

# LANGUAGE, CULTURE, IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES

Juan C. Guerra



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ROUTLEDGE

# LANGUAGE, CULTURE, IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES

*Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* examines what takes place in writing classrooms beyond academic analytical and argumentative writing to include forms that engage students in navigating the civic, political, social and cultural spheres they inhabit. It presents a conceptual framework for imagining how writing instructors can institute campus-wide initiatives, such as Writing Across Communities, that attempt to connect the classroom and the campus to the students' various communities of belonging, especially students who have been historically underserved.

This framework reflects an emerging perspective—writing across difference—that challenges the argument that the best writing instructors can do is develop the skills and knowledge students need to make a successful transition from their home discourses to academic discourses. Instead, the value inherent in the full repertoire of linguistic, cultural and semiotic resources students use in their varied communities of belonging needs to be acknowledged and students need to be encouraged to call on these to the fullest extent possible in the course of learning what they are being taught in the writing classroom. Pedagogically, this book provides educators with the rhetorical, discursive and literacy tools needed to implement this approach.

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*Juan C. Guerra*

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*para ti mami  
for you babe  
for you too mi'jo  
and for all my students*

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# PREFACE

If this book has a specific beginning, it is the Literacies and Literary Representations Symposium that Michelle Hall Kells organized at Texas A&M in October 2000, titled “Posing Questions and Framing Conversations about Language and Hispanic Identities.” In my keynote address at the symposium, later published as the lead essay in Kells, Balester, and Villanueva’s edited collection, *Latino/a Discourses: On Language, Identity and Literacy Education* (2004), I introduced *transcultural repositioning*, a concept I had coined for an invited talk in April of that same year at the Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University, titled “The Practice of Transcultural Repositioning: A Possible Alternative in Education to Assimilation and Accommodation” (2000). In my view, the concept of transcultural repositioning captures the liminal qualities in the reading, writing and rhetorical practices that students in my classes invoked whenever I asked them to tackle any of the many prompts I assigned during my 15 years as a basic writing teacher at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s, and my 3 years as Director of the Educational Opportunity Writing Program at the University of Washington at Seattle in the early 1990s (see Guerra, 1997, 2004). In a more recent publication, I describe it as the rhetorical ability many disenfranchised students have learned to enact intuitively, but one they must also learn to regulate self-reflectively if they hope to move back and forth more productively across “different languages and dialects, different social classes, different cultural and artistic forms, different ways of seeing and thinking about the increasingly fluid and hybridized world emerging all around us” (Guerra, 2007, p. 140).

About 12 years ago, Michelle—who appreciated the explanatory power reflected in the concept of transcultural repositioning and used it as a theoretical component in her own research (see Kells, 2002, 2004)—coined another term, *Writing Across Communities*, that lies at the heart of the work we have been doing

together. Six years ago, in the context of what we saw as the promise of the Writing Across Communities initiative that she and her colleagues established at the University of New Mexico in 2005, Michelle and I developed a proposal for a pragmatic book that would illustrate the logic that informs the approach. Because we quickly realized that the initiative Michelle and her colleagues had developed still needed time to mature before we could extrapolate much from the research data they had collected, we decided that scholars in composition and literacy studies interested in this kind of work would profit more fully if we first developed a book-length treatment of the theoretical notions informing a Writing Across Communities approach, then followed it up with a book-length qualitative case study. After we completed our book proposal, but before we persuaded an editor to consider it for publication, Michelle decided to return to a book project she had temporarily put aside, currently titled *Vicente Ximenes and LBJ's Great Society: Twentieth-Century Mexican American Civil Rights Rhetoric* (forthcoming). Because several theoretical ideas related to our project were coming together in my own thinking, Michelle and I agreed that I should go ahead and, in a book of my own, identify the key theoretical principles that inform a Writing Across Communities approach to the teaching of reading, writing and rhetoric. This book is the result of that decision.

