted suicides,

drug overdoses, and truancies suggested bi-cultural anxieties that were not fleeting, but fixed, calling for a pedagogy that addressed their causes directly, instead of seeking merely to treat the symptoms. As Lu observes, the approach of the basic writing pioneers--Rose, Trilling, Shaughnessey, Bruffee, and Anzaldua (whom she cites here)--has proven ineffectual for helping "students cope with the conflicts swamping their psychological borders" (896).

Many of my students were traumatized by the destabilizing effects of deracination and acculturation. Instead of a pedagogy that sought to ignore, to "paper over," the deep sources of conflict in the contact zone, what the situation demanded was a practice which directly engaged the multiple sources of conflict in the lives of the students, which converted their conflicted experiences as borderland residents into defacto texts for writing, reading, and critical thinking. What was in order was a pedagogy which foregrounded conflict in the composition process, which exploited the constructive uses of conflict in the classroom, as a means not only to critical literacy, but to radical red subject position.

Lu calls into question the complacent attitude basic writing practitioners entertain regarding "the possible uses of conflict and struggle, even when these possibilities . . . are substantiated . . . by writers like Anzaldua and Rose and by research on the constructive uses of conflict and struggle" (907). She challenges these "gatekeepers, converters, and

accomodationists" to "reposition" their pedagogy in a manner that incorporates and accounts for the conflicted lived realities of students in the contact zone. For the goal of an illegitimate assimilation into a dominant culture, Lu substitutes the aim of helping these "students become active residents of the borderlands," by exploiting the fruitful tensions of their "cultural dissonance," by inventing a critical literacy that enables them to name not only their own lived realities, but the painful manner in which those realities have been conditioned by the dominant culture in its effort to negate their subculture (900, 887):

> [W]hen dealing with students from "subcultures," the dominant culture and its educational system need, as Howe urges, to be more "sympathetic to" the[ir] pain and alienation . . . and at the same time should value more highly the "infusion of vitality and diversity from subcultures." (898)

By allowing these students to name the conflicted conditions of their ambivalent borderland existence, such a liberatory pedagogy would not only grant them a measure of distance from it, but would foster a greater sense of agency, of selfhood, of radical red subject position. Several compositionists have argued the relevance of a pedagogy foregrounded in the constructive uses of conflict, but none to my knowledge have advocated it with the forceful eloquence of Lu who attests that "th writer writes at a site of conflict rather than 'comfortably

inside or powerlessly outside the academy'" ("Repositioning" 20). My experience with Athabascan students in Alaska overwhelmingly confirms her view.

Theory and Repositioning

The conflicted, marginalized terrain of an Athabascan Indian Reservation was fertile ground for such a situated pedagogy. Rather than writing and reading within the narrow confines of E.L. Bartlett School and the master narratives of the Western canon, I would encourage students to write and read across the boundaries of the borderlands, so closely circumscribed by the dominant culture. Henceforth, composition instruction would be contextualized in "narratives from the borderlands," in Native American texts foregrounded in conflict with the dominant culture--situated in the conflicted topoi of the Iroquois, the Lakota Sioux, the Seminole, The Hawaiian, the Innuit, and the Athabascan (Lu 888). Composition would be grounded as well in the conflicts of their own lived realities, experienced on a daily basis while negotiating the abyss between Athabascan and American cultures. Such an approach would be informed by the critical theories of Michel Foucault, whose analysis of the manifestations of power and the privileging of the local over the universal as the proper locus of resistance and reclamation, would provide a useful theoretical framework for this radically repositioned praxis (78-108). The cetrality of Foucauldian theory

to the composition classroom has been observed by several compositionists, particularly Kurt Spellmeyer.

