As far back as I can recall, English classes were always less satisfying than the writing and reading I did on my own, which is why as an undergraduate, I changed my major from, and back to, English more times than I care to remember. By the end of graduate school, I realized that this contradiction could sustain my interest throughout the dissertation, so with something less than godspeed from my committee, I embarked upon an exploration of institutionalized literacies. As they (and I) would attest, the sailing was not smooth, in part because what I was trying to do seemed so heretical at the time, especially since the political winds hadn’t turned institutions enough to believe in land beyond the horizon. Fortunately, I found experienced explorers, such as Patricia Bizzell and Victor Villanueva, who gave generously of their experiences and whose work served as outposts along the way.

In much the same way, James Slevin is one of those intellectual adventurers, and his *Introducing English* is a map that, upon arriving in the new world, assures me that the ordeal was not in vain. Although the ostensive purpose of this book is “a desire to explore, in one or another domain, the intellectual work of composition as an interpretive activity concerned with the social and cultural consequences of language and language education,” the relief of Slevin’s map is as much, if not more, valuable, for in exploring “the central role language education plays in the process” of “cultural hegemony,” Slevin provides an explorer’s firsthand account of the new frontier that is English studies (2, 6). In doing so, Slevin identifies five regions in which he considers a range of issues drawn to scale, including the ways that intellectual work of composition was represented to him and by him, the historical representations of literacy and English education, the impact of these historical legacies upon contemporary literacy, the intellectual work of composition within the larger university, and the ways that this intellectual work is represented to others beyond the university.

Together, these enable readers to step back from the new, uncharted territory in order to see it, as it appears to Slevin, in a much larger scale. In his remapping, Slevin discards dated guides based upon *absence* or *lack* in favor of one based upon *difference*. In doing so, he integrates the linguistics of contact and contact zones within materialist critiques of education, schools, and society as the most significant points of reference. One of its strengths is its (secret) history of the dividing line within English Departments. As such, the ambiguity of the title signals this remapping well, and while the subtitle appears to qualify this purpose, it also leaves open the possibility that the *proper* scale for reorganizing English Departments is literacy itself. In doing so, Slevin offers a perspective on this territory that has much in common with those of other explorers on both sides of the
disciplinary divide, as well as the intersections of the two. At the same time, he reclaims this space in the name of composition. For example, colonial literature, such as the story of Pocahontas or records of Virginia Tidewater, becomes accounts of ways that “fundamental assumptions about education and language were planted, like the colony itself, in the consciousness of invaders and invaded alike” (4).

Not only does this book seek to reclaim English Departments, but it also remaps the frontier of the university itself, which Slevin acknowledges by admitting that composition is a metonym (I’d argue the stronger metaphor) for intellectual work as a whole (10). Throughout the collection, Slevin explores the implications of this new university, whose purpose is creating, sharing, and testing knowledge, whether as research, teaching, or service. In doing so, he paradoxically scales back composition, in the ways it often minimizes education generally, and advances it, in the name of intellectual work. Expectedly, Slevin addresses predictable issues, such as the relationship between composition and other disciplines, yet he challenges conventional thinking about these relationships. In this example, Slevin distinguishes between writing across the curriculum, with its tendency toward academic socialization, and writing in the disciplines, with its ability to position intellectual workers, including students, within “an historical and dialogic intellectual project” (190-91). In addition, he addresses larger issues, such as assessment and tenure, advocating in both a more active role for faculty being evaluated.

In addition to reconfiguring English Departments and remapping the university, this collection exemplifies praxis as a form of intellectual work. Whether depicting his first classrooms, explicating Don Quixote, or critiquing conventional WPA assessment methods, Slevin insists upon a level of theorizing that prevents his discussions from descending into a numbing series of disciplinary vacation slides, thereby ensuring that these contribute to a new (way of looking at the) world. At the same time, he provides more than a travel guide. For instance, he argues, in a letter to a former student, that the most important knowledge students can learn is the difference between having a point and making a point, or “the intersection and interpenetration, perhaps better expressed as the dialectic, of thesis and development (elaboration, exemplification, illustration)” (248). As this example illustrates, Slevin emphasizes the ways that practice and theory inform each other, which legitimizes this collection as an exemplary model for those of us who aspire to similar forms of intellectual work.

Nevertheless, some readers might experience déjà vu, that sense that they have been here before, and for good reason. Though revised for this event, seven of the thirteen chapters have been published previously, even more if the letters that are the last two chapters were written for other occasions. Still, good collections, like good maps, offer more than the sum of their parts, and this collection nonetheless succeeds in this regard by juxtaposing selections to create a composite that any of these pieces alone, read in isolation or reconstructed from memory, cannot. Seeing, for example, Slevin’s thinking about genre theory alongside his
description of discipline-based writing seminars allows for an intertextuality that might otherwise be lost in the time and space between the two.

A more alarming limitation concerns Slevin’s willingness to import conventional cultural critiques into his version of this new world. At several points, Slevin cites the symbolic violence of colonizing discourse, the canon, even education itself, and while I am sympathetic to his perspective (who wants to be accused of (symbolic) violence, even in the name of reclaiming territory?), I am uncomfortable when these assertions are carried to their (il)logical conclusions, as they seem to be here. First, doing so seems to conflate symbolic violence, which can be traumatic, with physical violence, which almost always is. Second, it denies the difference between seeking enculturation and being subject to it. Third, it misrepresents the experiences of literacy in which, some have argued, (symbolic) violence is part of the very experience of writing and reading.

Perhaps worse, such a move authorizes versions of students as (relatively) passive victims of these violations by language and culture of English education. As Keith Gilyard, Victor Villanueva, and others have explained, the discursive and socio-cultural experiences of students are far more complicated and contested. To be sure, most students have already assumed any number of selves and values before they arrive in classrooms, and by their presence, they signal some appreciation of and desire for the privileged discourse of the academy, if only as a means to another end. In the larger picture, many of them recognize that they cannot expect to survive, let alone thrive, in the world without acquiescing to new selves and different values. (Who of us can?) At the same time, many of these have attested that the discursive shifts they make, or learn to make or even don’t make, are temporary, contingent shifts, ones that are undone as soon as they walk out of the classroom or leave the campus. In these and other ways, students deserve more credit for their tactical performances, or unofficial forms of resistance, that simultaneously acknowledge the rules and resist their conclusions.

Nonetheless, a sense of justice, or as Slevin has argued elsewhere a concern about injustice, drives these essays, which makes his intentions more the issue. For these and other reasons, Introducing English is a collection that I recommend to anyone who is sympathetic to the political turn of praxis that seeks to account for difference. Those who read it will find Slevin’s version of composition, English Studies, even the postmodern academy to be a more just alternative. Furthermore, they will find that from reading it, they have a powerful way of thinking, as well as an exemplary model for theorizing, about these and other issues. In short, this map will serve them well as they construct more detailed accounts of this newly publicized world of intellectual work.

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