College Composition and Postmodern Subjects

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Introduction
As a teacher of English Composition, I find questions of identity to be fundamental to writing pedagogy in higher education, though issues of identity are rarely addressed in the college classroom. Postmodern notions of subjects-in-relation and identity as compendiums of constructions-in-flux is an agreeable frame for identity in my writing classroom; especially as discussed by Lester Faigley in his work - *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. To demonstrate my concerns with identity and the ways in which identity are configured in the writing process, I will be examining writing pedagogy through my own encounter (as an instructor) with an American textbook for college composition titled *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (fifth edition.) Subsequently, I will be discussing my assignments in the composition classroom and the ways in which my students articulate issues of identity in their own writing.

Aporia and the Postmodern Subject
The decentering of author and audience as occasioned by poststructuralist and postmodern theory has enabled a revisioning of the self as a compendium of subjects, where each subject position entails a constructed relation with a corresponding audience. Prior to postmodern interpretive practice, post-enlightenment thought consisted in the notion that the subject (as constructed in writing) can be visible only within a larger, coherent socio-cultural matrix where visibility presents a “rational, coherent, unitary individual” (Faigley 153). Postmodern theory, on the other hand “understands subjectivity as heterogeneous and constantly in flux” (237). The question of agency (an important one for feminists) is not a question of positing a unified awareness but of articulating the positioning of a subject among a series of relations wherein one must consider the ethical implications established through these series of linkages.

In Faigley’s terms, detecting differences at the site of these linkages requires a momentary delay, and as a result, is a site for the possibility of an infinite array of actions and an infinite set of possibilities for the positioning of the subject. It is only through the next phase, or the next phrase, that the beholder will position themselves, however provisionally, during their encounters with boundaries of difference among competing discourses through which the beholder must ceaselessly negotiate. To my way of thinking, it is this delay that constitutes a creative opportunity for dynamic reflection, however momentary. Because this delay requires a suspension of judgment, the beholder is offered an opportunity to think through the self and – at its best - to encounter an opportunity to participate in self-conscious and potentially revelatory practice. Through one’s attention to their own subject position in relation to bodies of knowledge, the subject - as constructed in postmodern thought - is not longer rooted at the site of body-as-object, but ceaselessly constructs itself as an embodied subject at the site of being-in-relation.

What this aporic vision of a compendium of subjects entails is the apprehension of a subject position through which one recognizes a decentering from the post-enlightenment position of a cool, rational, coherent subject to a postmodern position where the subject is no longer ‘above the fray’ and no longer detached in a state of rational coherency articulated through a politics of mastery. I would
argue that this postmodern position is congruent with a lived experience wherein the postmodern subject eschews emotional distance and finds her/himself always already in a position of intimate relation vis-à-vis discursive bodies of knowledge as well as the bodies of those living around them.

Given an awareness that “every rhetorical system is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known,” I will first examine the notion of a subject as constructed in a popular college composition text used in North American college composition classes (Berlin 4). I will then compare this subject construction with the postmodern site of radical subjectivity that I encountered in my classroom in the context of a university in the upper Midwest of America in the early 21st century. I would like to argue that the practice of writing – when the writer/beholder is constituted and cultivated through a postmodern framework - has the potential to tear one’s self “away from any identity (including one’s own) in order to accomplish subjective fulfillment” (Kitlinski).

Subjecting to Saint Martin

*St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* is arguably one of the most popular college teaching texts for composition courses in the college classroom in America and, as such, is well suited to my inquiry. Immediately and without opening the text, I am struck by the cover of the book on which the words “the Guide” are inscribed in two inch white letters on a white background.

The shading of the type leads the viewer to see the words “the Guide” as hovering over the surface of the picture plane. The effect of encountering what appears to be both ethereal and didactic is further enhanced by the words “The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing” which appear in black half-inch type to the right. Whoever Saint Martin is, it is clear that the “Guide” is indeed “St. Martin’s,” and the ideological force of the hagiographical associations between this book and a book in the possession of a canonized saint (the Bible?) sets up a potent chain of signification. This potent string is perhaps further emphasized by the choice of rhetoric – a choice which instantiates the tenets of a Judeo-Christian framework in which ‘logos’ is construed as God-given and of such complex/mythical proportions as to require a “Guide.”

