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Positioning the Translingual Approach: Producing a Positive Linguistic Liminality for Language Learners

Table of Contents
Chapter 1– CR, IR, and Translingual (TR)–The Search for Linguistic Flexibility .. 2
   CR/IR Publications and Implications ................................................................. 3
   Translingual Publications and Presentations .................................................. 13
   Growing Popularity of the Translingual Approach ....................................... 15
Chapter 2 – The Translingual Contact Zone ..................................................... 23
   Safe Houses, Havens, and Transience ............................................................. 26
   Qualifying the Contact Zone ......................................................................... 29
   The Consequence of Contact Zone (Hyper)tension .................................... 32
   Official / Public and Unofficial / Private ....................................................... 35
   Crossing the Streams – Obama’s Combination of Realms ......................... 37
Chapter 3 – The Translingual Approach as a Positive Linguistic Liminality .......... 41
   Aspects of the Liminal .................................................................................. 42
   A Translingual Representation ..................................................................... 43
   Translingual as Interconnective .................................................................... 46
   Translingual as Continual Development/Growth ....................................... 49
   Translingual as a State of Permanent Flux ................................................ 53
   Ramifications for the Discipline .................................................................. 54
Concluding/Inaugurating Words ...................................................................... 57
Appendix A – Sharing Linguistic Resources – A Translingual Classroom Activity .. 58
   Outline of Assignment .................................................................................. 58
   Detailed Description and Reasoning for the Assignment .......................... 59
   Works Cited ................................................................................................. 62
Chapter 1– CR, IR, and Translingual (TR)–The Search for Linguistic Flexibility

“No one puts new wine into old wineskins. Or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins”

(NKJV Luke 5:37-38)

In the fall of 2012, I taught my first section of first-year writing. Because this teaching occurred at a university in southern California, I quickly found myself making space in my studies and pedagogy for English-language-learning (ELL) and second-language (L2) concepts. Acting as catalysts to this part of my pedagogy, four international students—two from Bahrain, one Iranian, and one Chinese—and a dozen or so Spanish-speaking students were funneled into my section. While trying to discover ways to appropriately and effectively address the idiosyncratic patterns present within the writing of this diverse classroom, I came across research on contrastive rhetoric (CR), what Tony Silva and Ilona Leki define as “the notion that writers' different cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence the structure or arrangement of their L2 texts” (5). However, after asking around at the CCCC’s in 2013, I found many scholars responding to my queries with comments like “I haven’t seen much on that in a few years,” or “CR seems to come back to the surface every 5 or 10 years or so.” I took these almost off-the-cuff responses and began trying to determine whether CR was something worth revitalizing.
At that moment, the situation began growing much more complex. At first glance, it would seem that, after a large spike of interest around 2005 in the form of CCCC’s presentations, CR met with a sharp decrease and began waning as an area of study, pigeon-holed and left to fade. Supporting this summation, Yichun Liu and Xiaoye You share that “in recent years…contrastive rhetoric has become limiting for studying writing in cross-cultural contexts” (154). Yet, it appears that CR remains in another form as a partial conceptual tool for some L2 writing instructors, particularly those with a foot in the field of Applied Linguistics. This discovery occurred as I began examining three key types of academic data more closely—namely publications, presentations, and people. I started to realize that I was actually trying to understand not just contrastive rhetoric but a complex relationship between three strangely interwoven areas of scholastic interest all connected to 2L writing—contrastive rhetoric; CR’s next step, intercultural rhetoric (IR); and an overlapping and more flexible concept described as translingual (TR) or the translingual approach. Ultimately, I use this chapter to illuminate the strange relationship between these three terms and display why the TR approach has become both more popular and a superior method for examining what has traditionally been termed ELL or 2L concepts in writing. Then in the following two chapters, I add greater contextualization to TR concepts and present the translingual approach as an effective and positive overarching linguistic paradigm.

CR/IR Publications and Implications

In Foucaultian style, I will begin at what appears to be the end or the
beginning of the end from a publication standpoint. In 2004, an exchange occurred, “before a warm fire in an old house…in Maine,” between those whom some might call two pillars of 2L writing, Paul K. Matsuda and Dwight Atkinson (“Conversation” 277). Four years after its recording, this exploratory tête-à-tête between Matsuda and Atkinson was printed under the title “A Conversation on Contrastive Rhetoric.” This conversation takes an honest look at one part of English language learning in composition. The two scholars declare that this conversation has occurred “at a crucial point in [CR’s] history—one which requires significant rethinking of nearly everything associated with [contrastive rhetoric]” (277). This “significant rethinking” comes in response to a number of scholars over a period of decades struggling to define applications and limitations to the contrastive rhetoric paradigm.

One extremely pertinent area that Matsuda and Atkinson address significantly is that of “renaming and reconceptualizing” (283). The two scholars discuss Ulla Connor’s encouragement to shift the terminology to *intercultural rhetoric*, and specifically Matsuda shares that “coming up with a new term, and also changing the term, is something...to encourage. But having said that, I [Matsuda] am not sure if I like the term...because intercultural rhetoric in its own way limits the scope of what these studies can look at” (283). Matsuda broaches the discussion of IR terminology without fully buying into IR as a primary option. Nevertheless, he indicates a clear need for a new name and well-considered methodology with greater flexibility and a larger potential scope of elements to study. Further, this idea of “renaming and recontextualizing” will show itself to be extremely salient when I delve more fully
Continuing on to understand the development of CR, it becomes clear within the body of literature surrounding contrastive rhetoric that the topic has accumulated a significant amount of scholasti-political baggage almost from the initial introduction of the concept by Robert Kaplan in 1966. For those familiar with CR, it is no secret that this method has drawn substantial amounts of praise and criticism since Kaplan initially conceptualized CR. To sum up a legitimate compendium of scholarship in a few sentences, CR originally illuminated the fact that scholars were willing to look at ELL work as more than simply error-riddled compositions. “Its value arose from its ability to synthesize disparate fields that had long existed separately…into a new, highly generative area of inquiry” (Bloch 243). The initial and continuing popularity showed that scholars might be willing to see the dissonance or interference within a student’s work as a cultural disconnect more than a lack of intellectual prowess on the part of the student. To borrow once again from Y. Liu and X. You, “contrastive rhetoricians entertain a fundamental conviction that unique sociopolitical and cultural experiences of a nation render some distinctive features in the rhetorical practices of its people” (154). Still, Kaplan’s theory also displayed, however unintentionally and debatably, a certain Eurocentric or Western American weighting because the theory could be perceived by some as emphasizing how other languages related to English and more specifically how these languages contrasted or clashed with English on a structural level. Ryuko Kubota and Al Lehner describe this situation as a “reductionist, deterministic, prescriptive, and essentialist orientation” (10). Thus,
Despite the intention upon inception, any conclusion based within this paradigm almost seems to forcibly require the inference of a deficiency or weakness because the CR paradigm utilizes the Standard Academic English or Standard Written English (SWE) formation as a bar of comparison.

Nevertheless, Kaplan’s work still maintained significant popularity and in the last few decades has been furthered by his successor as the leading scholar for CR, Ulla Connor. Overlapping and extending Kaplan’s work, Connor published in conjunction with the progenitor of CR in the 1980’s. Further, in 1996, she also released her own full-length text, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second Language Writing*. Then again, in 2008, Connor edited the anthology, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric*, which houses the previously mentioned conversation between Matsuda and Atkinson. Finally her 2011 text, *Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom*, spends the first few chapters attempting to re-engage former scholarship on CR. In light of this substantial and seminal research on CR as well as what Connor has termed *intercultural rhetoric* as of 2004, it is no surprise that the IUPUI *Women Creating Excellence* webpage describes her as a woman who literally “has defined her field of study” (Owen).

Aside from a couple of articles published over the last five years, the only major publication since 2008 was a second full anthology in 2013, *Critical and Corpus-Based Approaches to Intercultural Rhetoric*, housing an article by Connor. More importantly though, the final section of the 2013 anthology held two articles focused on the “Next Steps” of the CR/IR field of study. The first comes from Suresh
Canagarajah who will significantly aid the discussion of TR in later chapters. The second work, “Intercultural Rhetoric: A Conversation—The Sequel,” is a follow-up discussion between Matsuda and Atkinson who are once again asking important questions about the future of the revamped field that was once CR.

Despite these discussions of “Next Steps,” the difficulty is that IR continues to struggle to step into a place of its own where it no longer fights against the tension of past arguments against its ancestry in CR. This difficulty inhibits the overall potential and speed of growth for the field. This struggle against criticism of CR can be seen repeatedly in Connor’s 2005, 2008, and 2011 works. First, in 2005, one can find a back-and-forth in volumes 13 and 14 of *The Journal of Second Language Writing* among Ulla Connor, Ryuko Kubota, and Al Lehner regarding the possible limitations and criticisms of contrastive rhetoric. This dialogue appears to be one of the last publications focused on CR until Ulla Connor’s anthology in 2008. Connor’s involvement in this printed dialogue ends with a slight nod and a substantial challenge to Kubota and Lehner who shared how CR seemed to represent a “reductionist, deterministic, prescriptive, and essentialist orientation” (TCCR 10). Consider the challenge in Connor’s closing words.

