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Migrant Rationalities: Graduate Students and the Idea of Authority in the Writing Center

Nancy Welch

Nous mourrons de n'être pas assez ridicules.
We do not dare to be ridiculous enough, and this may kill us.

—Slogan from the French Women’s Movement, quoted in Le Doeuff (Hipparchia’s Choice 84)

In their essay “On Authority in the Study of Writing,” Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch name two opposing modes of authority in composition: assimilation, in which authority is gained through adopting and adapting to the conventions of a particular discipline, and resistance, in which authority is gained through writing against those conventions in a voice of continuous critique. The campus writing center, I believe, is a site where the tensions between these dominant modes of authority are most keenly felt. In my experience as a teacher and administrator in a small writing center at a large land-grant university, these tensions can become outright, visible conflict for graduate student writers. Coming from a range of ethnic, geographic, and academic locations, these students voice on their visits some common concerns: How do I find my way into this alien discourse? How do I maintain a sense of self within it? Do I embrace the conventions of my discipline? Resist or even reject them? Despite the many differences among them, these students believe they face a strict choice between resistance or assimilation, and at this crossroads between one or the other choice, they locate the writing center.1

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For two semesters I’ve followed four graduate student writers—from English studies, biology, and occupational therapy—to see how a writing center, rather than reproduce one or the other idea of authority, might offer a third choice, one rooted in dialogizing, as Mortensen and Kirsch advocate, static notions of authority. In particular, I’m thinking of the third choice offered by philosopher and feminist critic Michele Le Doeuff, whose project of thirty years has been to radically redefine her discipline’s conceptions of authority and whose work, I believe, can join ours to show how authority isn’t some “out-there” package we either accept or reject but rather something we make and re-make, each time we sit down to write. More, Le Doeuff stresses that a writer constructs her authority not through meticulous, single-minded attention to one particular discourse community (whether one is working to adapt to that community or working to critique it), not through pruning from her text all hints of other communities, their conversations, and her participation in them. Instead, Le Doeuff argues, the making of responsible, responsive authority in academic writing calls for practices of both “reverie” and “reflection,” of “migration” that can lead a writer far from and back to her disciplinary writing, able to see through her reveries and through migrations elsewhere the limits of her disciplinary writing and what else she knows that can help her test those limits. Le Doeuff’s testing of philosophy’s limits, her work to reintroduce practices of reverie and of migration into the day-to-day work of a philosopher, tells me how to rethink that crossroads in the writing center between individual desires and disciplinary ideals from strict either/or choice to eventful dialectic.

On Reverie, Reflection, and Migrant Rationality

From Plato and Rorty, Le Doeuff has examined philosophy’s assertions of authority as doubly limiting, doubly dangerous. Philosophy, she writes, declares its status through a break with poetry, image, myth, fable, reverie. Even while throughout the philosophical canon we find islands and caves, seas and storms—“in short,” Le Doeuff writes, “a whole pictorial world sufficient to decorate even the driest ‘History of Philosophy’”—philosophers continue to insist that these images are decoration only and that theirs is a purely theoretical and self-sufficient form of discourse (Imaginary 1, 2). Such an insistence, however, severely limits the work of philosophers, Le Doeuff argues, because it severs them from the reverie—the dreaming with and through other discourses and daily social demands—philosophers need to entertain ideas that can’t be empirically established and absolutely defended, to venture towards questions whose answers are not guaranteed in advance, and to learn from other disciplines instead of insisting, “I do everything on my own.” The suppression of reverie in the name of a pure rationality prevents philosophy, for instance, from joining and enlivening its work with that of contemporary feminism, intent as philosophy’s radical skepticism is
on interrogating and deconstructing feminism’s platforms for political change.² If this kind of disciplinary isolation and assertion of a superior authority isn’t troubling enough, philosophy’s suppression of reverie, Le Doeuff writes, also allows the discipline to perpetuate itself without ever examining its own founding dream—a founding dream that sets up as “enemy” most of the world’s population. Not only does philosophy define itself through dubious assertions of what it is not—not dream, not image, not story nor agenda for social change—it also defines and elevates itself through a pernicious degradation of everyone and everything it declares itself not to be—irrational women, treacherous natives, dark continents, naïve activism. By displacing elsewhere, outside its system and onto others, all that it deems unknowable, incomplete, not strictly “rational,” philosophy can hide its own incompleteness, contradictions, and contingencies. Through exclusion, displacement, and degradation of others, philosophers can claim to be “people who know absolutely what they are saying” and whose work “has no hidden content which might have escaped the author” (*Hipparchia* 166).³