In the ensuing six years, I have broadened the scope of what I think it takes to establish a campus-wide approach to the teaching and learning of reading, writing and rhetoric relevant to the present moment. To begin with, I have come to see the Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM as the manifestation of an emerging perspective in the field that scholars are increasingly referring to as *writing across difference*. According to proponents of this perspective, we are no longer in a position to argue that the best we can do is to inculcate our students with the predispositions they need to make a successful transition from their home discourses to academic discourses. Instead, we need to acknowledge the value inherent in the repertoire of linguistic, cultural and semiotic resources our students use in all their communities of belonging (Kells, 2007, p. 88) and encourage them to call on these as they best see fit in the course of learning what we are teaching them in the college writing classroom. In short, our students can no longer become successful readers, writers or rhetoricians by simply figuring out how to meet traditional expectations related to the production of Standard Written American English. As Selfe (2009) so elegantly puts it,

Young people need to know that their role as rhetorical agents is open, not artificially foreclosed by the limits of their teachers' imaginations. They need a full quiver of semiotic modes from which to select, role models who can teach them to think critically about a range of communication tools, and multiple ways of reaching their audience. They do not need teachers who insist on *one* tool or *one* way.

*p. 645, emphasis in original*

In response to Selfe's call to action and in line with the work that Michelle and I have been doing over the past 16 years, *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* presents a conceptual framework for imagining how we can institute campus-wide initiatives, such as Writing Across Communities, that attempt to connect the college classroom to the students' other communities of belonging. The book accomplishes this task by first tackling one of the biggest conundrums we currently face in the field regarding the extent to which fixity (standardization) and fluidity (difference) can be utilized simultaneously (Chapter 1) if we are going to provide all our students, but especially the disenfranchised among them, with the tools to navigate and negotiate the range of reading, writing and rhetorical challenges they encounter in college classrooms over the course of their studies and in communities beyond once they complete them. In Part I of the book, I take the four key dimensions that inform a writing across difference approach—language, culture, identity and citizenship—and discuss each in turn before Part II, which contains case studies I conducted in a single classroom and in a campus-wide program to test my theories.

After exploring the dialectical relationship between fixity and fluidity in the introductory chapter, I shift the discussion to the role that language (Chapter 2) plays in the lives of students—especially the disenfranchised among them—who are required to take writing courses in postsecondary institutions. There is arguably no issue more salient in composition and literacy studies right now, because language is at the heart of everything we do in the classroom as reading, writing and rhetoric teachers and one of the key semiotic practices our students must know how to enact productively over the course of their everyday lives. In light of recent debates about how best to respond to language difference in the writing classroom, the study of language strikes me as the ideal place to begin any conversation about how we can bring about change in our curricular and pedagogical practices, as well as in the larger society as a whole.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge how inextricably language and culture (Chapter 3) are tied to one another if we hope to make meaningful use of our students' lived experiences in the course of working with them to fill their "quiver(s)" (Selfe, 2009, p. 645) with a provisional array of linguistic, cultural and semiotic resources that we as theorists, researchers and educators have identified. In tandem with their relationship to one another, language and culture in turn produce and are produced by the shifting identities (Chapter 4) that our students choose to appropriate and perform as they navigate and negotiate the varied social spaces they inhabit in the classroom, on campus and beyond. Finally, we need to think about how these three dimensions (language, culture and identity) can be utilized in our historically grounded efforts to cultivate citizenship (Chapter 5) among our students through the work we do together in the college classroom and in relationship to their other communities of belonging.

As we work collectively toward one of the most important outcomes of organized education—producing *citizens in the making* who are not only responsible in themselves and to others, but who are also committed to equity, inclusion and

social justice—we must remain continuously aware of the key dimensions that inform this outcome. But because theoretical concepts have inherent constraints and limitations, we need to make sure we test our theories, if only in the most general sense. For that reason, the chapters in Part II demonstrate how the interactive elements I have just described manifest themselves in a single college writing classroom (Chapter 6) and in a first of its kind campus-wide Writing Across Communities initiative (Chapter 7) that attempts to integrate the individual college classroom, the campus and our students' other communities of belonging. There are few things more difficult to undertake through our scholarly work than lasting institutional change in the social spaces we occupy, but we will undoubtedly shortchange ourselves if we aim for anything less.

*Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* should appeal to theorists, researchers, educators, graduate students and advanced undergraduate students in the fields of composition, literacy, rhetoric, multilingual, and education studies interested in exploring how to teach reading, writing and rhetoric in ways that acknowledge language difference, transcultural perspectives, identity formation and citizenship. Because the book reflects the growing alliance among scholars in first and second language studies, it should also appeal to anyone who is trying to find ways to address the needs of the growing number of migrant, immigrant and international students enrolling in postsecondary writing classes at an unprecedented clip. Theorists, researchers and educators on the international stage who are wrestling with many of these same issues will find that *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* provides them with conceptual ideas and examples of how we can best equip students with the repertoires of rhetorical and discursive practices they need to navigate and negotiate the complicated social and cultural circumstances they face in the late modern era.

One last thing: Except for the extended passage in Spanish and Spanish/English that opens Chapter 2 and is translated in an endnote at the end of that chapter, the English translation of all Spanish words, phrases and sentences used in this book can be found listed in order of appearance in Spanish to English glossaries at the end of each chapter. In contrast to the typical practice in the field of inserting the English translation in brackets immediately after a passage in Spanish, I decided to include English translations in separate chapter glossaries to provide readers with the experience of encountering Spanish words, phrases and sentences in isolation. I am hoping this will allow readers with varied levels of competency in Spanish to take notice of the immediate tensions they experience as they struggle to translate and understand Spanish words, phrases and sentences at the very moment they encounter them in the book.

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A version of Chapter 2 previously appeared as “From Code-Segregation to Code-Switching to Code-Meshing: Finding Deliverance from Deficit Thinking through Language Awareness and Performance” in the *61st Yearbook of the Literacy Research Association*. Copyright 2012 by the Literacy Research Association. Used with permission. A version of Chapter 3 appeared as “Invoking Modalities in the Writing Classroom” in *Time and Space in Literacy Research*. Copyright 2014 by Routledge. Used with permission. A version of Chapter 5 appeared as “Cultivating Transcultural Citizenship in a Discursive Democracy” in *Texts of Consequence: Composing Social Activism for the Classroom and Community*. Copyright 2013 by Hampton Press. Used with permission. A version of Chapter 7 appeared as “Enacting Institutional Change: The Work of Literacy Insurgents in the Academy and Beyond” in the *Journal of Advanced Composition*. Copyright 2014 by the *Journal of Advanced Composition*. Used with permission.

# 1

## FIXITY AND FLUIDITY

The year is 1961. I am lying alone in a bed that I typically share with two younger siblings early on a Sunday morning reading a book I checked out from my elementary school library. I am engaged in the new—for me—social practice of reading, a habit I developed a couple of years earlier that compels me to immerse myself in fictional worlds created by various authors to escape the social, cultural and political constraints that conspire to keep me fixed, tied to a particular *chronotope* where “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh” and “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). If, at that moment, we could have zoomed up into the sky from the bedroom and looked down as we are now able to do using the perspective Google Maps provides, we would have located that bedroom in one of 34 buildings laid out in a neat barracks-like matrix that together made (and still make) up *Los Vecinos*,<sup>1</sup> the housing project where my eight siblings and I grew up. Except for an Appalachian family that lived in the building immediately behind ours, every family living in the 29 four- and six-unit apartment buildings was Mexican or Mexican American. The families living in the 5 two-unit apartment buildings carefully segregated from our own were African American. We all knew our place so well at the time that in all my years living there I never once befriended an African American child, nor one of them me, even though I walked past their homes every day on my way to an overwhelmingly Mexican public elementary school that we did not share with them, located immediately south of the housing project.

If we were to zoom farther out, we would notice that *Los Vecinos* is located in Harlingen, a small rural town in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas methodically divided in half by railroad tracks that run through its middle. Like me, everyone (or so it seemed at the time) who lived west of those tracks in the

## 2 Fixity and Fluidity

housing project or in one of the small, generally well-kept, but sometimes dilapidated working-class homes on the west side of town was of Mexican origin. *Los bolillos*—as housing project residents disparagingly referred to white people in our town when they felt the need to put them in their place—lived east of the railroad tracks in their comfortable middle-class homes with modestly manicured lawns. I am certain—although I do not remember being aware of it at the age of 11—that there must have been a few middle-class families of Mexican origin living on the east side among the Anglos. West side residents referred to them as *los vendidos*, a stinging rebuke used by adults in *el barrio* to describe those they saw as having turned their backs on our shared language, culture and way of life. Although I encountered both groups—*bolillos* and *vendidos*—on a regular basis in the public junior high and high schools I attended later, like everyone else in town, I pretty much hung out with my own kind. It was comfortable, and it felt like home. But it was also the only thing we were permitted to do. We had no other choice.