I welcome articles like Kubota and Lehner's that help keep contrastive rhetoric active and moving forward. But it is time for scholars like Kubota and Lehner to give contrastive rhetoric an evenhanded representation rather than using it consistently as a straw man argument full of misrepresentations. It is not accurate to draw a binary
representation of contrastive rhetoric as static, essentializing, and assimilationist. I believe that it is incumbent on critics to direct their criticism to an updated and current version of the field rather than to indulge in misinterpretation. (136)

Connor’s challenge to scholars helps us understand some of the larger scholastico-political difficulties surrounding continued scholarship in CR/IR. In her final article within the 2008 compendium, Connor takes a moment to remind her readership once more that “contrastive rhetoric is also frequently characterized as static, as if no developments have taken place in theory, methods, and paradigms[, but] Kaplan's own writings (2000, 2005) are clear examples of how contrastive rhetoric has advanced continuously” (CR: Reaching to IR 304). Here, she acknowledges the difficulty of many scholars to fully embrace CR even at the point of publication in 2008. What this commentary does though is twofold. In her attempt to move beyond these criticisms, she seems to continually confirm the strength of the scholastico-political chains that hinder the reinvention or redirection of contrastive rhetoric in a long-term way.

As a final example, Connor displays her continued concern by attempting to add greater qualification and complexity to CR/IR in the 2011 text by sharing that, “as legitimate as some of the criticism has been, much of it has stemmed from a lack of understanding about what contrastive rhetoric stands for today. Many researchers view contrastive and [even] intercultural rhetoric as Kaplan’s original formulation” (13). Connor goes on to share that this formulation “is easy to paint into a corner as
out-of-date” (13). Further, the way she substantially grounds and references the less effective past philosophies of CR in the first few chapters of this 2011 text could add to the difficulty in distinguishing or instigating any substantive nuancing introduced to the concept. She pushes for an acceptance of the growth which has occurred, and yet this growth while beneficial may not be substantial enough overall or substantial enough in the areas of greatest concern.

More concisely, perhaps CR/IR is not static, but that does not make it fluid. The field may be looking for a less viscous linguistic paradigm—something capable of expanding in a more radical way. Connor seems to acknowledge this idea, sharing that “contrastive rhetoric has been useful and explanatory. Yet, to stay alive and continue developing, contrastive rhetoric needs to move far beyond…binary distinctions” (*CR Reaching to IR* 304). For all practical purposes though, while CR/IR may have “moved” or even “moved… beyond,” this paradigm has yet to prove that it has “moved far beyond” in a way that allows it to encompass all that is necessary of an overarching linguistic paradigm. Unfortunately then, despite attempts to shift—and partial successes in shifting—from CR to IR, the semi-substantiated stigma has remained to deter some portions of academia and continues to haunt the scholarship surrounding both CR and IR formulations. Therefore, while “misrepresentations” are generally not beneficial for any field, Connor’s need to take this defensive stance multiple times across multiple years of publication points to a problematic situation with CR/IR concepts. The repetition of her defense here indicates that, whether she is right or wrong, the perception she fights against is a
heavily anchored one which makes moving forward and effectively reinventing under a parallel signifier like *intercultural rhetoric* difficult.

And yet, Ulla Connor has brought no small amount of beneficial scholarship to L2 language studies, and CR/IR itself has had an immense amount of scholarship that has been beneficial and warrants honoring. As a starting point in this remembrance, Ilona Leki’s article “Twenty-Five Years of Contrastive Rhetoric: Text Analysis and Writing Pedagogies,” describes nearly sixty studies connected to contrastive rhetoric and ELL concepts. One of Leki’s key contributions comes in the form of her assertion that “at their most pedagogically useful, contrastive rhetorical studies concern themselves with the social construction of knowledge within discourse communities” (135-136). Leki brings to light the connection between contrasting linguistic communities through the immense body of work she shares, these communities that at times seem to determine the success or failure of students or writers based on their abilities to assimilate to the norms of a specific discourse culture. As a final note, Leki introduces a touching personal account of the confrontation between differing rhetorical expectations [of] Fan Shen (1989), a Chinese graduate student in the U.S., [who] describes her reaction to being told, in her literature class, to write naturally, to be herself, to find her own voice. She quickly realized that she could not possibly "be herself," her Chinese self, and write a text that would be acceptable, or even comprehensible, to an English-speaking audience. Instead, she found
herself forced to develop an English "self," one that would correspond to the expectations of "self" in the U.S. academic discourse community. [This touching example illuminates how] contrastive rhetoric studies help us to remember that the idea of "being yourself," or writing elegantly, or communicating clearly and convincingly has no reality outside a particular cultural and rhetorical context and that our discourse community is only one of many. (139)

Through the addition of this very personal element, Leki’s work creates a vivid picture of the motivation of many who studied CR. She uses this testimony to embody the difficulties in which instructors engage who care deeply for their ELL students. Instructors attempt to be sensitive to students’ needs for acclimation to the public/gate-kept academic discourse community while also trying to encourage students in their private/individual linguistic development.

Adding to Leki’s examination of CR, Paul Kei Matsuda further opens up dialogue about a decade later to attempt the introduction of a more contextualized model. His concern at the time stemmed from the fact that the need for ESL writers to learn how to organize English written discourse still exists (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1988; Leki, 1991, 1992; Reid, 1989; Severino, 1993), although the way to translate research insights into classroom practice is yet to be developed. [Matsuda’s] aim in [his] study, then, [was] to develop a model of L2 writing that can help teachers place insights from contrastive rhetoric
studies into the practice of teaching ESL writing. (“CR in Context” 46)

The difficulty with attempts to tie scholarly insight into classroom practice stems, as Matsuda shares, from the complexity of each language situation, and this complexity seems to go beyond CR, at least as it continues to be perceived. Seeing how Matsuda’s work incorporates scholars’ growing understanding of the complexity of language acquisition and development at the time, it is no surprise that he is one of the key conversants in the transitioning of this discourse. In fact, in this same transitional article, Matsuda makes clear to us how contrastive analysis of written discourse in itself will not be sufficient [because] organizational structures of L2 text should be analyzed in context; that is, in light of the writer’s mental representation of the context of writing, the reader’s actual reactions to the text, and the outcome of the interaction of the two. (57)

The notion of complexity will be discussed in greater detail later, but Matsuda’s article as a whole indicates a growing acknowledgement of CR’s benefits and more importantly its limitations—which Connor is still in the process of overcoming. Nevertheless, in this moment, Matsuda displays an attempt to validate scholarship on CR while showing us the need which had yet to be filled at the time.

Thus, in taking a moment to register a sampling of the immense scholarship and its varied reception by those interested in ELL concepts, I hope to both honor it as an old wineskin and illuminate the progression of scholarship in composition studies that seems to be emerging in more recent history. After all, I agree with
Connor that CR still possesses merit, and IR certainly holds great value as it continues to adapt. Sadly, IR still remains colored by its scholastic history in the eyes of many scholars which slows its progress. Yet, even in a perceived static form, CR/IR formulations can give benefit because sometimes using a less effective conceptual tool is better than having no tool at all.

For the same reason, while CR may not be a complete or fully accurate picture of the linguistic situation, the concept is not useless nor the decades of scholarship that it represents without merit. Because of its simplified approach, it could still provide both developmental students and new instructors with a basic framework for approaching language difference. And yet, the field of composition seems to have found “a more excellent way” through the translingual approach—a way that mirrors the ancient move from a legalistic system of error to a compassionate system of sanctification or growth (NKJV 1 Cor 12:31). Delving into the translingual approach more deeply below, one will begin seeing a more broadly applicable framework for perceiving and advancing the thinking and writing of ELL students which challenges scholarship rooted in a more static-state or at least less fluid ideology.

**Translingual Publications and Presentations**

But to track back significantly to that exploratory tête-à-tête between Matsuda and Atkinson, for our current reflection, the scholars’ desires to focus on “renaming and reconceptualizing” help illuminate certain shifts in the study of English language learning in composition over the last 5-10 years (“Conversation” 283). To expand on these shifts slightly, after the 2009 update to the CCCCs position “Statement on
Second-Language Writing and Writers”—which represented a growth in length and breadth of nearly four times that of the 2001 document’s original content—one can observe a significant increase in the use of translingual terminology in publications and conference presentations. This proportional shift and honing in the statement indicates a growing prominence and maturing of the ELL field beyond basic approaches. To reference a more commonplace carpentry comparison, an apprentice may begin using the basic hammer and nail in early stages simply to get the work done, but as his or her expertise grows, a desire for less clunky, more project-specific tools or techniques—the ball-peen hammer, shingling hammer, ripping, drywall, and claw hammers, etc.—and a greater finesse become apparent in the fully-licensed contractor. In the same way, as the field of ELL and 2L writing develops to greater maturity, the tools/concepts that instructors need, desire, and utilize will come to enhance or completely replace the incomplete or less efficient processes of the past, hopefully in a way that respects scholastic predecessors.

With this thinking in mind, after the sharp spike in presentations and panels on contrastive/intercultural rhetoric at the CCCCCs from 2004-2005, only one or two presentations appear as part of the convention to the present for either CR/IR topics. Further, Connor seemingly disengages with the CCCCCs after 2006 except for a single presentation around the time of her anthology publication. To justify this move slightly, she did begin her own conference just for IR topics around this time which may have drawn any scholarship away from the CCCCCs. Of course, this change could also hypothetically have been connected to her IR formulation receiving less
buy-in at the CCCCs than she had expected. Adding to this pattern, after performing a quick scan of publications on the MLA and ERIC databases, CR/IR topics do occur, but translingual topics have more publications here as well. But by also considering the fact that translingual scholarship is fairly fresh and publication cycles being what they are (two-year processes usually), I still expect to see drastic growth in the number of publications over the next few years. By contrast, CR/IR topics have been around for quite some time and publications are less progressive and more assessive in nature which seems to lead to an inference that CR/IR concepts are struggling to make headway, but translingual topics seem to have the wind at their backs.