This book is hardcover and heavy. On skimming through these pages I wonder how students can position themselves in the midst of this discourse. So much time and space is devoted to how to write, when to write, why to write and what to write; that the cacophony is deafening and I find, intimidating. It is all so very impressive. Makes me feel proud to be a composition instructor. Makes me feel like I have something to say. Or that the book has something to say and therefore, if I use this book, I as a teacher will have something to teach. If the student has anything to say at all (and they will, this is my job) their discourse will be policed and positioned within the discourse of this tome; a tome that – on many levels – approaches biblical proportions.

My reading of the introduction encourages me that this text is not just talk (what’s wrong with talk in a college classroom?) and that the text is a means of offering “practical, flexible guides that escort students through the entire process, from invention through revision and self-evaluation” (xxvi), as students will “imagine their prospective readers, set goals, and write and revise their drafts” (xxvii). The notion of passive, feminized (i.e. without power) students who “imagine,” and who are “escorted” through a process of self-knowledge by the paternal figure of a guide is perhaps flattering for an instructor. I, however, am
uncomfortable with this subject position with which I will be complicit if I use this text in my classroom. The ideas signified by the notion of an “escort” reinscribes Faigley’s accusations that The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing prescribes for both text and writing instructor a stance for “cool rationality” and “emotional distance” in writing (158). At the same time, the instructor who is constructed as guide also operates at some other, perhaps transcendent level far removed from that of the naïve, feminized (earthbound) student writer subject presented in this text. The teleological emphasis inherent in the authors’ description of the writing process is also deeply disturbing to me. The words “guide,” “escort,” “process” and “goal” all contribute to the framework of a teleology that presupposes an end, and all progress is assessed from the point of view of that ending, an ending which is already constructed before the writer has even begun to write. Faigley would point out that this notion of an ending, as constructed and imposed from within the text “aspires to stand above the social formation in order to erect overarching explanations” (145).

In addition, the introduction tells me that this text will have the students write for a “prospective reader.” The question then becomes, who are the prospective readers? Are these readers other students? Teachers? Parents? Lovers? Graduate students? From what position in this indeterminate relation will these college students be writing? As a female American living in the 21st century, the position from which I will be writing (whether in a classroom or otherwise) is never determined. Am I writing from the position of Barbara Sheffield Morrison (legal maiden name)? Of バーバラ・モリソン (Japanese name in Katakana)? Of Dr. Barbara S. Morrison? Of 馬原森尊 (Japanese name in Kanji), of Mrs. Barbara Morrison Missiras (legal married name)? bsm (artist name in English) or 森 (artist name in Japanese)? Or Seie (Buddhist name)? For each student of writing there may be as many subject positions, and for each subject position there is a constructed relation in which there is a corresponding audience. Faigley maintains that The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing has already determined the student’s name; that is, the position of each student who attempts to inhabit this text as one of countless, anonymous “docile bodies,” - as feminized vessels whose desires will be perpetually forestalled by the writing instructor whom The St. Martin’s Guide constructs as an asexualized, heterosexual male who is imaged as “guide” in the religio-cultural matrix of a Western, Christian, capitalist society (156).

In order to compare the student subject generated by the writing sanctioned in The St. Martin’s Guide with the student subject I encountered through my assignments in the writing classroom, I chose to look at Chapter 8, “Justifying an Evaluation,” as this portion of the Guide appears closest in intent to my own inquiry into evaluation. In seeking to compare these subject constructions I want to highlight my own practices as a composition instructor, to learn something about my writing instruction, and to explore the ways in which students construct their own subjectivities in the writing process.