The recognition of philosophy’s troubling strategies for constructing authority has led Le Doeuff to revisit some of its most revered tales and tellers—Kant’s island, Sartre’s Woman—to highlight their suppressed reveries and hidden contents. It’s led her to read against philosophy’s assertion of a pure and self-contained rationality and to highlight how the forms of reverie that usually get displaced into the realm of “creative” writing are very much at work in philosophical production. “[Das] Capital,” she writes, “is made up of bits and pieces, Descartes recounts his life story and dreams, Bacon weaves his project with biblical memories, Greco-Roman myths and quotations from Virgil . . . Everything must be brought in to undo a world of commonplaces . . .” (*Hipparchia* 221, my emphasis). Le Doeuff’s discomfort with philosophy’s construction of authority has also led her to introduce into her own work as a philosopher practices of “methodological subjectivism” from feminist consciousness-raising groups, undoing the commonplace belief that philosophical practice demands precision, certainty, and objectivity:

> The imprecise and hesitant words proffered in women’s group took me back beyond my training to a rediscovery of the *groping and stuttering* contained in the project to produce philosophy: *many clumsy attempts and much improvisation* are needed before a clear and distinct idea can be formed. (*Hipparchia* 221-222, my emphasis)

Through her rereadings of the philosophical canon and through her own migrations into the practices of feminism, Le Doeuff argues forcefully for a philosophy that doesn’t hush up its reveries and displace its own ambiguities onto others. She seeks to redefine philosophy as a discipline that “openly acknowledges the incomplete nature of all theorization,” that views this incompleteness not as a “tragedy” but as an invitation to ongoing specula-
tion, and that, far from shying away from uncertainties, "slides along the verge of the unthought" (Imaginary 127). Working against complete disciplinary orientation and isolation, Le Doeuff writes, "I am seeking the greatest possibility of movement" and a "migrant rationality" that continually constructs, questions, and revises its authority from what it finds in different disciplines and different periods of thought, in the metaphysical and in the everyday (Hipparchia 51).

Le Doeuff's idea of migrant rationality doesn't mean she is an expressivist, nor is she an advocate of fem l'ecriture or of what Teresa Ebert calls "ludic" feminism, which conceives of writing as "free-floating play" detached from the bonds of meaning, detached too from working for any kind of material, historical critique and change (887). Notions of writing-the-body, in Le Doeuff's analysis, are founded on a disturbing acceptance, not revision, of masculinist philosophy and its displacement of the irrational, the affective, and the sensual onto "Woman." Rather than joining the ludic "revolt of unreason," Le Doeuff calls instead for a complete renovation of words like "reason" and "authority"—from something totalizing and absolute to provisional, plural, and revisionary practices that explore the tension among "what it is legitimate to say, what one would like to contend or argue, and what one is forced to recognize" (Imaginary 118, 19). In other words, instead of advocating an entirely accommodationist conception of authority ("what it is legitimate to say") or a stance of complete resistance ("what one would like to contend or argue"), she argues for bringing the two together in a continuing, often conflictual, always generative dialectic that can create a third choice: what one is forced—or sometimes startled—to recognize.

The Suppression of Reverie Across the Disciplines

Meanwhile, graduate students in my campus's writing center voice on their first visits a conception of academic authority that is out-there, pre-packaged, not at all open to contest, and whose understanding of what it means to write in their disciplines is formed by the same exclusions and positivistic imperatives that Le Doeuff examines in philosophy. For example:

For me anyway, writing in the sciences is different from writing in English classes that I've had. In English composition you come up with a thought... In [graduate biology] seminar you don't have that opportunity because you're given a topic and then you have to pull out all these resources and support this idea or that idea, and there's just so many facts you have to include. You can't express yourself so much as you have to express facts. (Interview with Donna, a graduate student in Biology and Biomedical Science)

Well, the thing most on my mind is the paper I just wrote and how it relates to the student writing I'm reading. It should relate; it's
about them. But the languages are so vividly distant. I think about how far apart they are, and I think of the unbroken chain that should run from that sort of "high theory" down . . . through what students write. And it's such a long stretch. (Process log written by Max, a graduate student in English, about a draft of a presentation for MLA)

Sometimes I think, "This is what I really want to say," but I don't know how to put it in that structure and make it like they'd like to have it. It feels kind of tight right now. (Interview with Leslie, an unclassified graduate student seeking admission to an occupational therapy program)

They [members of a fiction workshop] say I have to change my story their way if I want it published because it's in the United States that it would be published and it has to fit with American readers. But who cares whether it's published or not? I'm not going to worry about trying to get my stories published anymore. (Interview with Jaswant, a graduate student in English, about a draft of a fictional story)

While their contexts for writing differ, all four of these students suggest that their understanding of what it means to write in their disciplines is as much—or more—informed by exclusion, what writing in a given field is not, as it is by inclusion, what writing in a field is. The boundaries they perceive don't mark "the verge of the unthought," open to testing and crossing beyond, but instead patrolled borders they must not cross and cannot revise. In fact, concern about what's legitimate to say threatens to prevent these students from even imagining what they would like to contend. When Donna tells her writing center teacher that she's got some new ideas about a draft for a biology seminar, she also says she's reluctant to work out those ideas in writing, explaining, "Since he [the instructor] didn't really write anything except some corrections on my draft, I'm apprehensive about adding to it." Though Jaswant appears to take up a position of determined resistance to her discipline's expectations, she also tacitly accepts at least one her workshop's founding exclusions: excluded from the realm of publishable stories is everything that does not match white and Western storytelling norms, including her own stories.

