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Good intentions of writing center people may pave the road to hell, a place of acculturated Others and uninquiring writing coaches, if we who work in writing centers accept the paradigm of the modernist University which understands literacy—a monocultural standard for exhibiting understanding—rather than literacies, cultural practices used to negotiate differences. In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Nancy Maloney Grimm illustrates how an institutionalized literacy seeks to usurp other literacies as she tells the quintessential story of Hajj. Hajj, an African American student in advanced composition, wrote a personal essay using Black English Vernacular to recall events that occurred in the city of his youth. The errors his teacher found were in Hajj’s use of diction and word choice, and Hajj found himself with his paper in the writing center. This is a crucial moment, Grimm would argue, in literacy education for the student,
the writing coach with whom Hajj worked, the University, and every field of inquiry related to literacy and cultural studies. Writing center work and Grimm’s book are about these moments.

In arguing for the legitimacy of theorizing in the writing center, in acknowledging the diversity of today’s college students in terms of their racial identities, socio-economic statuses, world views and levels of preparation for college (hence, postmodern times), in charging standard English academic discourse with normalizing or washing the discourses of other cultural communities, and in disclosing that institutions of higher education are not fair, Grimm reexamines familiar territory in composition theory. However, as she attributes the development of her ideas to scholarship, experience, intuition and compassion, Grimm provides ample footing to make a personal, compelling call for change in writing center practice.

According to Grimm, writing center workers need to recognize that our preferences and expectations are cultural rather than correct, ideological rather than normal, so we are able to see that in striving to admit outsiders into the academic literacy club, we are requiring others to trade their cultures for the one preferred by the University. Instead of participating in this ethnocentrism, writing coaches need to listen more to students in the writing center, clarify the assumptions teachers may have, and collaborate with students as fellow researchers in the projects of literacy exchange and the “mediation of differences” (79). Grimm argues that when writing centers talk with students about how literacy works as a cultural practice, we do more for them than when we pretend that it is a neutral individual skill. If we explain the cultural values, beliefs, and performance expectations that are encoded in academic practices, if we make the tacit understandings explicit, we are creating more choices and offering students more information about how culture works . . . [W]riting center workers must be prepared to offer more compelling and more socially just visions of literacy to counteract the simplistic understandings that lend themselves to social ranking rather than communication. (46)

The sharing of multiple literacies, and its subsequent social transformation, is more apt to begin in the writing center than the composition classroom or elsewhere in the University, Grimm maintains, “[b]ecause writing centers are places where literacies come in contact with one another” (119). As Mary Louise Pratt explains, “contact zones” are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” (182), and Grimm suggests that in the writing center, coaches and students may practice the “arts of the contact zone” (57). The University,
steeped in conditions and structures of modernism and believing in things like "essential truths" (2) and "solitary authorship" (14), does not create an atmosphere conducive to a democratic meeting, clashing and grappling of cultures; the University embodies, following Pratt, a “context[t] of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 182). The writing center, often considered a service-center to the University, is challenged to back these beliefs, but the center can, if it's willing, follow another course of action: it can acknowledge the “change in human consciousness that has resulted from technological transformation in communication and transportation, increased encounters with diversity, and a global economy,” and thereby embrace the “conceptual possibilities of postmodernism” (Grimm 3). The practice that follows from a postmodern theory would encourage students from nonmainstream cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds to maintain their perspectives, feel that there is a place for them in the University, and push the boundaries of the dominant discourse. This is what “counts as progress,” Grimm contends (15).

In abstraction, this notion of progress and what it entails would appeal to the egalitarian sensibility of the typical writing center worker today. Moving toward the ideal practice, however, requires that writing coaches acknowledge ties to a culture and how that culture structures our literacy. Grimm notes that members of the dominant culture, predominantly the white middle-class and those who have, perhaps unwittingly, chosen its traditions, are more accustomed to being “normal” than being part of a particular culture; the literacy endorsed in the writing center is simply an extension of the dominant culture’s normacy. Grimm would agree that mainstream coaches are not inclined to ask, as Andrew Sledd, for example, asked in 1988, “Which literacy? Whose literacy?” (499). This acknowledgement of ties to a culturally defined literacy is very difficult for the white middle-class and discloses much insecurity, Grimm argues extensively. When one understands that the literacy she has been teaching is cultural practice and, therefore, not neutral or necessarily right, she must then deal with her “loss of innocence” (46) and the fact that she committed what is a crime in a postmodern age: having strived to maintain the “status quo” (71). These realizations cause anxiety and so are resisted, which often results in resistance to Grimm’s concept of progress.

In her work with international students in the United States, Helen Fox realized that we need to listen to the students and “learn how the world makes sense to them” in order to “become more effective at helping them adopt the communicative styles and habits of mind that will foster their success in our system” (10). This is what international students want. But Grimm focuses primarily on two other groups of students who also find themselves in the minority and ideologically outside the culture of the
University in this country. Borrowing the phrase *involuntary minorities* from anthropologist John Ogbu, Grimm identifies ways in which African American and American Indian students, for example, have “communicative styles and habits of mind” as useful in academic work as in the literacy of the dominant culture. In a recent article published in *CCC*, Scott Richard Lyons would corroborate this notion in his investigation of the American Indian experience with the literacy of the dominant culture. Lyons posits that what American Indians want is to “resis[t] assimilation through acts of writing” as they maintain “hig[h] hopes for . . . rhetorical sovereignty” (449). Students from this group often go to—or are “referred” to—the writing center. Failure of the writing coach to make the mental stretch from literacy-as-neutral to literacy-as-cultural, and failure to mediate literacy differences, may ultimately disserve the student and squelch progress despite her good intentions to help the student succeed.