Writing Subjects

One assignment that I have worked on with my composition students is found in Ways of Reading regarding an essay by John Berger titled “Ways of Seeing.” I asked my students to write a final paper as follows:

Over the past few weeks you have written four essays on seeing and engaging with art. In your first essay you engaged with a reproduction, in the second you engaged with a piece of art that had been held in your family over time, and in the third essay you again engaged with an original piece of art, but this time in the context of a museum. Then, in this latest essay, you wrote about how one can compare engaging with art to engaging with a particular text.

For this paper I want you to collect these essays and reread them with a critical eye. Write an essay in which you discuss what you have learned through these various exercises. Compare your
findings from each essay to one another and ask yourself questions about your process of engagement; i.e. the fact that an original was in the museum – did this affect your engagement in a positive way? Negative? Was it more fruitful to engage with a reproduction than with a piece of art in your home? Use your conclusions to speak back to Berger’s essay. In your essay let the reader see if your explorations have or have not confirmed what you take to be Berger’s expectations for engaging with art.

In the assignment noted above I am asking students to evaluate their own processes of engagement on a multitude of levels, in the first place with art – both in terms of the plastic arts as well as in terms of reading Berger’s writing on the page, as well as in terms of an engagement on the part of the students with an evaluation of their own past writing assignments in the context of the course. St. Martin’s Guide outlines the reasons why students may be called upon to make an evaluation, citing the subject position vis-à-vis a culture in which the writer is determined to be a student, a scientist, a teacher/academic and/or a business manager. According to St. Martin’s Guide, the writer’s “success at these important writing tasks may in some measure determine whether you advance in your career” (292). Good writing, for St. Martin’s entails a return on investment; a return in which “success” is measured by advancement through a corporate body. Writing and the subject constructed in writing are only recognized by St. Martin’s Guide when that subject is itself visible within a larger socio-cultural matrix. To be visible is to be coherent, and to be present in discursive practice is to be a “rational, coherent, and unitary individual” (Faigley 153).

In the face of St. Martin’s construction of a coherent, rational student subject, the subject presented in the following student paragraph is a protean substance of subjecthood whose chameleon character changes and adapts with each and every situation. In response to the assignment given above the following is the first paragraph from a student’s essay:

The saying, “Communication is a two-way street,” is a common one, meaning, basically, that communication is reciprocal. Both sides must give as much as they take to get the most out of it. The same is true with any work of art. A viewer of art cannot simply stare at a piece and hope to see it for all it is. In order to get the most out of art you have to converse with it, and this conversation is affected by many things, including how and where the piece is presented, the viewers familiarity with a piece, and what experiences and expectations the viewer brings with them.

An instructor, ascribing to the tenets of St. Martin’s Guide, would find the student subject posited in this paragraph to be no subject at all. That the protean self in a constant state of flux is not “visible” to a corporate body seeking to commodify subjects into neatly packaged, self contained units. Saint Martin himself might levy charges against the subject posited in this piece of writing as a ‘shape-shifting Satan’ which can and must be exorcised from the text and from the writing process as a whole. Indeed, it would appear that the “goal” and the “end” of the writing process according to St. Martin’s is to banish this subject from the kingdom.

Yet “postmodern theory understands subjectivity as heterogeneous and constantly in flux” (227). The question of agency is one which the student writer above has tackled head on, locating him/herself amidst a series of relations which must be taken into account, and indicative that our “students, at least, are more aware of how agency can be constructed from multiple subject positions” than the pedagogues involved in the St. Martin’s project (224). Each linkage that the writer above has articulated, whether between expectations and experiences or between art and its context, posits a subject who must consider “the implications of their linkages” (238). It is this ‘delay’ made visible in the student writing above that threatens the unitary nature of the subject according to
the gospel of The Guide.