Together, these students tell me that Le Doeuff's analysis of suppressions and displacements in philosophy is very much applicable to other disciplines. These students likewise understand that an author in their disciplines is someone who knows absolutely what he or she is saying and that any incompleteness, uncertainty, or vagueness is a tragedy, a mistake they ought not to have made. What's more, these students remind me that I and other teachers in this writing center too often accept these constructions of
authority and of disciplinary writing—accept that yes, Donna’s instructor is banishing from the realm of possibility further explorations of ideas in her paper; accept that yes, white and Western storytelling norms are the only norms and so Jaswant must choose between a writing a story that can be published or sticking with one that cannot. Composition’s primary verbs for describing the creation of authority in writing—verbs like “master,” “position,” “situate”—position us to work within rather than test these limits of what Donna can write, of how Jaswant can revise. These students tell me, then, that the first step towards dialogizing ideas of authority needs to be taken by writing center teachers: through our questioning of the constructions of authority we’ve inherited from composition studies and elsewhere, through our refusal to accept too-limited ideas about how academic authority in writing is made, through our beginning to imagine with students practices that explore the means and uses of migration.

Shouting to be Heard: Max in the Writing Center

Consider, for instance, Max, working in the writing center on a paper for the Modern Language Association’s national convention. A former attorney, Max is comfortable with the idea of addressing a large group of people, and he brings to the center strong convictions about what he wants to say in his talk. Like many graduate students who visit this center, he’s a fluent writer, deeply immersed in the conversations of his discipline, and drafting comes easily. That is, until he compares the language of his draft with the language of the first-year composition students he’s writing about. In his draft, which seeks to reintroduce the body, physical location as well as socio-political location, into theories of composing, he writes such sentences as, “I contend that the cortical processing centers of our brains are making an unwarranted power grab in the guise of academic theories, a move made possible only by the sort of misunderstanding of cognition our intrinsic cognitive biases promote.” This is the kind of sentence Max is looking at when he writes in his process log, at the end of an early session in the writing center, about the “long stretch” between his students and his writing about them.

At issue for Max isn’t how to master and assimilate to the dominant conventions of his discipline. If the goal of writing center instruction is to teach students the conventions of academic writing, Max has already learned such lessons, or at least, his language seems to match up neatly with what one might expect to hear at a conference like MLA. A goal of rejecting those conventions doesn’t seem possible either. Max has made a commitment to writing this presentation, he’s chosen the writing center as the place in which to do this work, and though he says he feels “morally terrible” about the language it’s getting written in, he continues to write sentences like that above, then chastises himself in his process log for the “Oxford don” and “Great Man” sound. For constructing this presentation and for constructing
a sense of academic authority, Max could use a third choice.

That third choice comes first through a suggestion from Julie, Max’s writing center teacher and a graduate student in nineteenth-century literature, that he set aside his draft for a session and write about his audience. Max agrees and in this writing, which becomes a kind of reverie and at times a real nightmare, he draws out some of the narratives that are suppressed but still very much at work in his highly abstract first draft. He writes:

The students sit out in [my imagined] audience, but I know them. I respect them because I know them. Now I look at the academic audience. Well. Outside of my close allies, they are fools. I like my students. I hate my audience. How could they be so dense as to fall for that disguised relativism crap Rorty and Berlin are pushing? It shows a horrible lapse of understanding of the philosophy, psychology, physiology—listen to me. I know the Truth. My academic writing is just a crusade.

Though this reverie about his imagined audience may sound, especially at first, dismissive and even arrogant, Max’s words get at the some of the “hidden content” and underlying narratives of much academic writing—writing that Olivia Frey compares to a kind of survival-of-the-fittest Darwinism and that Jane Tompkins has compared to the structure of movie westerns and biblical tales such as David and Goliath. From this perspective, that “long stretch” Max sees between his presentation and his students may result, at least in part, from a clash of two tales: the classroom he teaches following a narrative of affinity and respect, the academic conference he’s about to attend following a much different story-line of antagonism and combat. Especially through invoking such influential figures in composition and rhetoric as James Berlin and Richard Rorty, Max suggests that, despite his authoritative-sounding language, he’s writing his presentation with a deep sense of illegitimacy. His MLA audience, he believes, will have a thoroughly postmodernist orientation; they are assembled against any talk of referentiality. And so, just as the philosopher, described by Le Doeuff, projects theoretical incapacity onto others in order to create for himself or herself the authority to speak, so does Max in his first draft follow his discipline’s rituals for claiming the right to speak.