Whereas I had viewed conflict in the classroom, and in the lives of my students, "as the enemy," now I came to perceive it as an ally in the quest to make instruction meaningful and relevant, liberatory and empowering. Lu offers a powerful rationale for incorporating the constructive uses of conflict into the bi-cultural composition classroom: "Stories of the borderlands like Anzaldua's suggest that teachers can and should draw upon student's perception of conflict as a constructive resource" (897) Such an approach not only has merit in its own right but is consistent with the therapeutic goals of Freudian psychoanalysis, which aims to mitigate the debilitating effects of trauma through the "talking cure"--a discourse largely grounded in the sources of psychic conflict.

There was certainly no shortage of conflict in the lives of these borderland learners. The Reservation was an extremely politicized terrain in which racial, environmental, and economic conflicts with local, regional, and national implications were being played out between Athabascan and American cultures. If Con-AG hoped to mine the vast coal deposits of the Reservation, I turned my attention to deposits of another sort: the rich, untapped ore of conflict lying just below the bewildered surface of the dark Athabascan eyes that looked into mine.

Such a situated pedagogy would require a radical repositioning of my instructional philosophy, goals, and methods-

-amounted in fact to a conversion experience. In the future, I would orient instruction away from the academic literacy of the classroom and toward the lived realities of the students, reasoning that a borderland classroom required a pedagogy suited to the borderlands. Instruction, instead of privileging acculturation into a dominant culture, would be aimed at fostering reculturation into a traditional, but renascent, culture. Such a radical repositioning in favor of a more situated pedagogy receives strong endorsement from Lu, who posits education in the borderlands as "a process of repositioning" relative to the enabling uses of conflict in the composition class (890). Such a situated pedagogy would of necessity be oriented to the community and the non-school literacies of my students and away from the classroom and the academic literacy privileged there--though I had no intention of abandoning this either. I merely hoped to find a more effective, meaningful, and engaging means of fostering academic literacy--by using a contextual, rather than a textual, approach to instruction. Lu encourages practitioners to adopt such a "contextualized" approach to composition instruction in general, one which "explores ways to help students recover the latent conflict and struggles in their lives":

> Most of all we need to find ways of foregrounding conflict not only in the generation of meaning . . . but also in the teaching of the conventions of

> "correctness" in syntax, spelling, and punctuation. (910)

Further, by allowing students to name their conflicted realities we not only make learning relevant, but empowering--in the process bridging the abyss between the word and the world, between the classroom and the community. To name the world is to empower the namer. Language is the progenitor of invention, and the prerequisite for self-determining subject position. As so effectively stated by Freud's rebellious protege, Otto Rank, the aim of language is not merely to "identify with what it imitates but . . . to dominate it and make itself independent of it. This is the formula for all creating, for by creating man makes himself independent of that which exists" (240).

This statement has significant implications for borderland learners, for the ability to name their conflicted world through the critical word affords them a measure of distance from that world. Language liberates the ego from its conflicted reality, in the process restoring a measure of agency over that reality, fostering a sense of subject position relative to it. For residents of the borderlands, the critical word is a means for naming and renaming their conflicted world; is a vehicle for repossessing and reclaiming that sacred topoi, geographical and psychic, from which they have been dispossessed.

The conflicted word bestows legitimacy on what till now has been branded as illegitimate, sanctifies what till now has been deemed as forbidden ground for critical study. It allows the

marginalized, borderland learner to repossess entire regions of the self that have been put under erasure as it were by the dominant classroom ideology, that have in effect been stolen from them, even as their lands were stolen. If the lands cannot be returned, at least these lost, conflicted regions of the self can be restored to their native owners. If they cannot be liberated from the Reservation, they can at least be liberated from the reservation of the self in which they have been forced to dwell, as if in a cell, so narrowly defined and so relentlessly imposed by the dominant culture.

This ability to name their conflicted world through the critical word is central to the process of reinventing themselves, of re-situating themselves in a renascent American Indian culture, of reclaiming agency through a new radical red subjectivity. The word not only frees them from the world, but reinvents the world in a manner that allows them to cope with it on their terms instead of on its, to be "active residents of the borderlands" instead of passive objects in "The Green Frogskin World"--to invoke Lame Deer's satiric appellation for Western civilization (31).