**Growing Popularity of the Translingual Approach**

Thus, proceeding from the conversation between Matsuda and Atkinson, one notes a number of composition scholars playing with terminology, trying to find a definitive descriptor which would encompass the beneficial and needful elements originally suggested within the discourse surrounding CR while sifting away the unnecessary ideological baggage that has become associated with the perspective of this discourse. Working toward the present, it would seem that scholars are attempting to create new terms or renegotiate older ones with the hope of fulfilling the critical needs that Matsuda and Atkinson summatively depict, or as Horner et al indicate, to “recognize [and overcome the] traditional ways of understanding and responding to language differences [which] are inadequate” (“Language Difference” 303). So, one finds scholars toying with terminology to attempt a more accurate representation of the language learning experience. These terms, with their individual
nuances and overlapping connotations, each declare a certain amount of agency and
politicization affecting relationships among the composition student, the classroom,
and the English language.

However, *translingual* has begun radiating more brightly in the last few years
in a number of venues. Taking a quick look at CCCC’s programs from 2009 to 2013,
the mention of translingual terminology grows from literally nil to nearly fifteen
entries, steadily multiplying each year. Most interestingly, the 2014 program
indicates growth on an exponential level with nearly twenty-nine entries. By
comparison, at least in the context of the CCCC’s, CR/IR presentations only appear
once or twice in all four years. As previously mentioned, a quick search on MLA or
ERIC still pings a good number of articles connected to translingual topics, and just
in 2013 Suresh Canagarajah released the full text, *Translingual Practice: Global
Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*. And so, *translingual* seems to be gaining
greater popularity for a number of reasons, and this popularity seems to coincide at
least partially with the gaps existing in and the vacuum left by the CR/IR paradigm
within the field of composition.

For instance, the term *translingual* lacks the ethnocentricity characterized by
CR while also facilitating more effective comparisons on multiple linguistic levels—
not just the larger level of rhetorical structuring but also the sentence and word levels.
The translingual approach does not follow Kaplan’s expressed assumption that,
“while there are phonological and morphological differences and similarities among
languages, these differences…have lesser significance in communication across
languages” (13). Instead, this translingual approach finds value in the varied, multifaceted, and complicated forms of language not simply the large-scale rhetorical choices. “It is sufficiently broad to accommodate the metalinguistic and cognitive awareness involved in such literacy” (“Literacy” 3).

Perhaps a clarifying example from my teaching will illuminate the differences here. One of the previously mentioned Spanish L1 students of mine had been exhibiting a syntactic structural pattern which separated the subjects and verbs of his sentence extensively. He would insert direct and indirect objects and their descriptors before the verb sometimes pushing the verb of the sentence away from its grammatical subject by an entire line of text. The CR paradigm, with its focus primarily on larger paragraph-oriented structuring could easily have led me to overlook the cause of this idiosyncratic pattern; however, in using the translingual approach, which remains open to a larger gamut of linguistic factors, I was able to focus on a similar syntactic structure exhibited in Spanish connected to both reflexive verbs and the placement of pronouns between the subject and verb.

Further, even in applying the CR paradigm, one might approach the piece of writing and see this pattern as a deficit because Standard American English readers are accustomed to subjects and verbs maintaining close proximity to one another, and in using such a structure, the writer could confuse some readers momentarily or cause these readers to perceive the sentence as convoluted. The CR-based commentary might approach the student in a prescriptive manner. However, with the translingual approach this technique can easily be viewed as a beneficial rhetorical device which
initially may have been learned in Spanish but, in transference or recontextualization, allowed the writer to build to a greater syntactic crescendo when used effectively. Altogether, the translingual approach in this instance not only allowed me to focus on sentence-level syntactic/rhetorical elements but also helped me to see these elements—and any idiosyncrasies that they possessed—as positive aspects of transfer to be encouraged when rhetorically effective.

But to return to the broader academic discussion, for these reasons and more, this term *translingual* has come to the forefront of scholarly discussion through various CCCC’s panels and numerous publications particularly in the last three years. In fact, Suresh Canagarajah has gone so far as to declare “that the neologism ‘translingual’ is needed. Existing terms like *multilingual* or *plurilingual* keep languages somewhat separated even as they address the co-existence of multiple languages” (“Literacy” 1). Yet, to describe translingual as a “neologism” lends intense importance to its growing role in the 2L writing community because, while on the surface level “neo-” equates to new and “-logism” denotes a simple word, the connection of “-logism” to the Greek *logos* indicates more than a fresh sign. Though some may consider this common knowledge, *logos* according to the Encyclopedia Britannica can be described as “the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning” (“Logos”). In this moment then, Canagarajah does not simply identify *translingual* as an important term, he indicates its potential for bringing about a paradigm shift in 2L writing studies, for “[re]ordering” the linguistic universe.
To anchor this more existential consideration, one necessary moment of shift occurred after the L.4 4C’s panel of 2010, “(Re)Defining Translingual Writing,” which was later reviewed by Rebecca Lorimer and Andrea Olinger. In this panel, Paul K. Matsuda appears once more, now accompanied by Bruce Horner and Suresh Canagarajah—all influential scholars in this branch of composition studies. The reviewers of the panel describe the event as “continu[ing] a conversation that has been developing across conferences and publications for the past few years” but which “reached something of an official status with the publication of ‘Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach’ in the January 2011 issue of College English” (Lorimer and Olinger). The reviewer’s concluding statement declares that

Even though “(Re)Defining Translingual Writing” was scheduled on a Saturday, it still drew quite a crowd, and the frequent “mm-hms” and “ahhs” overheard suggested that the audience was not only interested but invested in the speakers’ ideas. The field’s conversation about language variety in writing has been around for quite some time, of course, but of late, the frequency of panels, publications…and themed conferences…suggests a growing desire to deepen and complicate our understanding of our students’ increasingly diverse language repertoires. (Lorimer and Olinger)

It seems important to note Lorimer and Olinger’s descriptive similarity to Atkinson’s word choice from years earlier. Where Lorimer and Olinger emphasize a “growing
desire to deepen and complicate,” Atkinson expressed his desire to see the field “complexify” aspects of 2L studies (“Conversation” 294). These parallel signifiers display how the specific need expressed in Matsuda and Atkinson’s conversation seems to be filled by this new approach. And further, the extreme potential of this next term to encompass a much larger gamut of “methodologies and...methods...to complexify” the study of writers across languages, becomes all the more visible (“Conversation” 294). Thus, this new term *translingual*, with its proponents intentionally staving off full definition (Lorimer and Olinger), better illuminates the complex act of meaning making occurring through English language learners, and really all language users, in the composition classroom.

In light of this greater complexity, how does emphasizing such a seemingly needful shift over time from one basic, limited tool to a more advanced, liminal mechanism aid composition scholars? The answer is paradoxical: these elements in one sense better expand and more accurately define language concepts in the composition classroom, and yet through a greater grayness or ambiguity of definition, these elements create a positive linguistic liminal space where greater growth can occur. The translingual approach allows for a greater spectrum of language use and comparisons and moves away from the more reductive nature of CR or the politically saturated IR. One might say that, while contrastive rhetoric was inadvertently used “to close a subject down,” the translingual process possesses great potential to “open up [the linguistic] project” (Bartholomae 189).

Projecting forward, to understand the discordant interactions of closing down
and opening up, it might aid us to remember what Christine Gledhill, known for her work in Women’s Film and Cultural Studies in the UK, spoke of in the 1980’s. She illuminates how “language and cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate, or displace, definitions and identities” (104). If this situation is true, then contrastive rhetoric has, it would seem, reached its maximum potential because it naturally creates a politicized situation favoring one specific type of agent. This auto-politicization present within CR significantly inhibits what Gledhill describes as “negotiation” (98); whereas, TR does not immediately or intrinsically create a power imbalance and, therefore, holds greater potential for theoretical and practical application. In fact, one immediate consequence of utilizing Gledhill’s representation of the linguocultural situation seems to finalize and emphasize the ideologically outmoded nature of even the more recent scholarship on CR and IR. Yet looking more deeply into Gledhill’s concept of language as a contested site, one may see more clearly the potential step that a translingual approach could make beyond not only CR and IR but the concept of the contested site as well.

To continue fleshing out how this process can open up the linguistic project, the following chapter will begin by continuing to apply Gledhill’s framework comparatively, now to TR concepts. By using Gledhill’s negotiation heuristic as a starting point and then expanding into the application of Mary Louise Pratt’s contact zone framework, I attempt to advance the academic understanding of this translingual approach and begin contextualizing a further developed method for engaging with
and encouraging translingual practice which I call a *positive linguistic liminality*. 
Chapter 2 – The Translingual Contact Zone

“more and more English courses are now informed by a view of language as a site of struggle among conflicting discourses with unequal socio-political power”

(Lu 305).