But as Max writes this hidden content of his initial draft, he also moves into that dialectic between what it’s legitimate to say these days about composing and what he wants to contend, and doing so, he’s also forced to recognize as ludicrous his own position as speaker: “You stand up in a room full of chairs basically,” he says, “and lecture for twenty minutes about how we need to have more interactive education with our students.” Continuing to imagine and reflect on that gap between him and those chairs, he’s surprised to recognize too that maybe his construction of a thoroughly hostile audience isn’t quite accurate. After all, it’s doubtful that Rorty will actually
come to hear Max’s talk. It’s doubtful that anyone advocating an extreme relativist position will attend a panel about cognitive theories of composing (or even a panel about composing at all). So, who will attend then? Max writes, “Maybe I’m afraid no one is listening. It makes me strident... It’s the equivalent of shouting to be heard.” With this writing, Max enacts that kind of migrant rationality that Le Doeuff describes, his writing producing a great deal of movement as he compares his relationship with students to his relationship with the conference audience, as he imagines and critiques his position as speaker, as he asks the crucial questions, “Who’s listening?” and “Why am I shouting?”

As Max returns to his draft and continues to write and revise, that dialectic continues and begins to change not only how Max talks but also what he talks about. During two sessions in the writing center, for example, he and Julie “gloss” his draft, but instead of writing in the margins of each paragraph “Quote Peirce here” or “Tighten this sentence up”—the work of increasing assimilation to disciplinary expectations—they write to “mess up” the draft and especially to mess up its divorced-from-the-classroom language. In the margins, they imagine what Max might do physically to counter the presentation’s disembodied tone. They imagine a mini-striptease, jotting in the margins such cues as “Remove tie” and “Begin to remove shirt; look up startled; button back up sheepishly.” Through glossing, Max explains, he’s able to use the “anger” and “humor” he feels about academic conferences and about how his own presentation is getting written. Through glossing-as-improvisation, Julie’s authority as a teacher is also disrupted and revised—from someone who knows absolutely what should be done to “fix” a paper and who guides a writer towards increasing coherence, consistency, and clarity (a role Julie can’t take up since, as she acknowledges to Max, she’s not even sure what he’s trying to say) to someone who also gropes, stutters, and improvises in the margins, venturing towards a tone for this presentation that can’t be guaranteed in advance.

In the end Max says he feels “a responsibility” towards his audience to do a more “straight” presentation, deciding that theatrics probably aren’t necessary. Even so, though most of the glosses do not appear, in the end, in his presentation, this work in the margins, he says, “translated into how I finally said things.” Sentences such as “I contend that the cortical processing centers of our brains are making an unwarranted power grab in the guise of academic theories...” are revised into sentences that cite students and that address a peopled, not vacant, room. “Again, try testing this,” Max writes. “Imagine some symbol or idea that, when it is attacked, you take it personally, right down to the autonomic level of faster pulse and breathing.” When he returns to the writing center after the MLA, Max describes people coming up to talk with him at the end of his presentation. Those people did raise questions. They did not agree with everything he said. Yet, Max says, their
questions “really seemed to connect” with his talk. He describes feeling “better understood than I’ve felt with pretty much anything else I’ve done professionally.” Maybe more importantly, he also describes “better understanding” himself what his talk was all about.

From Resistance to Revision: Jaswant in the Writing Center

Some might argue that Max, already well-versed in the conventions and values of his discipline, can easily afford to stray from the work of increasing orientation towards disciplinary norms and that others, not having yet mastered those norms, cannot. Another graduate student in the writing center, Jaswant, tells me, however, that the opposite may be true. A master’s student in fiction writing from Malaysia, Jaswant’s struggles over issues of authority can tell us too that fiction doesn’t mark a radical break with the theoretical, the displaced imaginary of expository prose. Foregrounded for her in the fiction workshop and in the writing center is that same crossroads, even more delineated and disturbing, between assimilation and resistance, sacrifice of academic authority or sacrifice of self.

In general discussions about her writing, Jaswant speaks with confidence and enthusiasm about the cultural and familial sources for her stories. “When I first took up fiction writing,” she says, “my thoughts were ‘Ha! Me sitting there conjuring up all these stories about things I don’t even know about.’ That’s what I thought until I started writing.” Once she started writing her first story, Jaswant says she realized she didn’t have to “cook things up.” Instead she could look to her history, her experiences and relationships, and “tons of stories popped out.” Through these stories, she says, she wants to remember and reconnect with her family and with a culture she’s been away from for more than six years. In her process log she writes: “I feel like I’ve forgotten so much, and that’s why I tell myself I should write about all these things so I shouldn’t forget . . . or just to be able to tell them to my mother [in Malaysia] on the phone, so we can laugh together about them.” For Jaswant, fiction writing is a way to practice memory and maintain relationships across distance and time, and this definition gives her a deep sense of confidence and purpose with each new story she starts.