Grimm contends that cultural appropriation experienced by involuntary minorities also happens to students from the working-class—the group with which she can most identify given the circumstances of her parents and grandparents, and of herself and her siblings when they were young. The assimilation imperative Grimm inherited from her maternal grandmother and great aunts—the imperative she sees operating in the University—could be summed up in their response to all complaints about why things were done they way they were done: “because that’s the way the rich people does it,” they chanted (xv).

Grimm’s form is true to her mission, thereby arguing quite successfully for her main premise, her belief in the value of multiple literacies. She demonstrates her commitment to this as she writes her book using as her sources “theory, metaphor, and story,” in addition to argument (3). In asserting her integrity as a scholar, Grimm establishes the authenticity most accepted within the modernist framework of the University as she borrows from composition theorists like Victor Villanueva and Mike Rose, known for challenging notions that students of color and of the working class are linguistically deficient, and theorists like James Berlin and Linda Brodkey, who take exception to modernist conceptions of the writer and of the student. Grimm moves outside composition theory to enlist Barbara Ehrenreich’s support of her claims about the middle-class’s perceived tenuous hold on its position of power. As a framework for Chapter 4, in which she suggests ways to negotiate rather than neutralize literacy differences in the writing center, Grimm uses the methods of reviving relationships set forth by family systems theorist Harriet Goldhor Lerner.

Grimm uses metaphor as a way of knowing and solidifying her case. She draws connections between quilting and theorizing, connections
between the peculiar winter storms of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the "climactic" changes and conditions that writing centers are subject to because of their place in the University. She draws connections between a baby retreating in distress when shown her reflection in a mirror and the white middle-class's shock when it first recognizes that its culture is "raced" and "classed" (73)—that it is only a shadow of the Form, not the Form itself. Grimm also tells stories. In relating the experiences of students whose writing "doesn't conform to mainstream worldviews and language patterns" (39), Grimm relates her own story of assimilation, of learning to correct her working-class expressions. She retells Anne DiPardo's story about Fannie, a Navajo student who doesn't seem to have much to say. From her own collection of transcribed writing center sessions, she tells the story of Joe, the son and grandson of mink farmers, who buried what he knew to be true about mink farming in order to achieve an "unbiased" position in an essay based only on his readings.

Grimm has caused me, a director of a writing center, to inspect the practice of my good-hearted undergraduate writing coaches. More honestly, I have also scrutinized my own earnest attempts to "make a difference." While reading her text, I was compelled to ask Grimm questions like "well, did that student's writing improve?" and "what, then, counts as literacy?" Grimm anticipated my questions and answered them presently, noting that each was a question "a good modernist would ask" (21). My predictability thus exposed, I have had to wonder how well my theories and practices in the writing center have adapted to what Grimm calls "postmodern times." Though her advocacy of the fruitful exchange of literacies in the search for a truer sense of literacy seems to be right in step with contemporary composition talk, Grimm argues in favor of practices that writing pedagogues commonly reject. She is a proponent of the unthinkable: that writing centers should edit and proofread student work. Such practices may teach the arbitrarily construed conventions of language that gate-keep success in the University, Grimm argues; failure to teach these is to practice social discrimination and to draw parameters on literacy exchange that are too narrow. As postmodern theory taught her to question the status quo in other areas, Grimm hired Rebecca to work in the writing center in her senior year. Rebecca was a working-class student who struggled to earn C+ grades in first-year composition, and who, in her second and third years, watered the plants and answered the phone in the writing center as a work study student. Grimm recognized that Rebecca's status as an outsider to the University might contribute much to the exchange of literacies going on in the writing center. Again, Grimm remains true to her method. She uses theory and compelling examples to establish a new frontier for the writing center director who, in her good intentions and
with "theoretical awareness," fosters social discrimination in the name of student-centeredness, and also for the director who identifies good writing coaches by their good writing, thereby eliminating tutors whose lived experiences might better enable them to recognize what a student writer doesn't understand.

In thinking again about Hajji, the student whose idea of using nonstandard dialect to evoke a sense of place was not understood by his teacher, I am reminded of the story Pratt tells in "Arts of the Contact Zone." In 1613, a Peruvian named Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, an Andean of Inca descent and a Christian, wrote a 1,200-page letter to King Philip III of Spain in a mixture of the Andean language Quechua and nonstandard Spanish. The letter did not reach the intended recipient, and it's likely that the letter was not understood by a Western reader until the 1970s. Pratt notes that "[i]n the Andes in the early 1600s there existed a literate public with considerable intercultural competence" but "such a community did not exist in the Spanish court" (188). The writing center that Grimm envisions, and I share her vision, is a place in which texts, voices, lives and literacies like Guaman Poma and Hajji's would not be lost.

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Works Cited