The following is the first paragraph of another essay generated in response to the same assignment:

John Berger seems to think that the art of today is completely different from the art of yesterday. The art of today has been preserved, mystified, and its uniqueness destroyed, all by the camera. Berger certainly gives a convincing argument to support his ideas and yet, it seems that that really isn’t the purpose of his essay. Whether or not you agree with his views and ideas is almost irrelevant to the true meaning of the essay. Berger seems to welcome you to stand up and challenge him. He wants you to confront his views, to look him in the face and question his stance. He draws you into criticizing him, and then...he has you. As soon as you do this the essay has accomplished its purpose. It has caused you to approach art and reproductions in a different light. Even if you distain his ideas of “bogus religiosity” and “cultural mystification” they will be forever present in your thoughts when engaging art. As Berger says, “By refusing to enter a conspiracy, one remains innocent of that conspiracy. But to remain innocent may also be to remain ignorant” (125). After reading and engaging Berger one can claim to be neither innocent nor ignorant. Berger has drawn you into the conspiracy. Your ways of seeing have been forever changed.

The subject position of this student is one constituted through the recognition of a decentering from the position of cool, rational, coherent subject to the position of a postmodern subject. This subject is no longer above the fray, and is no longer detached in a state of rational coherency. While the writer is still concerned with “true meaning,” s/he notes the irrelevance of taking up a coherent subject position. Consequently, the tone of the writing is more emotional and personal; e.g. “he has you,” as if the subject-making process is happening on the page in a graphic struggle. As a reader, I respond to the immediacy of this prose, whereas I tend to become bored with the antiseptic prose generated by the cool detachment of a St. Martin’s subject. The subject in this paragraph does not presume to “guide” the reader through anything but her/his own subject hood and for that s/he can take responsibility. In the student writing above we are presented, “not with the discovery of an underlying rationality but with the presentation of the self as reasonable, authoritative and objective,” and a presentation made in the context of his or her own process of self reflection (Faigley 162). The subject in the paragraph above has given up any claim to an “author-ity,” derived from the notion of an post-enlightenment subject by entering into a relation with a text in which the subject can no longer be characterized as above or beyond the politics of articulation (162). The subject of this paragraph recognizes the implications on his or her own subjecthood that arise as she engages with discursive practices, specifically those of Berger and those generated by an encounter with the plastic arts. The decentering process does not seem to have been an easy one, and appears from this writing sample to have been at once difficult, puzzling and life changing.

Conclusion

Faigley’s text is not the first time I have been exposed to notions of a postmodern subject. There is a particular energy, a dynamism that I encounter when working through the lens of postmodernism. It seems I have always already been a postmodern subject. One of the tenets of postmodernism is a radical move back to the subject where all possibilities exist simultaneously. It is this radical subjectivity that is thrilling for me, both as a writer, an artist, and as a teacher. One’s positioning amidst radical choice, that moment when one takes it upon themselves to act: to put pen or brush to paper, to open’s ones mouth, and/or to raise one’s hand, is extremely empowering in its implications for ethical responsibility in the context of radical subjecthood. One might ask - which hand is being raised? The hand of an academic? An artist? The hand of a student? An instructor? The hand of an
American citizen? A Japanese? The hand of a woman?
A father? The hand of a Buddhist? With so many
subject positions to choose from and so many existing
at so many points in time, the postmodern subject
appears to be nothing if not life-affirming for both
students and instructors of English Composition.

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文章表現とポストモダン・アイデンティティ

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要約
ポストモダン時代の教師には、アイデンティティが画一的なものではないことは明らかはずである。ポストモダニズムにおいては、状況が変わるにつれて、アイデンティティも変わると認識されている。米国ノース・ダコタ大学における経験によれば、学生も同様の認識をしている。したがって、文章表現の教科書は、アイデンティティの多様性を認識している学生のために作られているのであるから、プロテウス的アイデンティティ表現を積極的に許容しなければならないにも関わらず、米国でもっとも広く使用されている教科書 Saint Martin’s Guide to Writing を分析してみると、ある思考様式を強要していることが判明する。ポストモダンの時代のアイデンティティと作文教科書には間隙が存在しているのである。

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