In the previous chapter, contrastive rhetoric (CR) as well as its derivative, intercultural rhetoric (IR), were introduced and positioned as a necessary yet politically stilted and viscous precursor to the most recent development in language learning and interlocutory studies, what scholars are now referring to as the translingual approach or translingual practice (TR). Having moved beyond CR and IR, I would like to begin the next step toward understanding the flexibility and benefit of TR concepts. To show how the translingual approach can expand to include the contact zone while also possessing the capability of going beyond the hyper-politicization and hyper-tension of that same concept, I will use the aforementioned contested site of Christine Gledhill as a stepping stone to approach the highly referenced framework of the linguistic or translingual contact zone. Gledhill’s 1988 publication appears to act as a forerunner for the more widely sourced work by Mary Louise Pratt, a comparative literature scholar at NYU, referenced by multiple translingual publications (Min-Zhan Lu’s “Professing Multiculturalism,” Bruce Horner et al’s “Language Difference in Writing,” and Suresh Canagarajah’s Translingual Practice to name a few).

To clarify, Gledhill’s consideration acts as an early stage of what would come
to be called the contact zone. Her particular way of approaching the contested site adds a greater variety of interaction that seems to undergird some of Pratt’s expression. If one compares the language used for Gledhill’s contested site to Pratt’s description of the contact zone, one finds a significant parallel. In Gledhill’s model, “language and cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate, or displace, definitions and identities” (104). In articulation, Pratt’s description of the linguistic situation discusses “writing and literacy in what [she] like[s] to call the contact zone. [Pratt] use[s] this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (“Arts” 34). In setting these two descriptions of the linguistic situation side by side, one discovers that Gledhill and Pratt share the belief that there is some sort of site or frontier or place of contact and tension, where some kind of linguo-cultural wrestling matches and power negotiations seem to occur. Respectively, Gledhill’s framework conveys the specific connection between language and culture as well as a variety of nuanced socio-political interactions—imposing, challenging, confirming, negotiating, displacing—and Pratt contributes the specific, academically salient terminology of the “contact zone” to anchor our signification of the tension.

Thus, while the two echo one another, Pratt has become the primary purveyor because her term has experienced greater exchange. Her own introduction and application comes through multiple works including “Arts of the Contact Zone” in 1991 and more recently “Harm’s Way: Language and the Contemporary Arts of War”
in 2009. In examining the application of Pratt’s contact zone to translingual practice, Canagarajah shares how “we find that her model perceives contact zone negotiations as conflictual and stressful” (*TR Practice* 30). Pratt pushes this sense of linguistic conflict further and more graphically when moving from her work in 1991 to 2009. In her earlier work, Pratt describes how “students experienced face-to-face the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility, of others” (“Arts” 39). Here, Pratt focuses on the “occasional…hostility” and shares also about the alternate “joys of the contact zone,” but fast-forwarding to 2009, Pratt grows much more aggressive in her assertions about language. In this later article, she opens up to stronger signifiers sharing how “language [acts] as an instrument of violence and a weapon of war” (“Harm’s Way” 1516); and further, Pratt juxtaposes her assertion with particularly graphic depictions of war-torn contact zones.

So whether one describes this situation in terms of a contested site, a contact zone, or by extrapolation a linguo-cultural combat zone; it seems clear that this model possesses a frontier space and some sort of tense interaction connected to linguistic or cultural moorings. To further contextualize this reflection, consider the following depiction of the frontier as described in the OED. The first entry for *frontier* shows up around 1400 A.D. and declares the etymological derivative as that of old French (OED). This derivative from the French actually illuminates the conflict of linguistic sites or frontiers quite well: such a connection becomes salient when one considers the French association of the word, *le front*, to a person’s forehead. The forehead has been and continues to be indicative / representative of that forward edge where
conflict occurs or where lines are drawn, in essence, where the geography of the body ends and interacts with the other, definitely paralleling Herderian thought (TR Practice 20). For this reason, professional pugilists are often said to be going head-to-head with their opponents, taking advantage of this historical reference of the forehead as a point of border contact and conflict. In this context, Pratt’s contact zone seems to equate to a boxing ring with multiple adversaries who “meet, clash, and grapple with each other.” In fact her choice to use the coordinating “and” here displays an in(tension)al parallelism. For Pratt, it appears that meeting can never be the final interaction: some clash is requisite.

Safe Houses, Havens, and Transience

One cannot just meet, come to know, and then grow together in this model because one must also clash and grapple. If this definition of the contact zone is to be upheld, the interaction must be combative despite Pratt’s inclusion of what she calls “safe houses” (“Arts” 40). Of course, safe houses are definitely positive things. Places for healing and rebuilding identity are absolutely necessary. As Pratt describes them, “safe houses” are “temporary…places of healing and mutual recognition” which are definitely beneficial (“Arts” 40), yet the implication from this set up leads to or emphasizes a desire to leave the contact zone and run to the refuge of the safe house—the less conflicted space which is only temporary in Pratt’s model. The very term ties back to the situation of slaves escaping the terrible conditions of the confederate south via the Underground Railroad. Were the majority of slaves content to find a safe house within this hostile environment, or were they intent upon reaching
the safe haven of the North? Now, I do not mean to overstate the life of a dark-skinned person in the North in the slavery or even post-slavery era: the mid-nineteenth century writing *Our Nig’* would definitely complicate such a mis-articulation of that situation. Nevertheless, I think honest scholarship leads us to acknowledge the significant difference in lifestyles available in each of these regions without negating the socio-political complexity of the situation. For this reason, it seems incongruent to make the primary visual for the new wineskin of the translingual approach a parallelism to the atrocities of American slavery—even if one can agree that linguistic situations often possess “asymmetrical relations of power” ("Arts" 34).

If one extrapolates this representation and applies it to ELL concepts, it is not a far step to see a parallel developing between the American academic community and southern plantation owners, is it? I would rather my students see me in a slightly more positive light than that which the contact zone seems to portray without feeling like I was required to also somehow be subversive to academia on a consistent basis—again not completely negating the complexity of the situation. Still, by taking this concept of the linguo-cultural frontier or contact zone and superimposing this model onto the translingual approach, the language user has very few avenues for avoiding conflict which only illuminates the inability of the contact zone to fully represent TR.

But if safe houses act as the primary means for relief, what happens when the language user cannot find an established safe house? Where in this situation does the
language-user abide in the contact zone model? Is the translingual relegated to hiding in a bush or under a bridge—living as an outcast, as a troll beneath? Even with its fairytale connotations, this troll bridge existence would explain Canagarajah’s assertion that “all spaces are contact zones” (TR Practice 26). Nevertheless, that image seems, at a minimum, moderately terrible, yet it emphasizes some of the highly politicized attitudes with which marginalized groups contend today. Gloria Anzaldúa, a chicana and feminist scholar/poet worthy of respect, would appear to confirm the struggle of “the outcast…pushed out of the tribe” (60). But, who builds a home on a bridge, or is the translingual without a home in this model? Does he or she become a “mestizo/a” of sorts and the bridge a “borderland,” to borrow from Anzaldúa’s terminology once more? Does the translingual stay transient and without linguistic residence, moving from temporal safe house to temporal safe house, or is a linguistic residence some sort of false construct from the outset? A misinterpretation of large-scale linguistic sedimentations?

These questions result from superimposing the contact zone representation onto a translingual approach, trying to get key aspects of the contested site to match or overlap with translingual practice. I do not feel the need to address all of these questions because, even if I may partially agree with Anzaldúa that “living on borders and in margins [to] keep…intact one’s shifting and multiple identity” can be positive (19), to live constantly in the conflict of the linguistic borderland only, without the possibility of a long-term reprieve, relegates the language user to unending linguistic conflict but not necessarily linguistic growth. Still, I do not intend to negate the
important political aspects of language which Gledhill, Pratt, and Anzaldúa describe, but perhaps a safe haven yet exists for the translingual beyond the contact zone.

**Qualifying the Contact Zone**

To be fair though, engaging in such environments seems to illuminate at least some of the linguistic difficulty of students who possess non-sedimented English experiences—those who would be struggling to overcome a more traditional view of the linguistic or cultural home and target derived from a (post)colonial perspective. Because of this qualification, I do agree that “teachers must allow discussions of oppression to become a part of language and literature instruction” (Delpit 501). These discussions invigorate and necessitate growth in students, writers, and language users in general. Nevertheless, “one reaction to teaching style in the contact zone is fear that it will keep students from wanting to learn the conventions of academic discourse” (Lu 316). These conventions, regularly described as standard written English (SWE), could be seen to embody the “oppressor’s language” which is why I often interchange SWE with *sedimented white (e)nglish* (Rich qtd. in hooks 167). This concern about teaching such conventions is partially understandable though because to characterize language as “the oppressor’s language” within the contact zone is to naturally set one’s self against that language: who is going to willingly apply the label “oppressor” to themselves? Consequently, one wrestles and contends with that language, but one cannot successfully subvert, or perhaps more positively put *reinvent*, what one is unaware of. After all, to borrow from Lu once more, “although the process of negotiation encourages students to struggle with such
unifying forces, it does not and cannot lead them to ignore and forget them” (316). In this manner, engaging in conversation about the power and structure of academic discourse as hegemonic stands to strengthen and empower students and writers.