If we zoomed just a bit farther out, we would see precisely demarcated agricultural plots of land spreading out in all directions from my hometown on which an array of crops were and are still cultivated. Scattered among them you would see the cotton and tomato fields where many of us in *Los Vecinos*—those of us who did not head north late in the spring as part of the annual stream of migrant farmworkers—labored to help our families make ends meet, earning 3 to 6 dollars (depending on how much we were able to pick) for a 12-to-14-hour day of grueling work in the stifling heat and humidity of a south Texas summer. In many cases, it was a life made even more difficult by a condition too many of us had to deal with at home: alcoholism in the midst of poverty and all that it entails.

Because of our current fascination in composition and literacy studies with the role that fluidity plays in our day-to-day lives, we sometimes forget that the rigid, stratified existence I just described is not a thing of the past, something experienced only by those of us old enough to have lived in a pre-civil rights era when every social, cultural, educational and political institution in this country conspired to keep us segregated from one another on the basis of our language, culture, identity and citizenship status. At the same time that it acknowledges and provides a sense of the possibilities available to our students in a volatile world where difference has replaced sameness and is now the new norm (Lu & Horner, 2013), this book makes every effort to remind us that fixity continues to be an inescapable element of our lives. But the book also fiercely argues that we, as educators in composition and literacy studies, must delve into the intricacies of what it means to live in social spaces<sup>2</sup> where nothing—not our languages, cultures, identities, or citizenship status—ever stands still despite the best efforts of institutional and ideological forces operating to hold us all—especially the disenfranchised among us—in rigidly defined and stratified categories. In so doing, I call on my own lived experience, first because the theoretical arguments

I plan to make will become too ethereal if they are not grounded in blood, flesh and bone, but also because anyone who is going to ask students to use their lived experience<sup>3</sup> to write themselves into being in college classrooms and other communities of belonging<sup>4</sup> must be willing to do the same.

## A Deleuzian Dreamscape of Desire

Wherever we turn nowadays, we are practically overwhelmed by a Deleuzian dreamscape of desire informed by a rhizomatic interpretation of reality full of centers, but no beginnings or endings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In ways that we may not have realized before, a Deleuzian orientation has infected our thinking in the field of composition and literacy studies and in an array of related disciplines. As a consequence, we are repeatedly reminded that everything around us in the physical, social, linguistic, cultural, political and virtual spaces we inhabit is in continuous motion despite the best efforts of conservative elements in our society to stop everything in its tracks, to contain the irreverent nature of life out of a deep-felt sense that centrifugal forces are tearing apart centripetal systems (Bakhtin, 1981) that have seemingly been in place forever. Motion and its cousin mobility (Urry, 2005, 2007) have always been terrifying, but in an era of unprecedented change reflected in transnational travel, multimedia overload and global marketplaces that influence our lifestyle choices and our work-related options, space and time seem to be picking up more speed with the announcement of each new technological innovation (Fairclough, 1999, p. 75). As a result, many among us often feel as if we are at the precipice, teetering on the edge of oblivion, lost in the muck of a new kind of space and time that more than ever refuses to stand still. In Deleuze and Guattari's words,

We live today in an age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to turn up so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity. We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date. We no longer believe in the dull grey outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution aimed at forming a harmonious whole out of heterogeneous bits by rounding off the edges. We believe in totalities that are peripheral.

*1983, p. 42*

As researchers, theorists and educators in composition and literacy studies, we are obligated to develop and provide our students with the strategic and tactical tools they need to navigate and negotiate the unprecedented levels of change they encounter in their lives as readers, writers and rhetoricians in college classrooms