When it comes to looking at particular drafts and particular experiences in fiction workshops, however, Jaswant’s tone quickly changes, and she speaks with a striking absence of authority. Like the philosophic discourse that Le Doeuff examines, fiction, as Jaswant understands it in the workshop, is a discourse that leaves no room for speculation and in which any “hidden content” that’s “escaped the author” is a mistake to be corrected. In workshops, she says, students edit the Malay-English dialogue between her characters, tell her to stick to one point of view and to either explain or drop all cultural references. And (not to displace all the difficulties Jaswant has
experienced elsewhere, outside the writing center) Jaswant describes, too, moments when her first-semester writing center teacher also corrected her drafts, assuming that she didn’t know the conventions of written English even though English is Jaswant’s first language. About the sentence, “My mother said I’m like a flower that’s always late in blooming,” her writing center teacher said, “We have a phrase for that: ‘late-bloomer.’ Just two words instead of all the words you use” (my emphasis). More troubling to Jaswant, her writing center teacher would respond to her drafts “like a tourist”: “She’d go on and on about the mango trees and miss completely the mother.” When Jaswant returns to the writing center a second semester, ambivalent about this place and her writing, she brings half a dozen story drafts and describes her goal for working on them in strict either/or terms: “I need to know whether to revise these stories how others want them or keep them just the way they are.”

Like Max, Jaswant perceives a long stretch between what others want of her writing and what she wants, but unlike Max, Jaswant doesn’t feel she can dismiss the readers in her workshop and the authority she feels they really do have to tell her what good fiction is. She says, “Maybe because I’m a woman, I’m so used to doing what people tell me to do, and I always want that, almost need people to tell me what to do” (Jaswant’s emphasis). In her second semester in the writing center, she talks and writes too about another audience she cannot dismiss: Asian friends who have read and questioned her stories. Recreating a moment in which she gave a draft to a Singaporean friend to read, Jaswant writes: “Yunghi ripped it apart. She said, ‘How can you talk about Asian women that way?’ She said I had been white-washed and that I can’t talk about what goes on back home in front of an American audience.” Looking up from this writing, Jaswant asks, “Do you think that’s true? Do you think I’ve been ‘white-washed’?”

With this question, Jaswant underscores that the tension she experiences isn’t only between her desires and the workshop’s, inside and outside, self and other: it’s very much a conflict situated within the fabric of her life, one reproduced again and again in the history of her country, her family, and in her stories too as she writes within and between two cultures, trying to construct and maintain identity and authority within both. As she writes, two dominant audiences, represented by the workshop members and by Yunghi, vie for her allegiance, insist that she join one and sacrifice the other.

It’s the writing center that Jaswant endows, however uneasily, with the authority to settle this conflict for her, and it’s to me, her current writing center teacher, that Jaswant addresses the question, “Do you think I’ve been white-washed?” When, in the writing center, I try to resist becoming another insistent voice in her fiction, an advocate of one side or another, a white woman who answers this incredibly charged question with a “yes” or a “no,” Jaswant becomes increasingly agitated. In her process log, she writes, “Nancy
hasn’t even read my whole story. It’s frustrating. How is she supposed to tell me what to do?” Here, Jaswant and I both need to create the possibility of a third choice—one in which Jaswant imagines ways of answering Yunghi and the members of her workshop, one in which I can imagine a role for myself beyond advocate of assimilation or advocate of resistance—either kind of advocacy, after all, positioning me as the one who tells Jaswant what to do.

We begin to create that third choice first through a process of reading and writing that Berthoff calls, in Forming/Thinking/Writing and The Making of Meaning, interpretive paraphrase. As she reads through a draft, Jaswant points to paragraphs where she recognizes her sentences sliding “along the verge of the unthought,” evoking reactions, images, stories, and conversations that aren’t yet written. Looking at one short sentence depicting a mother running between kitchen and living room, serving food to her husband and his friends, Jaswant says, “There’s a lot more I see when I read this than I’ve gotten down on the page. All these kids underfoot and the fireworks outside and the men just eating and drinking, eating and drinking.”

Turning the draft over, she writes:

I see the mother like her daughter [Jaswant’s narrator] does—very dull and stupid. To her [the mother] the festival of Deepavali is just an extra chore. All the cleaning she has to do, baking, and nonstop cooking all the day, dealing with extra people in her small house, all the relatives and guests that keep streaming in. To her it is work before and after, and she hates it. All the extra children drive her crazy too (especially her brother’s children ‘cause they were brought up differently than her children and need more attention than hers). By that time, she just wanted to go to bed. She was exhausted, but her husbands’ friends were still there drinking. The house was a mess, the kitchen needed cleaning, the children were still running around.

With this interpretive paraphrase, Jaswant brings to the surface one of her draft’s restless undercurrents, countering the celebration with that of chore, posing against the carnival atmosphere of a once-a-year religious holiday the familiar, daily image of an exhausted, over-worked woman. Initially, remembering that some workshop members had called this character “flat” and “uninteresting,” Jaswant had considered dropping her from the story altogether—the mother was a mistake to be eliminated. Through interpretive paraphrase, though, Jaswant imagines another way to understand this character, recognizing that there’s more to her than the words “flat” and “uninteresting” suggest and recognizing too that this “more” needs to be written. Looking up from this writing, Jaswant says, “There’s a reason why there are three generations of women in this story. I’m
not sure just what, but there is a reason for it” (her emphasis).