Furthermore, engaging in such conversations allows us to move beyond not only the antiquated home-to-target model but also the tensions of linguistic slavery represented by the contact zone, to reconcile past and future into the present of a personal vernacular. As bell hooks shares,

using the vernacular means that translation into standard English may be needed if one wishes to reach a more inclusive audience. In the classroom, [she] encourage[s] students to use their first language and translate it so that they do not feel that seeking higher education will necessarily estrange them from that language and culture they know most intimately. (172)

Through hooks’ practice described above, her students can avoid some of the difficulty existent in the traditional home-to-target perspective because these students need to consider developing a broader literacy to accommodate “a more inclusive audience.” This broader literacy developed for inclusion cannot be completely explained by the contact zone model because, ultimately, “the point must not be to eliminate students’ home languages, but rather to add other voices and discourses to their repertoires” not by grappling with difference but by embracing the difference and finding commonality to create inclusion (Delpit 490). Contextualizing this idea, Pratt shares that “while subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates
from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for” (“Arts” 36). Interestingly, Pratt’s consideration here characterizes those subordinated peoples as possessing a smaller sphere of influence and unable to control the core of dominant culture whereas hooks and Delpit both give writers greater agency through the active use of an expanding personal vernacular.

Nevertheless, Canagarajah presents a mild criticism of Delpit for one implication of her view claiming that she and other “African American scholars…consider it their pedagogical mission to provide access to written language for minority students rather than changing the norms…in some ways…pit[ting] the claims of access against voice” (TR Practice 110). In partial agreement with Canagarajah, I would augment Delpit’s statement slightly because to “add other voices” comes through as more assimilative than generative in nature in spite of her greater representation of agency on the part of the student. In this way, I would qualify Delpit’s prior assertion by emphasizing not the addition of “other voices and discourses” but instead the development of new accents to the student’s voice and a greater understanding of rhetorical contexts.

This change from the addition of other voices to the development of new accents represents a key difference. In Delpit’s version, the student approximates the discourse of another at a contested site to insert him or herself into the new conversation, but in the augmented form, the student is becoming and changing, self-embodied in the new discourse. Perhaps more clearly put, in the augmented form, the
student is not ventriloquizing an added voice but instead learns how his or her own
writerly voice can flex and inflect to cause greater uptake in new contexts. But in
spite of the previous criticism, Delpit still affirms the belief that “discourses are not
static, but are shaped” (490). If this is the case, then perhaps the contact zone
structure above remains too rigid to accommodate the more dynamic nature of the
translingual approach. Going even further, Delpit suggests that “acquiring the ability
to function in a dominant discourse need not mean that one must reject one’s home
identity and values, for discourses are not static, but are shaped, however reluctantly,
by those who participate within them and by the form of their participation” (490).
So, despite the expression of a “home” identity—which remains unnecessarily
linear—from this suggestion, I surmise that somehow the language user expands to
encompass the new context which possesses some sort of delta factor that becomes
activated by the presence and activity of “those who participate,” and this
participation leads to a reshaping of the non-static discourse through the interaction of
the language user. Consequently, while the nature of the contact zone is to exhibit
change through the conflict, what these scholars are pointing to does not necessarily
require permanent tension: Rather, the method that hooks suggests actually alleviates
some of the initial tension through the use of an inclusive, expansive personal
vernacular.

The Consequence of Contact Zone (Hyper)tension

Still, let me unpack this thought then about the contact zone a little further
because by understanding the negative within this contrast the positive aspects of the
translingual approach should become more apparent. If scholars project a view of language as always contested or always in conflict, where language users exist always or only in borderlands, contact zones, or frontiers; they set up an endlessly combative linguistic existence. This sort of model for the linguistic situation remains incomplete, leading some to view language as always intensely political—which of course it can be, sometimes—but it is not always and not only that. One might say that scholars are attempting to utilize the contact zone as a master key for the entire linguistic enterprise, but it only fully functions for a few floors and not the whole building or linguistic structure. Once again, a model or paradigm develops that is beneficial but incomplete. This hyper-politicizing of the linguistic ideology could breed a negativity surrounding language that does not seem to coincide completely with the potential present within the translingual approach which “acknowledges the writer’s right and ability to experiment with innovative ways of deploying codes taught in the classroom” (Lu 316).

Additively, this idea of the contact zone as a linguistic paradigm fails to consider collaborative effort within linguistic interactions. To repeat and add to a previous consideration, “we find that [this] model perceives contact zone negotiations as conflictual and stressful. We are finding, however, that in many such spaces people also collaborate and help each other succeed in their interactions” (TR Practice 30). So while it is no easy thing to move beyond Gledhill, Pratt, or Anzaldúa’s assertions regarding the contact zone, my concern lies in the overemphasis or broad application of such conceptualizations to all linguistic
interaction—where all interlocution abides in these physically and ideologically violent contact zones, these contested sites of negotiation. To return briefly to Pratt’s 2009 work, the intense pathos connected with her graphic imagery while rhetorically effective for her article, I fear, may cause a sensationalist overemphasis on the political nature of language, leading to an incomplete or distorted interpretation of linguistic use and development by many scholars.

I am not challenging the veracity of the violent contact zone in many circumstances, but I might challenge its broad spectrum application represented by its significant scholastic presence. Because, rather than leading language users to enjoy the collaborative aspect of meaning-making, this view of language as always contested could easily create animosity toward linguistic growth or play on the part of the language user. Perhaps, this collaborative aspect is just one of those “patterns of interaction and communication that are yet to be theorized for contact zones” (TR Practice 26), or maybe it remains an indication of incompleteness in the concept similar to that observed regarding contrastive rhetoric.

Whatever the theoretical reasoning, if our students and writers are told that their languages and cultures will always only exist as sites of contestation at cultural frontiers or contact zones, they may choose to simply avoid the conflict of language use and, in so doing, miss out on the positive play of linguistic growth—this idea of translingual innovation. Instead, the translingual approach, while confirming a certain amount of contestation, also allows us to experiment with language, to enjoy the “freeplay of substitutions” across linguo-cultural sites (Derrida 923).
After all, very few individuals can stand constant conflict. People regularly seem to need moments of enjoyment to accent and often counterbalance conflict resolution. In personal relationships, extensive conflict regularly becomes motivation for dissolving a relationship. As unrelated to linguistic considerations as it may seem, the general desire of most people to avoid unending conflict finds support in quantifying studies of marital dissolution in America. According to the American Psychological Association “about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher” (“Divorce”). Adding to this information, 56% of respondents in a recent survey declared “too much arguing” as the reason for separating (Hoskins 3). Too much unresolved conflict can lead to a defeatist attitude leading to cessation from the interaction. Derivatively, within the contact zone model, language users may tire of the conflict and miss out on enjoying the freestyle of linguistic intercourse. This underrepresented aspect of language use/development/growth explains the growing introduction of Rogerian concepts into composition and rhetorical theory texts like Everything’s an Argument or Teaching Argument in the Composition Course.

Official / Public and Unofficial / Private

Nonetheless, this discrepancy between the model of the contact zone and collaborative interaction, that linguistic intercourse, may be at least partially understood by drawing on a dialectic set up by Martha J. Cutter in her 2009 text, Lost and Found in Translation. Cutter shares that

more and more individuals are “people of the gaps” who create from
their multilingualism and translations new forms of language and new ways of life…The tension between the official and the unofficial realms of language policy and usage animates many of the debates surrounding multilingualism in art, politics, and society, and…a zone of borderized, translated, transcoded, and transmigrated languages and ethnicities persists in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, this tension. (Cutter 218)

These two aspects of language, the official vs. unofficial, become beneficial as the official linguistic realms seem to line up more effectively with the classic tension of the contact zone. This official level of interlocution represents the visible spectrum of interaction among language users aligning with a public or large-group realm: whereas, the unofficial realm of language space exists in greater fluidity in the realm of individual relationships and the world of the personal because people interact more as individuals and perceive one another less as representative entities or stereotypic exemplifications of sedimented people groups in this unofficial realm.

By aligning official realms and larger community interactions with the contact zone, it is easier to understand how the blanket stereotyping of culture and language and specific parts of the social spectrum occur, how tensions develop at such contested sites which tend to negate perception of actual individuals. This official realm is where one sees struggles between people groups and dominant cultures or hegemonically influencing languages like SWE. Contrasting this aligned set, the unofficial, personal, and interactive matrix is more likely to see individuals use what
Canagarajah calls “translingual negotiation strategies” (TR Practice 76). Canagarajah dedicates an entire chapter of his text, Translingual Practice, to this topic of negotiation strategies to emphasize the positive mechanisms available but often overlooked in scholarship surrounding language learning. This unofficial realm allows users to focus on the individual relationship and work through or invent a unique, personalized, interactive linguistic form.

These seemingly dialectic elements are mirrored further in the common frustration of first-year writing students who regularly assert a desire to write in the way that they talk with their friends rather than approximate some forced academic voice. The official realm in this instance, that which is most in line with the contact zone, is the public sphere of the academic discourse, which again is rooted in a sedimented form of white English. In this common experience, the unofficial realm is the private environment of comfort where the student and his or her friends share overlapping language(s). In this situation, a student must either find a way to assimilate into the academic linguistic culture, which studies like Canagarajah’s “Safe Houses” or Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” have contextualized as highly problematic, or find a way to bring his or her personal linguistic repertoire to bear on academic themes—to flex or inflect a new academically accented vocalization.

