

Forum on Writing at the University

Edited by Amit Baishya

Amit R. Baishya: Getting on with it?: Practices of Writing at the University

In our call for papers for this forum, “Writing at the University,” we asked for “practice-based essays” that provoke “reflection about what we do and why.” Our interest was especially on *practices of writing* in the classroom and beyond. In putting together the forum, we thought of “practices” here in Michel de Certeau’s sense of an art or “way of making” that brings into play “a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination that cannot be dissociated from an art of using” (xv).

It is important to note that our focus is on *practices* of writing (in the plural) rather than the practice of writing (in the singular). Our focus on practices is intended as a response to the narrowly defined practice of writing that cultural critic Stanley Fish champions for composition classes in his three articles in *The New York Times*. Fish argues that writing pedagogy should privilege form over content; in learning how to write, he says, “it’s not the thought that counts” (“What Should, Part 2”). While Fish’s arguments emerge from his experiences of teaching and observing the teaching of writing in the composition classroom, the implications and scope of his argument are larger than the question of writing in the composition classroom alone. His arguments rest on two basic premises. First, Fish argues for the establishment of a “coherent core curriculum” that possesses the potential of fostering a common dialogue between faculty and students across the campus. Central to this core curriculum is a “writing course that teaches writing and not everything under the sun” (“What Should”). This premise of what a core course in a university cur-
Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 12/13 (Spring & Fall 2010)
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riculum ought to be provides the ballast for an attack on Fish's main target—what he calls the “facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism” (“What Should,” Part 3). Fish takes issue with the line of thought that claims that the “correctness” of linguistic forms is a “matter of power not right,” and argues instead that while the standard language may be a means to preserve the status quo:

That very truth is a reason for teaching it to students who are being prepared for entry into the world as it now is rather than the world as it might be in some utopian imagination—all dialects equal, all habit of speech and writing equally rewarded. (“What Should, Part 3”)

Fish defends the strengths of his pedagogic methodology through an analogy culled from the teaching of a “second” language. Imagining a hypothetical scenario where a student “infected” by the “facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism” protests that s/he has the right to her/his own language, Fish suggests a teacher should respond: ““Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I’m here to teach you another one.” (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it” (“What Should, Part 3”).

Fish's articles raise important questions about how we perceive our roles as practitioners and teachers of writing in the academy. Do we view “languages” as enclosed molds as he does? Do we heed his “realist” injunction of simply getting “on with it,” and envisage the university as a microcosm of the disciplinary space that is the world “outside”? Even if we agree with the proposition that the university is a preparatory space for the world outside, does it mean that students have to abandon the “worlds” they come from totally? I agree that the utopian imaginary of “soft multiculturalism” where every form of speech and dialect are given equal status is an idealistic pipedream; existing hierarchies of power and disciplinary institutions produce certain languages as more equal than others. But to argue from there that the university *should be* envisaged as a space where students are simply “prepared for the world as it now is” does not take a crucial condition into account. The university is not the equivalent of a factory-like space whose sole function is to “prepare” unformed *tabula rasas* for the world outside. Students bring their prior “worlds” into the university space. These “worlds” negotiate with the disciplinary protocols of institutionalized forms of writing. Viewed from the other angle—that of the teacher of writing—the practice of teaching writing too is a constant dialogue between disciplinary protocols and the “worlds” that students bring with them into the space of the university. Think here of the widely used injunction employed in writing classes, cutting across disciplines, that students have to find and cultivate their own “voice.” The cultivation of “voice” cannot arise through an exclusive attention to form alone; thought and content engage in a dialogical relationship with form. This process is a tremendous un/learning experience not only for students, but also for teachers.

Since Fish uses an analogy from second language acquisition, let me illustrate my point through an example from another linguistic domain: that of translation. Translation is not simply an act of transfer from one language to another. A good

translation functions as an interface between two (or more) languages. In a discussion of the translations of works of philosophy, Jonathan Rée argues, “Thinking only becomes philosophical when familiar words grow strange” (252). Serious philosophical writing, he says, is recognizable if it reads “like a translation already” (253). But this point about translation is not limited to translations of philosophical works alone. As theorists of translation like Lawrence Venuti have argued, a translator can either “domesticate” works from other languages which provide “readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” or “foreignize” the translation, which entails “maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal linguistic [...] values at home” (15, 148). The point where both Rée and Venuti’s arguments converge is that this act of interlingual transference (the “good” translation) is an invitation for *unlearning* the naturalized presuppositions of the receiving culture/language. Such dialogical encounters are not reducible to the “facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism”; rather, they serve as an invitation to forge the tools for a “common conversation” that does not fetishize difference, but does not subsume plurality under the sign of unity either. Spaces where “languages” come into contact—such as a translation *and* a writing classroom among others—function as sites where subjects can simultaneously learn and unlearn from each other. Fish’s analogy of the teaching of a second language envisages the space of a writing classroom as a point of convergence between multiple languages as well. But by viewing “languages” as enclosed molds—as he says, “I am not here to take that language from you; I’m here to teach you another one. [...] And then get on with it”—the pedagogic strategy he enunciates in his articles forecloses possibilities of productive dialogue between the prior “worlds” of students and the different worlds they encounter within the space of the university.

The focus on *practices* of writing in our forum constitutes an attempt to explore the potentials and possibilities of such dialogic spaces. In spite of the widely divergent points of view of the writers included in our forum, if I were asked to use a term that signifies a common thread binding them all, then I would go for “communication.” Communication implies a dialogical interplay of different points of view. More importantly, practices of communication in spaces where languages come into contact, like the classroom, initiate processes of learning and unlearning simultaneously. Simply getting “on with it” in the monolingual way that Fish advocates, stymies the communicative process that is the heart and soul of any practice that we employ in dialogic spaces.

Works Cited

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Vershawn Ashanti Young: Should Writer's Use They Own English?

What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like? [...] First, you must clear your mind of [the following...]: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style."
 --Stanley Fish, "What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3."

Cultural critic Stanley Fish come talkin bout—in his three-piece *New York Times* "What Should Colleges Teach?" suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should "clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world" ("Part 3"). He say dont no student have a rite to they own language if that language make them "vulnerable to prejudice"; that "it may be true that the standard language is [...] a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students" (Fish "Part 3").

Lord, lord, lord! Where do I begin, cuz this man sho tryin to take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan be talkin explicitly bout language differences. The two be intertwined. Used to be a time when a black person could get hanged from the nearest tree just cuz they be black. And they fingers and heads (double entendre intended) get chopped off sometimes. Stanley Fish say he be appalled at blatant prejudice, and get even madder at prejudice exhibited by those who claim it dont happen no mo (Fish "Henry Louis Gates"). And it do happen—as he know—when folks dont get no jobs or get fired or whatever cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Applachian accent or sound like whatever aint the status quo. And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come saying that people make theyselves targets for racism if and when they dont write and speak like he do.

But dont nobody's language, dialect, or style make them "vulnerable to prejudice." It's ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people's language. Like the way some view, say, black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language, like what Fish expressed in his *NYT* blog, that make it so.