In this statement especially, I hear Jaswant figuring a different role for the writing center than that of aligning with or opposing the voices of the fiction workshop and of Yunghi. It’s a place where she can pose questions (“Why are there three generations of women in this story?”) and imagine that yes, there are answers she can venture toward (“there is a reason for it”). It’s also a place where she can imagine and try out possible answers to members of her fiction workshop, drawing on authorities beyond its boundaries—and beyond the writing center’s too. “Do you think I have to explain what Deepavali is all about?” she asks me during one visit. Then, just as I’m about to say, “Well, yes, I think you do,” she continues, “I mean, Jamaica Kincaid doesn’t explain every word she uses. You figure it out or you go find out. Your job.” Here Jaswant reminds me that as a writing center teacher, I also need to enact that migrant rationality, moving beyond Jaswant’s draft to other fiction writers like Jamaica Kincaid who, indeed, does not define all cultural references in her stories, thus causing me to stop and wonder, “Why am I reading Kincaid’s fiction so differently from Jaswant’s?”—the answers telling me that my own constructions of authority need to be revised.

By the end of that semester in the writing center, Jaswant’s definition of revision has changed dramatically from a process of conformity she resists to one of “hearing my voice better” and “seeing what happens to a draft between Day 1 and Day 10.” Like Le Doeuff, Jaswant defines revision in terms of migration, movement, increasing sense of possibility rather than increasing sense of limits. Comparing her latest work to her earlier revisions which “didn’t go anywhere, didn’t move,” Jaswant also defines revision as “being brave enough to say, ‘What would happen if I went down this road in my story?’—and then doing just that” (my emphasis). With this definition, Jaswant stresses that migration and movement aren’t escapes from the rigors of academic work. Instead of escaping that tension she feels in the workshop, she turns it into a dialectic: working with and testing that pull between what it’s legitimate to say (rewriting her story according to workshop responses) and what she’d like to contend (that these stories are fine as is). Doing so, she comes to recognize a third possibility: that fiction is a way to remember and question her cultural stories, to re-envision as well as maintain the relationships she cherishes. Fiction writing, Jaswant says, “makes me realize my life is branching off in another direction, and there’s so much that goes on with the women back home that I want to write about.”

**Toward a Pedagogy of Migration**

Likewise, Donna and Leslie and their teachers experience in the writing center the uses of migration, of branching off in their talking and
writing in unexpected directions. Working on her application for full admission to a graduate occupational therapy program, Leslie initially writes such sentences as “Extensive employment opportunities abroad have afforded the utmost in cultural as well as rehabilitative experiences” (in a reference to her summers spent working in rehabilitation hospitals in England) and “An experience with an extended hospital stay followed by prolonged physical therapy rendered the personal experience necessary for a desire to become an occupational therapist” (in a reference to the car accident that landed her in the hospital for six months and in physical therapy for a year after that, first giving her the idea that she might also pursue a career in helping people recover from injuries). Instead of immediately suggesting ways to edit these sentences, Leslie’s teacher in the writing center sits back, looks at her rather than at the draft, and says, “Tell me why you don’t use ‘I.’” When Leslie responds with an account of papers returned in undergraduate classes, all the “I”s slashed out with red pens, her teacher makes this suggestion: Set aside the applications for this day, do some writing about memories of living in England instead, maybe just one day that really stands out. This writing—which Leslie calls “creative” and “personal,” describing in first-person her bike ride one afternoon through the small towns around London—leads her far (it would seem) from the task of writing a graduate school statement of purpose. But when they return in the next session to the application essay, this “creative” writing gives Leslie and her teacher a text, sentences Leslie has composed, with which to compare, reread, and revise “Extensive employment opportunities abroad . . .” to “While working at a rehabilitation hospital near London, I learned . . . .”

As for Donna, mid-semester she’s faced with the broad topic “Write about estrogen’s effect on cells,” within which she must pose her own question and direct her own research—a very different assignment from her usual experience of being given a specific topic, then taking that topic to the nearest library. When her writing center teacher suggests that she start by “freewriting,” she’s skeptical. Looking back on that experience, though, she says:

I sat down. Nobody else was going to have to read this; it didn’t have to make sense. So I was writing out anything I could think of, almost a Jurassic Park type thing. There’s a lot of environmental chemicals out right now that have a similar structure to estrogen, and they’re wondering if that’s contributing to low sperm counts in men. So I just kind of let that go into an idea of how these contaminants might actually end up sterilizing all the men in the world or something.

Like Max’s reflections on his theatrical glosses, Donna considers that her “Jurassic Park” scenario “got carried away.” Yet, some of this writing, she stresses, “made a lot of sense” and led her to make a list of questions about how current research in this area is being conducted and according to
what assumptions. From this kind of reverie and her reflections on it, she creates a topic that her instructor approves and that has her writing, planning, and raising questions before her first trip to the library.