**Crossing the Streams – Obama’s Combination of Realms**

According to Geneva Smitherman and H. Samy Alim, one interesting example of a combination of these two realms from Cutter comes in the form of President Obama. Describing one moment during an official realm political event, the authors
relay how “some African-American critics have strongly objected to Mr. Obama’s use in the public sphere of phrases deemed to be part of black private discourses” (2). This instance helps contextualize both the dichotomy and overlap between these two realms. The official realm in this moment gets characterized by the rhetorical situation—Obama’s political talk—and the unofficial realm by the flak, effectively reinforcing the definition of official as “public” discourse and unofficial as “private discourse.” This dichotomous attitude among “African-American critics” displays a desire to keep “black private discourses” out of “the public sphere” for the sake of protecting those discourses from being used for “a sort of linguistic pandering” for political gain, but this attitude could also stem from a desire to protect these discourses from subversion (Alim and Smitherman). But Obama’s use of these forms of “black private discourse” actually empowers that discourse making it more normative, he sets an example of blurring the constructed line between the official and unofficial realms of social and linguistic interaction. He effectively straddles the official and unofficial realms of language simultaneously, making the interaction more than simply a site of contact. Ultimately, assuming his rhetorical purpose in these moments were at least semi-virtuous, the President allows a part of his private cultural identity to blend into the linguistic contact zone of official, public sphere rhetoric.

Nevertheless, perhaps the critics feel that the publicizing of private black expression will open up to critique or to ridicule their language(s) and, by association, themselves. Accordingly, this concern may stem from similar sentiments shared by
Anzaldúa who reminds us that to “talk badly about [another’s] language” hurts the possessor of that language by illegitimating first the language and then the person (81). She continues this line of thinking in a very personal way by declaring, “I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate...all the...languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself” (81). Anzaldúa cannot accept herself because she feels the pressure of contact zone linguistics where the “languages” are segmented, fragmented and without cohesion, and yet in practice, she brings those languages into cohesion within herself; the language(s) are her language. Where her language overlaps with others she finds cohesion or sociocultural identity, but when her language fails to line up with others she feels incomplete. Yet, if one moves beyond borderlands and contact zones, beyond considerations of official and unofficial, one might discover that Anzaldúa’s possession of these languages, her (L)anguage, gives it the legitimacy she seeks. Yet to make this move, one must come to understand the nature of the translingual existence not as a linguistic contact zone but, instead, as embodied in a linguistic liminality that is both positively charged and playful.

Thus, the political climate connecting the cultural elements of language can have tense, conflicted, even dialectic implications, and many scholars have certainly illuminated in their respective works the highly politicized nature that can reside within language. However, at least in its maximum potential, the translingual approach does not create a troll bridge which sets the translingual in “a counterstance lock[ing] one into a duel” or duality between home and target, private or public,
unofficial or official (Anzaldua 100). And therefore, the concept of the contested site or contact zone, which helps to dismantle certain aspects of contrastive rhetoric, alternatively creates an unnecessary inhibition for the translingual approach because it produces conflictual sites created by a negatively constructed sense of difference. Because of this negative sense of difference, the contact zone model leaves the interlocutor either as a troll, a ventriloquist, or simply fragmented between sites, and yet, the translingual “approach sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or a problem to manage, but as a resource” in itself (“Opinion: Language Difference” 303).
Chapter 3 – The Translingual Approach as a Positive Linguistic Liminality

“We are led in the direction of celebrating liminality in general...as something positive” (Neumann 477).

At this point, the translingual approach has revealed itself as a paradigm capable of complexifying the linguistic situation when compared to CR and IR. Further, the translingual approach shows itself expansive enough to include the contact zone while also possessing the capability of going beyond the hyper-politicization and hyper-tension of that same concept—to the point of enhancing linguistic play in a positive way. Adding to these things, this final chapter reveals a model of liminality which enhances our understanding of the translingual approach. This positive linguistic liminality illuminates

- TR concepts as interconnective,
- TR concepts as continual development/growth, and
- TR concepts as permanently fluxing.

Ultimately, continuing the metaphor from Chapter 1, this positive linguistic liminality acts as “new wine for the new wineskin” of the translingual approach. New wine results naturally in rapid expansion, and the new wineskin flexes, constantly stretching those elements involved helping create a more enjoyable result. The old wineskins of CR, IR, and the contact zone may stay intact, but the translingual and the liminal combine to enhance greater growth and flexibility through the interaction. Despite mixing metaphors here, this need for expansion relates well to two kids playing football in the house: to maximize the enjoyment, they find it necessary to
change venues because the restrictions of the smaller space and the danger of damaging or dirtying the house are no longer issues when the game is taken out to a large backyard, nearby park, or dirt lot.

**Aspects of the Liminal**

As a place to begin understanding this expansive process of the liminal and its interaction with the translingual, the concept of liminality is most particularly effective for characterizing the nature of the translingual for at least three reasons.

- Liminality is connected to concepts of limits, borders, or thresholds (i.e. phrases like the outer limits, pushing the limits, overcoming limitations, etc.)
- Liminality connects to an anthropological transition—initially connected with a coming of age development, stepping over the threshold into adulthood, keying into aspects of growth and development.
- Liminality has a theoretical development connected to concepts of permanent flux and more-than-third-space existence, an existence straddling multiple others. Originally conceptualized in a temporal linear or binary, scholars have more recently imbued the term liminality with permanent and fluxing existence and dual or multiple belonging.

There may be more nuances which further accentuate the existence of the translingual, but these three aspects will be sufficient for the discussion at hand which ultimately hinges on understanding the potential that a translingual approach offers both pedagogically and in terms of linguistic existence. These concepts articulate with one another in a way that seems to create harmonic feedback to an empowering
level, shaking unnecessarily rigid linguistic moorings. Where the TR connects with the user, *liminal* connects with the context, yet both terms possess significant overlap in definition which creates mutual resonation.

**A Translingual Representation**

Moving forward, an expanded definition of translingual seems to be in order as well. As previously seen, a translingual mentality toward language creates a crossover which does not completely negate the borderland or the contact zone for language users; but instead, this paradigm “directly addresses the gap between” sites or zones (“Opinion: Language Difference” 305). This addressing of the gap helps us understand that the translingual approach speaks of an ever-present, concurrent enrollment in multiple sites. The translingual language user—being at once a participant in two sites as well as between sites—is not simply making contact with two worlds; she or he exists concurrently, concomitantly, within and throughout at least two realms and more often than not more than two—beyond a simple third-space sentience. This concurrence is exemplified in the signifying prefix *trans-* which according to the Oxford English Dictionary denotes meanings like “across,” “crossing,” or more interestingly “beyond” or “beyond boundary or frontier” (“trans-”). In a simplistic conceptualization, one might find this signifying prefix modeled as a crossing of borders or a movement through linguistic territory which is why the aforementioned contact zone remains prevalent in discussions surrounding translingual practice. More accurately though, the translingual writer exists “beyond boundar[ies]” and across platforms, sites, or zones—each representing a language or
linguo-cultural context—attempting to make meaning in each realm by using the resources of all. This thought will be detailed further momentarily, but for the moment, it suffices to say that, because the language user puts seemingly disconnected elements in articulation with one another, greater potential exists for enhanced signification and semiotic variety.

Adding to this idea, by examining a physical and historical application, one can also observe how *trans-* connotes more than a simple act of travelling from one point to another. To understand this complexity through one particularly tangible symbolism, one might consider the Trans-Continental Railroad (TCR). (While the TCR is significantly more culturally problematic when considering the impact on Native American tribes and Chinese immigrants and while I am not condoning the complete history, I do focus on a few positive metaphorical implications.) In a physical sense, the TCR exists as a single entity stretching deeply into disconnected states or territories. This entity abides in multiplicity, in plurality, no part more or less important to the composition of its being, its wholeness. A missing rail or spike anywhere along the track would hold equal potential for danger, damage, or a breaking/de-unifying of the whole. The spikes or rails or individual stations parallel linguo-cultural elements of a unique existence in a linguistic plurality: these pieces of the whole could equate to individual signifiers, rhetorical structures, semiotic resources, etc. Much like the complex existence of a translingual person, the Transcontinental exists concurrently in multiple sites and territories, beyond borderlands and across frontiers, with a multiple, equivocal, and equivalent
citizenship. One site on the railway is as equally valuable and vital to the transcontinental identity as any other site. Sacramento possesses as much importance as Salt Lake City: without either site, the Transcontinental could not identify itself as such. Perhaps, this metaphor explains Canagarajah’s description of the linguistic process as a “shuttling between diverse languages and modalities of communication” (“Shuttle” 177). This shuttling indicates the mental movement across borders—in, out, through, and between contact zones and their linguistic representations. To possess the ability to shuttle is to inaugurate a mechanism which facilitates resource sharing across sites in imaginative ways.

Yet, in this extended metaphor, the translingual writer is not just the traveling train but the entire railway—track, train, stations—whereas the discussion in the previous chapter, specifically the aspect of the safe house, depicts the language user solely as the vehicle that must do the traveling. Through this comparison of TR to TCR, one can realize that the term translingual possesses a greater mobility and sharing of resources because it models a more interactive relationship between languages for the individual language user. Instead of one language being defined by or contrasted with the other (as in the case of CR as mentioned in the first chapter), each language, register, or individual patois can be uniquely defined, idiosyncratic even, and yet mutually influencing the repertoire of the language user because of the connection within the language user—because the interlocutor becomes the unifying factor between, across, and among sites within the translingual approach (as discussed of Gloria Anzaldúa in Chapter 2). It becomes apparent that this
translingual way of thinking directs us to be more than dual citizens existing in these contested sites. This “approach…undo[es] such binaries” (Lu 307): the TCR did not belong to any particular state, localized territory, individual city, or single station because its very nature was to overlap and interconnect—existing within and beyond all elements of the track additively. Derivatively, the translingual approach leads us to position ourselves sometimes within contact zones and sometimes making connections beyond them and across them, often simultaneously.