The absence of a critical language with which to name their conflicted world results in the loss of true subject position. Instead, their egos, their selfhood, are colonized by a dominant culture that ultimately refuses the promise of assimilation it held forth. Unable to interpose the liberatory, critical word between themselves and their conflicted world, they lose any

semblance of agency with respect to that world. Lacking a critical vocabulary that is their own and not that of an alien culture, their subjects are collapsed into the nightmarish no-man's land of the contact zone, where they are formed, reformed, and deformed as objects to be acted upon, unless and until they can effect their liberation through language, radically reconstitute themselves as subjects, and recuperate a measure of agency over their world.

Critical literacy is the liberatory agent without which they are destined to remain the colonial victims of a dominant culture. Divested of the distancing power of the word, they suffer the bewildering loss of identity, and the premature loss of life, in a contact zone whose cemeteries are too crowded with small tombstones. Let it be the grave as well, the final resting place, of an errant ambition to impose academic literacy on students who have little use for it, of a misguided attempt to make apples out of chokecherries. Let it also be the tomb of a brand of education that for residents of the contact zone is little more than a form of cultural theft.

Works Cited

Allen, Paula, Gunn. "The Feminine Landscape of Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony." Studies in Native American Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs. Ed. Paula Gunn Allen. Ney York: MLA, 1983. 127-33.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. "On Not Listening in Order to Hear: Collaborative Learning and the Rewards of Classroom Research." Journal of Basic Writing 7(1988): 3-12.

Courage, Richard. "The Interaction of Public and Private Literacies." College Composition and Communication 40 (1989): 484-96.

Dean, Terry. "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers." College Composition and Communication 40(1989): 23-37.

Ferrell, Thomas J. "Open Admissions, Orality, and Literacy." Journal of Youth and Adolescence 3(1974): 247-60.

Foucault, Michel. "Two Lectures." Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977. First American Ed. New York: Pantheon, 1980. 78-108.

Howe, Irving. "Living with Kampf and Schlaff: Literary Tradition and Mass Education." The American Scholar 43(1973-74): 107-12.

---. World of Our Fathers. New York: Harcourt, 1976.

Holzman, Michael. "Nominal and Active Literacy." Writing as Social Action. Ed. Marilyn M. Cooper and Michael Holzman. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1989. 157-73.

Knoblauch, C. H., and Brannon, Lil. Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1984.

Kriegel, Leonard. Working Through: A Teacher's Journey in Urban America. New York: Saturday Review, 1972.

Lame Deer, John Fire, and Richard Erdoes. Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions. New York: Washington Square P, 1972.

Lu, Min-Zhan. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" College English 54 (1992): 887-913.

---. "Writing as Repositioning." Journal of Education 172(1990): 18-21.

Ogbu, John U. "Some Prerequisites for Understanding Minority Adaptation." Language, Literacy, and Culture: Issues of Society and Schooling. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1987: 149-77.

Rank, Otto. "The Formation and the Creation of Speech." Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development Trans. Charles Francis Atkinson. New York: Random, 1932. 235-64.

Sands, Kathleen, Mullen. "American Indian Autobiography." Studies in Native American Literaure: Critical Essays and Course Designs. Ed. Paula Gunn Allen. New York: MLA, 1983. 55-65.

Shaughnessey, Mina. Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teaching of Basic Writing. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

Smith, Patricia, Clark. "Ain't Seen You Since: Dissent among Female Relatives in American Indian Women's Poetry."

Studies in Native American Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs. Ed. Paula Gunn Allen. New York: MLA, 1983. 108-126.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. "Foucault and the Freshman Writer: Considering the Self in Discourse." College English 51(1989): 715-29.

Steele, Shelby. The Content of Our Character:A New Vision of Race in America. New York: St. Martin's, 1990.