But with these brief stories I don’t want to suggest that Jaswant, Leslie, Max, and Donna’s work in the writing center can be read as simple and enduring success, easy recipes for academic authority. Though Donna now sees that freewriting is a way to get started in exploring a topic and that she can “put” herself in this writing “in a fun way,” she perceives that all forms of reverie, migration, and considering what she’d like to contend must end once she begins drafting: “It’s like a deck of cards,” she explains. “You have to shuffle all your quotes into the right order, and that’s how you make your paper.” Donna forces me to recognize the limits of what I’d like to contend for the writing center and in this essay, the difficult and ongoing work of re-seeing and revising these pervasive ideas of how authority is made in writing. At these limits, all of these students suggest what we need to dream about next, what we can begin to imagine and enact, including:

1. Making the activity of writing a central part of every session with a student since that writing works to subvert the authoritative voice of the writing center teacher, begins to introduce students to the choices they might have (for Donna, choices beyond that metaphor of shuffling cards), and creates for teachers too (if they are writing as well) a space for reverie, for dreaming about other ways of working with a student, for imagining other ways of responding to a student’s questions. That moment, for instance, when Jaswant asked, “Do I have to explain what Deepavali means?” is one in which I should have thought, “We should write about that question” instead of gearing up to say, definitively, absolutely, “Yes, you should.”

2. Highlighting, too, that practices of reverie and migration aren’t just forms of “pre-writing,” to be assigned to an early stage of “invention” only, but are instead continuing practices of revision that could lead a student like Donna, for instance, to reread her draft with its shuffled collection of quotations and authoritative citations, to write back to those authorities in the margins, beginning to hear what her voice can sound like in this paper too. In this way we can demonstrate that practices of reverie and migration aren’t a “vacation” from the work of constructing authority nor a subtle form of assimilation, a round-about-way of adopting and adapting to conventions, but instead, as Marilyn Cooper argues, a way for students to consider and migrate toward the “spaces left open” in their disciplinary writing, spaces “in which they can construct different subject positions” (109).

3. Considering the role that reading can play in the writing center to triangulate discussion and further work toward dialogizing authority—Jaswant and I possibly reading Kincaid’s “In the Night” to see what context she provides (or refuses to provide) for figuring out what a “night-soil man”
is; Donna and her teacher taking a look at an article or two from biomedical science to see where these writers cite and shuffle and maybe where and how they begin to speak.

4. Valuing in weekly staff meetings the telling and the examination of stories from our work in the writing center. Here I think we’re following the practices of story-telling and of improvisation that Thomas Hemmeter describes in “Live and On Stage: Writing Center Stories and Tutorial Authority.” The telling of tutoring stories in weekly staff meetings, Hemmeter writes, enables the tellers to “clarify their roles, engage issues of power, and construct their tutorial persona” (38). The telling of such stories in the company of others and within a frame that highlights the need to dialogize our conceptions of authority also makes visible to us the otherwise hidden limits, definitions, and exclusions that defined our work with a student, the missed opportunities for reverie, the need for revision.

Jaswant and Max, Donna and Leslie, along with Le Doeuff, tell me that if we’re to enact a pedagogy of migration in the writing center, if students are to revise their constructions of authority from some out-there package to something they make and re-make in writing, if the writing center is to be not an either/or crossroads but a busy, noisy, fascinating intersection, opening out into many more than just two roads that might be taken—if we’re to achieve all or any of this, we need to continually remind ourselves and our students that incompleteness and uncertainty are not tragedies to be covered up with authoritative statements. Instead, incompleteness in a student’s writing is an opportunity for the student to talk, to write, to imagine what else she might say, what else she needs to learn. Likewise, a teacher’s uncertainty—a moment that exiles us from our usual advice and forces us to recognize the limits of what we know—can also be a rich site for learning, if we acknowledge those limits, voice our uncertainty, say “I’m not certain what the answer to your question is” and “But we can talk and write and see if we figure out where you might find some answers.”

Acknowledging limits can be unnerving, even frightening, for teachers as well as for students. As Jaswant says, it takes bravery to venture toward answers whose existence isn’t guaranteed in advance—bravery and a complete refiguring of a teacher’s authority from something that is possessed and passed on to something that’s made and re-made each time we sit down to work with a student. A pedagogy of migration depends, in other words, on teachers who (though long trained to believe that “teacher” like “philosopher” means one who knows absolutely what he or she is saying) also dare to stutter, grope, and work along that verge of the unknown.
Notes