**Translingual as Interconnective**

In fact, looking beyond the completed TCR structure, this railroad’s initial construction did not begin as one might expect—at a single point or center and working outward; instead, construction began at the outer limits of itself, the liminal horizons, then connections were made to create unity amidst a multiplicity of sites. Accenting this idea, Lu, Horner, Trimbur, and Royster share how “varieties of English and other languages…change boundaries and intermingle” (305). As translingual interlocutors attempt to make meaning, they share resources across sites leading to greater connectivity as the various elements “intermingle” through sharing that occurs as a byproduct of the liminal existence on the outer edges or limits of the translingual self. Because these linguistic elements are part of the translingual’s individual resources and because he or she sees them as unified within him/herself, greater potential exists for enhancing diverse uptake through the benefit of shared resources.

Pressing further, this unification occurs in instances where others may have
been socially conditioned or “disposed to recognize [certain linguistic elements] as belonging to disparate spheres” (Lu and Horner 600), but the translingual possesses the capability of bringing in a greater sharing of resources from not just the third space of the borderland but from a plurality of spaces and sites because “translinguals also see these resources as not owned by any one community or place…they are mobile” (TR Practice 181). Therefore, by shifting focus away from the possession of resources and redirecting to the benefit of sharing resources across boundaries, the translingual presents an almost osmotic interaction with language. Like water passing through a porous cell membrane which works to equalize both sides, the translingual linguistic mobility begins an act of equalization by sharing linguistic resources across permeable, socially-constructed borders—borders which ultimately represent hyper-taxonomized definitions.

Dovetailing and enhancing this aspect of the translingual which denounces socially constructed taxonomic (pre)dispositions, one scholar of the liminal shares how “liminality respects the fundamental polyvocality of the world, resisting instinctively the attempts to overtly unify political processes and subjects by forging them into a hierarchical order” (Mälksoo 483). Here, Mälksoo indicates how the liminal agent, in our discussion the translingual, “resists” the hyper-taxonomization of political subjects for the sake of falsely constructed unity: the translingual therefore counteracts this false taxonomy creating a truer unity than the contrived hierarchy above. However, borrowing the term unity could be problematic here. As Canagarajah shares in his chapter on dialogic cosmopolitanism
Cultures are different, and presumed similarities may have shades of difference that defy generalization. Furthermore, communities often accentuate their difference in inter-group relations for purposes of identity. Any effort to look for commonalities should take account of such performative acts of members who might distance themselves from others for strategic reasons...It is unwise to rely on commonalities or shared values to bring people together. More importantly, difference matters, and people are not prepared to sacrifice their difference for inter-group solidarity. (TR Practice 195)

In this light, the contrived unity I speak of could be comparable to the Rwandan difficulty of the Hutu’s and the Tutsi’s popularized in the film Hotel Rwanda. The truer unity that I suggest is that which is embodied within developing interactive relationships which allow for benefit from commonalities and differences, where the differences, once shared, might act as newly acquired commonalities. One might even call it an organically developed unity instead of a politically projected unity.

Consequently, these resources intermingle within the translingual. This aspect confirms what Canagarajah shares regarding the term translingual in comparison to others when he declares that “the term multilingual doesn’t accommodate the dynamic interactions between languages and communities envisioned by translingual” (TR Practice 7). The “dynamic interactions” within the language user lead to new combinations, and enhanced/nuanced meanings come to be: a flexible unity is created by the mobile sharing of resources. In the physical world, gold from
San Francisco finds value in the Great Plains, and the Texas longhorn changes how carne asada is cooked in California. Though the linguo-cultural benefits to translingual liminality represented by this model are just beginning to reveal themselves, it seems clear that a positive interconnectivity occurs across socially (mis)perceived sites through the presence of the translingual. The translingual presence allows for a greater sharing of resources which changes how language users interact and intermingle (For an example of how this would look in a classroom activity, see Appendix A). The translingual approach thus “foreground[s] the mutual interdependence of structure and language practices…shift[ing] attention to matters of agency—the ways in which individual language users fashion and refashion standardized conventions, subjectivity, the world, and their relations to others and the world” (Lu and Horner 591).

**Translingual as Continual Development/Growth**

Adding to this interconnectivity, the potential of the translingual approach also indicates an aspect of continual development or growth when articulated with definitions of liminality. Support exists for such an assertion within the history of *liminal* terminology as well as its current applications. The term, *liminal*, was originally placed within three categories “of a pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal phase” (Neumann 478). This focus evidences the central importance of the liminal stage because rather than creating separate terminology for the “pre-” and “post-” phases the relationship relies completely on the transitional, “liminal” phase. To clarify this argument, it would be as if—instead of referring to phases of life as
childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—I utilized terms like pre-adolescent, adolescent, and post-adolescent thereby placing the most significance on the adolescent phase.

It then follows that, by emphasizing the most significant term of *liminal*, this concept of liminality can be understood as the definer of the other two phases. Consequently, as previously mentioned, if one considers this liminality to contextualize a state of growth, to be post-liminal is to cease from growing, and in human terms, to cease from growing equates to atrophy or dying. And so, this lack of growth, lack of progressive development or movement, leads to a loss of momentum and then a reversal, an atrophying, and finally a “sedimentation” (Pennycook 47). After all, the logical conclusion or end-result of human atrophy or decay is death—a truly sedimented result. Similarly, when language users cease to push their own limits—shifting away from a state of growing and transitioning—they begin to decay to become embedded in linguistic sediment. In this situation, they are not interested in learning new words or semiotics or forms, only diminishing the rate of decay of that knowledge that is possessed already—a thought-process not unlike that present on A&E’s *Hoarders*. Along these lines, to be post-liminal is to turn from acquisition and advancement of new knowledge to an atrophic maintenance. Basically, the *post-*phase is an attempt to forestall death more than to actively live or grow. Adding further texturing, Dawn Skorcewski reveals how those who have become sedimented in a person’s mind, those shadows of the *post-* or “ghosts in [his/her] past” (103), end up haunting the person who still abides in a state of growth. Skorcewski brings up
the way that voices and attitudes of past instructors plague how new instructors and writers approach their own learning and writing. Thusly, language users can progress from a state of liminal growth to atrophy to decay and finally to haunting when interlocutors do not continue to push their own linguistic limits through perpetual liminality.

Combating such a progression, the translingual liminality provides “an antidote to essentialism, privileging becoming over being” (Neumann 476). After all, do instructors not regularly encourage writers to edit out a sense of being already? Many style manuals suggest that “forms of the verb be...lack vigor because they convey no action” (Hacker 3). _Be_ forms indicate stasis not growth or change, a sense of standing still or a suspension of forward motion, and these forms are often taught in tandem with passivity. Derivatively, the type of liminality that I describe here goes beyond the definition of the translingual as “separated from one social category and...suspended in an intermediate status before crossing over into another category” (Hopps et al 14). Translingual liminality represents not only a between-state related to a contact zone or borderland, but it once again indicates a certain element of growth or change. Those who abide in liminal spaces are not static or being suspended but are becoming, changing, growing, and pushing the limits of themselves. To live in this liminality is to regularly press on one’s own linguistic threshold embracing moments of linguistic vitality with celebration and enacting moments of linguistic invention vigorously.

Even the fact that some interlocutors still struggle with hegemonic issues or
exist at least in a partially marginalized state cannot negate the end result of growth in these individuals. (In fact, Canagarajah’s study defies his “expectations [because] almost all the informants took issue with the word ‘tension’ in the interview questions…they themselves were proud that they could negotiate…changing norms effectively for intelligibility and professional success” despite being in what many would consider a marginalized position (*TR Practice* 160).) The growth in these individuals occurs because these situations keep the language user molten, moldable. Yet, at the same time, liminality, while often politicized, is not limited to the political and, therefore, is superior to a contact zone or borderland in that sense. Further, by leading language users—in the composition classroom, writers and students—into a mentality of permanent liminality, instructors encourage them to not simply be aware of hegemonic structures but to see their position as in between, as “address[ing] the gaps,” or more appropriately as crossing over worlds and languages—to be active and growing: To put the situation simply, it encourages language users to be “both here and there” (Cunningham 34). And more than both here and there, the liminal translingual is concurrently here, there, and present at points between and beyond the representative here and there. Those who embrace the translingual liminality of linguistic experience may always reside across or straddle various sites or zones, but this residency will be as an agent of change or growth. Resultantly, the translingual is capable of, as bell hooks describes it, “rema[king]… language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination” (170).
Translingual as a State of Permanent Flux

Inasmuch as translingual practice dovetails with the aspect of liminal ever-growth, one can also surmise that a perpetual state of development leads to a permanent state of linguistic flux. Some scholars go so far as to say that “there are no stable societies... With everything in flux, [the] scheme of a pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal phase collapses, and the possibility of perpetual liminality opens up before us” (Neumann 478). This state of affairs takes the aspect of linguistic growth beyond a simple linear progression to a fluxed ebbing, peaking, and troughing; which is not to say that there are no duplicated or examinable linguistic patterns, but it is simply to acknowledge that the number of aspects influencing a writer’s rhetorical choices becomes immensely complex—making analysis that much more difficult. As Lu and Horner share, “a translingual perspective requires that we treat writers’ expertise and attachment to any language, dominant or peripheralized, as emergent rather than fixed, and that we do so in light of the emergent character of the contexts of their lives and work” (600). Not only must scholars be aware of existing patterns in this state of permanent liminal flux, but scholars must also consider the various elements as they might be re-articulated, re-invented, and re-contextualized in the mind of the interlocutor.

