

REVIEWS

Wolff, Janice M., ed. *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2002. 312 pp.

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Janice Wolff has gathered a variety of fascinating essays in her volume on contact zone theory and practice in writing classrooms, all of which are responses to the germinal article by Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone." Many of the contributors use Pratt's definitive "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other" to frame the approaches, spaces and pedagogy they describe (4). With these fourteen essays, eight of which are original to this volume, Wolff continues the urgent conversation about the difference between academic cultures and other cultures that enter the writing classroom.

Pratt's essay reminds us of the differences among autochthonous writing (writing about and for one's own culture), ethnography (writing about the conquered or colonized culture), and autoethnography (writing for the conqueror or colonizer). As Pratt argues, students must borrow idioms from the dominant, academic culture in their effort to gain entry (Pratt 5-6). Colonization of students in the classroom is hardly the same as colonization by conquerors or invading armies; however, students must submit themselves to the values of an alien academic culture in order to succeed within it. Students' contact zones are in the classroom, in the texts they examine, and in their writing. As Patricia Bizzell states in her foreword, Wolff "allows us to talk about conflict and negotiation in our teaching . . ." (x). The authors have many perspectives from which to examine contact zone pedagogy.

Wolff has organized the fourteen responses to Pratt's article in three parts. In "Spaces," we encounter the contact zone in teaching locations. Paul Beauvais' first-year writers do projects that cause them to interact, not necessarily successfully, with campus organizations. Even this failure to connect teaches, because student writers learn how the academic system works in spite of bureaucratic rejection (26, 32).

In her article, Bizzell also constructs a contact zone, this time a literary one, from texts used in her classes to interrogate all aspects of an event or period. As Bizzell argues, "We would, in effect, be reading all the texts as brought to the contact zone, for the purpose of communicating across cultural boundaries" (54). She goes on to explain, "my phrase for it is 'negotiating difference'—studying how various writers in various genres have grappled with the pervasive presence of difference in American life, and developed virtues out of necessity" (55).

Although it is a commonplace that victors write history, Bizzell proposes a far more honest approach involving texts from what Pratt calls colonizers, colonized, and writers with feet in both camps, as well as from more distant observers. All of the writers in the second section make persuasive arguments for the application of Pratt's theories in ways and places most of us will never experience, but from which we can learn even at a distance.

The second section, "Clashes and Conflicts," examines the nature of the activities in and content of the contact zone. Richard Miller's "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone" provides a worst-case scenario. He explains how a student misinterpreted an assignment to study and report on the activities of a minority group as an opportunity to attack gay men and the homeless, which the student then gleefully reports, complete with hate speech.

Robert Murray examines what happens when students realize they, the colonized, have to write in the style of the colonizing academy, the asymmetry of power first posited by Pratt (4). Students are not necessarily espousing the academy's values, but they learn to parrot them in their efforts to succeed. Murray calls this process "reconstitution" after Foucault's use of the term, so

that student rhetoric is altered to match that of the academy to serve or take advantage of it (Murray 149). Murray explains of one student, “. . . I suspect she discovered a way to articulate her views on race in ‘multivocal’ ways, one ‘vocalization’ of which might be interpreted as racial tolerance” (156-57). The student’s values apparently remained unchanged, and Murray’s use of “tolerance” instead of “acceptance” is deliberate.

Diane Penrod, a Native American, takes us to a rural New Jersey college town, frozen in the 1960s. Here Penrod discovers her colleagues’ and students’ lack of interest in other cultures, which they accommodate by agreeing with whatever they must without examining any of the issues. She calls this process “zoning out” (168). Like Murray, Penrod encounters and interrogates tolerance without acceptance. Re-examining her own 1994 essay in 2000, Penrod concludes that contact zones are being resisted more strongly than ever by tacit tolerance. Students and professors alike “go along to get along” in the contact zone without ever really grappling with the content.

In this section’s final essay, we follow Mary Harmon to a literature and writing course comprised mostly of white students who encounter Hispanic authors, writing in a combination of Spanish and English. When white irritation clashes with the culture of the few Hispanics in the class, controlled mayhem ensues. With Harmon’s guidance, both sides progress beyond their initial responses and find some common ground. Harmon muses, “Had my students become fully transcultural? Of course not -- not in a few short weeks. But many of them had changed” (209). The contact zone does not work miracles, but it does offer new perspectives.

The last section of essays, entitled “Community,” is the most difficult to tie together conceptually. The common thread I see is a perspective on contact zones of various kinds understood as communities. Each classroom becomes a community, or examines one, or both. These communities may be transient -- for example, Wolff’s writing class examines *Beloved* in a safe house atmosphere. Or these communities may be permanent, for

example, Carol Severino's writing center and the campuses Carole Yee evaluates. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson discusses "deep portfolios" in two-year colleges, where many students who have never written before must suddenly learn the language of the academy. Similarly, Jeanne Herrick examines personal narrative in the multicultural classroom, where students of many backgrounds must somehow negotiate a comfort zone in the contact zone. Indirectly, all five authors make the point that a contact zone can be created by students and teachers anywhere, and more: they can make contact zones of any place or material they wish to examine. In every case, there is some sense of community as a desirable vantage point from which to examine inner self or outer world.

What Wolff has done, of course, is to create yet another contact zone between the covers of this intriguing volume. It has considerable internal integrity generated through the constant cross-referencing by the contributors. Further structure is provided by the balance among the three sections and by the variety of the zones, communities, and approaches discussed. In the afterword, Richard Miller concludes, "Having learned the arts of the contact zone, it's time we put them to use . . ." (295). Wolff's volume is a tool we can use, something we as writing educators can employ immediately to make our classrooms rich, stimulating, rewarding contact zones.