1Scholarship of the past twelve years dramatizes how teachers and researchers have also experienced and responded to the writing center as this crossroads between two competing ideas of authority. Ken Bruffee has argued that the role of the writing center is to enable students “to experience and practice the kinds of conversation that academics most value” (7), while, more particularly, Irene Clark has defined the goal of the tutorial as assisting a student in gaining membership to a particular discourse community (53). More recently, Muriel Harris rearticulates these goals for writing center teaching in *College English*, describing the writing center tutor as a kind of guide to academic living and writing who can “help [students] surmount the hurdles others have set up for them” (28). Though the work of these teachers exceeds the brief paraphrases and quotations I’m allowing here, all three suggest what Mortensen and Kirsch call the “liberal” and “accommodationist” idea of authority, the seeking of sensitive and supportive means to guide students into the subject positions for writing that their classrooms and disciplines allow, though without questioning and examining those positions, their values, their implications. In contrast, Cynthia Haynes-Burton argues in “Writing Centers, Graffiti, and Style” that students often view the tutorial as a site for “resistance discourse,” for “a refusal of the classroom and the dominant framework of meaning it represents” (119). Haynes-Burton pursues that conception of authority that Mortensen and Kirsch describe as “radical” and as “resistant,” though without exploring (in this essay) how this resistant discourse might refigure the way students write and speak outside the writing center.

2For example, philosophy’s insistence on a pure rationality and its repudiation of any kind of foundational statement has led to such absurd contentions as Richard Rorty’s that there’s no basis for claiming as “intrinsically abominable” the subjugation of one gender by another. Sounding very much like composition’s Ann Berthoff, Le Doeuff calls this kind of philosophizing “hyperphilosophism” (*Hipparchia* 21). See Rorty’s essay in the Spring 1991 issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and Le Doeuff’s response, “Harsh Times,” in the May-June 1993 issue of the *New Left Review*.

3Philosophy isn’t alone in this practice of seeking to define and legitimize itself through such displacements and projections. We can see such strategies at work too between different groups of compositionists as one group (those calling themselves “post-process,” for instance) seeks to claim its authority through the denigration and dismissal of the others (those associated with “process” pedagogy). When as writing center practitioners we define our work against that of the classroom, describing classrooms as sites of normative mass education, as sites of abusive and coercive (teacher) authority, as always and only about conformism, we also follow philosophy’s troubling formula.
for creating our voices and our authority through displacement, denigration, and dismissal.

4I take all quotations in this essay from interviews with and writings by graduate students who worked for one semester or more in the writing center. Their names and other identifying information in this essay have been fictionalized.

5For more examples of these kinds of disciplinary exclusions and displacements, see interviews with students and professors in Gesa Kirsch's *Women Writing the Academy*. A graduate student in anthropology, Ms. Dannon, for example, sounds very much like Donna as she locates her authority solely in the vocabulary she employs and the authorities she cites: “At this point, my credibility rests with the material that I’ve researched, that I’ve cited; that’s the only thing I have right now” (44, my emphasis).

6That teachers in my campus’s writing center often accept without question these initial fixed constructions of disciplinary norms shouldn’t surprise me since this center is staffed by graduate students who also grapple with these ideas of academic authority in their own writing and graduate educations.

7I first spoke about Jaswant’s struggles with authority at the National Writing Center Association Conference in New Orleans, and there I tried to stress that her work in fiction does not set her apart from students working on conference presentations, seminar papers, or theses. Creative writing is also composed by the same kinds of disciplinary constraints, exclusions, and suppressions that mark other forms of academic writing, and I believe we make a grave error with our creative-writing students if we fail to see how they stand at that crossroads between assimilation or resistance. I must not have stressed this enough in my presentation, though, since recently, at another conference, I heard a presenter voice her disappointment that graduate student writers weren’t discussed in New Orleans at all—except for one who was working on “creative writing,” not on academic “research.” This line in the language should trouble us since it banishes all forms of reverie, of the imaginative, from academic writing and since it dismisses Jaswant’s work as having nothing to do with re-search, with social critique.

8This moment reminds me that, as writing center and classroom teachers, we need to revisit the ideas of “concision” and “clarity” as unquestioned goods in writing. Clarity, writes Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “is a means of subjection. . . . To write ‘clearly,’ one must incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify . . .” (16-17). Before we advocate editing in the name of clarity, we ought, at the very least, to consider with students what’s being eliminated—and, perhaps, forbidden—in the process.
My decision here to introduce the practice of interpretive paraphrase was guided by an article I'd recently read in *The Writing Center Journal* by Alice Gillam. In that article, she describes a student, Mary, caught between accepting or rejecting her teacher's request that she make her text more "focused." "Rather than stripping her 'story' to the bone in order to impose a focus," Gillam writes, "perhaps Mary needs to flesh out the contradictions embedded in the text and puzzle over the off-key shifts in voice as a way of discovering focus..." (7). For me, Gillam’s essay is very much about enacting that dialectic between reverie and reflection; it’s about imagining, trying out, and then reflecting on the possibility that yes, between Mary’s desire to leave the draft as is and her teacher’s desire for a sharper focus, there is indeed another choice that can surprise and satisfy them both.

**Works Cited**


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