What is being found then is that the more one embraces the true complexity of the linguistic situation the further one moves from a temporary or short phase of transition. Instead, it is tempting to shift toward a conceptualization of liminality as connecting to an ever moving threshold, as that of a door one never quite reaches or a
finish line that one never quite crosses. And so, “temporality has been moved from being interstitial to being permanent, in which case liminality becomes indefinite” (Neumann 475). Yet, to deter the negative implications connected with the indefiniteness of never crossing, I would augment this idea further by saying it is not that a state of permanent flux never sees victory or completion or the satisfaction of accomplishment. On the contrary, in this state of liminal permanence, the language user actually crosses the threshold or finish line constantly—with each new linguistic acquisition and successful interaction. Through this re-conceptualization, one comes to know more and more why “translinguals are open to the possibility of emergent grammar and new indexicalities” (TR Practice 181): this permanently liminal existence receives manifold self-affirmation with each interaction and emergent discovery.

**Ramifications for the Discipline**

Through these elements, the translingual liminality facilitates a permanent linguistic flux for both the individual interlocutor as well as the entire field of composition: as Mälksoo reminds us, “the concept of liminality enables…a discipline to seek active intellectual exchange and build mutually beneficial channels for the transfer of knowledge” (483). As a result, the fluxing linguo-cultural existence of the individual helps open channels for greater linguistic intercourse as “it questions the urge for static crystallizations” (481). One key element in this situation, discovered previously in the section on development, comes from this attitude of actively seeking to experiment with language, to find new ways of facilitating linguo-cultural
exchange. These experiments lead to emergent language, fresh language if one may, and this intrinsically playful translingual practice which leads to emergent language is not unlike what Victor Shklovsky describes as “impacting the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” breaking through that “habitualization [which] devours” (778). The translingual can therefore cause a new sense of knowing by breaking the known “static crystallizations” of a field of study stuck in “habitualization.” Finally, this re-learning and re-knowing, this refreshed sense of knowing, is a by-product—as opposed to a forced artistic technique—of the translingual’s emergent linguistic constructions, and these become available as resources for both the interlocutor and the field of composition through the permanent linguistic flux of a translingual liminality.

For this reason, it should not surprise the academic community that the translingual approach has at least partially developed from the discourse community focused on second language (2L) composition. As Matsuda shares in his article “Second Language Writing in the 20th Century,” “the field of second-language writing…has…become an interdisciplinary field of inquiry” (32). The field of 2L writing, in its very nature, mirrors this new complex approach to seeing language and instructing students. 2L writing itself connects multiple topics which may be perceived as disparate and sometimes even seemingly conflicting, from composition to socio-linguistics, combining scholarship in an intensely effective bricolage which is trans-disciplinary. Thus, instructors most capable of understanding a liminal linguistic existence find themselves teaching those who reside in a liminal learning
environment. The field has realized a pedagogic approach and linguistic existence that turns instructors’ felt-experiences of academic marginality, of inhabiting the liminal spaces of academia, into powerful positive processes for enhancing students’ education.

Building on this idea, it is actually fairly difficult to imagine a field which would be capable of understanding this idea of academic marginality/liminality more than those in the field of composition and the subfield of 2L/developmental writing. Borrowing significantly in this moment from the thinking of Theresa Enos who shared that “women comprise the majority in rhetoric and composition [to the point that] the field is often called a ‘feminized field’” (558), through progressively deeper comparative inferences, one can see that the field of composition rests quite far from the privileged circles of the academic world: math/natural sciences vs. the humanities, social sciences vs. arts, literature vs. writing, rhetoric vs. composition, composition vs. 2L/developmental writing. And whether instructors in this field understand liminality for linguistic, academic, or gendered reasons, the unique liminal and trans-disciplinary experiences of 2L writing instructors clearly appears to have influenced the development of the neologism translingual in a significant way.

In fact, no later than 1989, this translingual phenomenon was being inferred from research performed on instructor responses to non-native speaker writing. Robert Land and Catherine Whitley suggest that “because ESL readers seem to find organization in ESL texts—texts that native speaking readers judge to be poorly organized—perhaps they have a wider and more varied...reading experience” (334),
and this experience allows instructors to discover more effective methodologies for enhancing the educational experiences of their students. So, the translingual approach was brought forth from a field of study that intrinsically understands the challenges of living both across and between contested sites.

**Concluding/Inaugurating Words**

Thus, while many have tried to establish a paradigm for approaching ELL concepts in the composition classroom, the translingual approach has multiple immediate elements that give it superior currency and salience, not only over the more traditional concept of contrastive rhetoric but also over other terminology being introduced. Further, the translingual approach sets up a powerful and beneficial interconnectivity between linguocultural sites and zones. This interconnectivity can best be described as a state of permanent and positive liminality made possible by the translingual approach. In the end (or perhaps from the beginning), a translingual approach creates the potential for a positive linguistic liminality (creating a safe haven and not just a safe house) which allows language users to go beyond the linguistic contact zone, beyond the borderland, to a concurrent enrollment in multiple sites across multiple frontiers while facilitating constant growth through a permanently fluxing existence.
This activity can be effective as a linguocultural ice breaker earlier in the semester to expand students thinking surrounding cultural and linguistic resources. It might also be effective in preparing students for working with peers as they learn to take advantage of alternative resources or perspectives. I use the activity in the context of a first-year writing classroom, but it can be applicable to intercultural communication courses or environments. One could even use this activity in the business world as a team building exercise.

**Outline of Assignment**

- Prompt students to “Record every color word/descriptor that you know on a blank sheet of paper.”

- After students have expended their immediate possibilities, ask for a few students to read what they recorded. From my experience, students will only write (E)nglish color words. At which point, the instructor can ask something like, “Do you know any other language(s)? Write EVERY color word you know?”

- If one or two students did incorporate words that most would consider to be from another sedimented (L)anguage, ask the other students in the class how this example opens up their own lexical lists.

- At this point, some students may think along the lines of direct translation (Pink = Rosa, Red = Rouge, etc.). This could open up a larger discussion about whether students see these colors as possessing the same texture or not. i.e. Do “pink lips” convey the same image as “rosa lips” or “lips the color rosa”?  

- Have four to six volunteers copy their lists onto the chalk/whiteboard.

- Ask students to look for similarities and differences and discuss.

- Finally, have students (free)write for a few minutes on the implications of these similarities and differences. The instructor then could possibly ask whether these similarities or differences are beneficial or problematic. Does
the individual student find all colors publicly recorded as legitimate signifiers/descriptors/words?

- Come back together as a class and have students share their perspectives.

**Detailed Description and Reasoning for the Assignment**

An instructor asks students to examine their own individual lexicons by focusing on a seemingly elementary topic—color. I like to use color because it is such a common topic, and the general population seems to take it for granted. Further, I use this commonplace because students can work with subject matter that all have a base level of knowledge in. I use the basic content to convey the complex principle. Further, students often take for granted the power of choosing one color over another. So, the instructor asks students to create a list of every color that each student can come up with. At the instructor’s discretion, students could either work in silence without sharing until the instructor recombines the class or take liberty to discuss with neighbors if necessary—sometimes these interactive conversations can display the rich possibilities of interpretation. I have heard students ask questions about hyphenated colors and discuss with one another what criteria count for the activity.

Inevitably the students focus primarily on sedimented (E)nglish colors. At which point, the instructor gives further instruction to continue listing *EVERY COLOR* in every language or representation that they can think of. The purpose is to help students realize the breadth of their linguistic resources in this single, partitioned section of their lexicons. Interestingly, I have seen many students create some sort of
partition on the page—skipping space, drawing a line, starting a new column—before starting the next list. Students seem to consistently break (E)nglish words and (S)panish or (F)rench words into two separated areas on the page visually, instead of viewing these linguistic resources as unified initially. Further, by pushing students to the boundaries of themselves in this one area, the instructor gives them the opportunity to do so in other areas. Students can begin to see the various possibilities that they possess not only on a signifying/vocabulary level but also on a syntactic, semiotic, and rhetorical level.

Then the next step is to have students compare one another’s repertoires, looking for differences and commonalities. Now, to begin comparing students’ repertoires in the color sector of the students’ lexicons, multiple students can begin copying their individual lists into the more public space of a chalk/white board. As students lists immerge into the public sphere, the instructor can work through discussions of overlapping elements or unique resources that have now been shared in the common space. Students may vocalize various values toward language or their interpretation of the assignment to rationalize or justify the sparse or expansive nature of their own lists. Comments like, “Oh, I didn’t know that was okay,” or “I put this word because I thought…” act to open up discussion about what should count as a linguistic resource and criteria for its effective use. These discussions may lead to deep rooted socio-cultural assumptions, or they could inspire students to be more open to innovative linguistic practices, possibly both at the same time.

As a final step, students could (free)write, reflecting on the activity and its
possible repercussions. Instructors could even scaffold this activity with a larger reflective essay: possibly on innovative linguistic practices in the media, in their homes, in work environments, etc. Ultimately, by allowing students resources to be displayed publicly shared and discussed, students become more aware of options that exist beyond their own. This process begins to breakdown assumptions about what is acceptable, what counts as a linguistic resource. Students can begin to understand how all their life experiences and linguistic resources can be brought into and enhance their writings.
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