

Interchanges

Response to Sean Zwagerman's "The Scarlet P:
Plagiarism, Panopticism, and the Rhetoric of
Academic Integrity"

Virginia Anderson
Indiana University Southeast

Eight years ago, Rebecca Moore Howard urged compositionists to "set aside" the "category" commonly called *plagiarism* as a meaningful term, in favor of terms she finds more descriptive and less "unwieldy, unstable, and insidious" (488). The persistence of the term in our scholarly lexicon, however, suggests that such abandonment, even of a term that would appear to have useful surrogates, has been hard. Within the past twelve months, two lengthy articles in our major journals have demonstrated our field's inability to quit scratching this particularly worrisome itch. These writers, most recently Sean Zwagerman in the June 2008 *CCC* but also Amy E. Robillard in the September 2007 *College English*, document the interplay between emotion and intellect that will not allow the field to leave "plagiarism anxiety" (Robillard 13) behind. Zwagerman urges us to step back from the anger that so often characterizes our encounters with student lapses in paraphrase and citation; Robillard, on the other hand, argues that we not only cannot reject anger as a legitimate response but also that we should not. She sees such emotion arising from a clash of values that writing teachers especially face in their academic contexts, and she worries that "suppress[ing]" that anger will prevent us from fully understanding its genesis

CCC 60:4 / JUNE 2009

W122

and evaluating its uses, both good and bad (29). Both writers see the tension over what to do about plagiarism as a reaction to difficulties teachers face in dealing with external and usually institutional pressures that ask educators to function as compassionate facilitators of learning despite their submergence in a culture of hierarchy, subservience, and surveillance. But following this ongoing struggle over what composition as a field should do about plagiarism, I have found myself thinking that at least part of compositionists' agonized reaction to plagiarism arises from pressures *internal* to language studies and especially to composition—pressures that I have not seen fully theorized in the debate.

Robillard in particular is interested in understanding these constantly resurfacing emotional reactions; she asks why anger is such a prevalent response to students' misuse of sources, even when we know that such misuse is not always intentional theft. She traces several causes for this anger but focuses on writing teachers' anxiety over their identities—identities that are shaped by competing and perhaps irreconcilable discourses. She finds one such discourse in composition scholarship, in which “teachers who represent themselves as angry . . . risk identifying themselves as ‘bad’ teachers” (13). This discourse, one of liberation from a punitive culture eager to criminalize not least because of its own need for scapegoats, contrasts with the discourse of the academy itself, which demands that teachers model ideals of intelligence, honesty, and authority, acting as experts “too smart to be fooled by scheming students” (22) and too upright to let such moral lapses slide. Composition itself, Robillard believes, holds these two discourses in uneasy relation (20); teachers trying to meet both ideals are justly distraught. She urges us to recognize that anger is a human response when the relationship that writing creates between teacher and student, or between writer and reader, is betrayed: “If we represent ourselves as emotionally invested in our students, it only makes sense that we’d be angry when they plagiarize” (29).

Interestingly, Zwagerman enacts the scholarly discourse that concerns Robillard, arguing that when teachers see punishment as a valid response to plagiarism, they become complicit in the commodification of learning that has reduced education to nothing more than a streamline to a job (687). For Zwagerman, plagiarism, as an efficient means to a grade, is only to be expected in the culture of mistrust created by teachers chortling over their successes at Turnitin.com. The Turnitin testimonials Zwagerman quotes are a far cry from the blogs Robillard explores, in which teachers struggle with their feelings and responsibilities, but his insights complement hers in making visible the ways

that our disciplinary expectations of ourselves pit us against systemic forces that neither compassion nor complicity can easily disable.

These systemic forces from outside composition per se do call up another duty to students that I feel may be underrepresented in our scholarship. It is possible to understand fully the charges against the use of plagiarism as a bludgeon that Zwagerman depicts and still stand up in front of a classroom and say, "If you do this and this, you have plagiarized." What's ethically operative is what follows, or should follow: "in the eyes of many of the instructors you're going to encounter in your other classes here at Big Time U." On the one hand, this qualification reeks of commodification: "I'm telling you how to avoid bad grades." On the other, I have become convinced that students interpret what I tell them in ways that can often make me wonder what I actually said, and it just seems to me that to be fuzzy and thus risk misinterpretation about the current legal status even of patchwriting is to send students straight into the maw of the detection monster that Zwagerman describes. Even the part-time faculty in the composition program where I teach must be actively persuaded that copying or infelicitous borrowing of other sorts usually represents a moment of passage in the development of a writer or of a particular piece and constitutes an opportunity for helping students with that most difficult challenge of locating themselves in complex and unfamiliar texts. Convincing faculty in other schools across campus not to rush to Google at the first shift in a writer's voice is uphill work, and sending students to these faculty members without *legitimate* means of protecting themselves seems a violation of their trust.

But this question of my practical duty to my students is still a question about my relationship to forces beyond my disciplinary context. Within that context, the whole issue of plagiarism is informed by yet another discourse, that discourse that vigorously proclaims the death of the original, autonomous author. Howard's view of the emotional impact of plagiarism as "gender hysteria" (486) is well known; her widely cited work on the way in which the knowledge from which writing emerges is intensely collaborative, resistant to fictions of origination and ownership, is difficult to refute in any substantive way. This resistance to the entire nexus of assumptions underlying academic citation practice grounds an important prong of the plagiarism discussion: the belief that to endorse traditional views of intellectual property is to mislead students about the true nature of the written word. To tell them that anybody owns ideas or even words is to urge on them an unquestioning acceptance of the patriarchal, competitive, and individualistic mindset that the very word *property*

connotes. And yet just as Robillard argues that we shy away from following our understanding of the functions of relationships to its logical conclusion that anger is to be expected, we equally shy away from following our theoretical belief in the collaborative nature of knowledge to *its* logical conclusion, which would indeed lead us to do away with the category of plagiarism once and for all. Robillard's essay is predicated on the claim that plagiarism *is* a problem calling for response, and the other two authors I cite here, despite their firm theoretical stances, finally cede that something we recognize as plagiarism does exist, and it is wrong (Howard 487–88; Zwagerman 701–2). We must think, then, that somebody does own at least some words. But, in the face of our widely accepted theory, how and why?

At its most straightforward, our disciplinary concern about the cultural implications of ownership butts up against a disciplinary concern on which Robillard touches (14, 29): our position on the sanctity of labor. Robillard writes: "In plenty of instances of so-called plagiarism, what bothers us isn't so much a lack of originality as the fact that the plagiarizer has stolen someone else's *work*—the time it took to write the words or do the necessary research" (29, emphasis in the original). As a field often dependent on contingent labor, we are too aware of how easily labor can be exploited; to devalue the time that someone spent in front of a computer, perhaps well into the night, giving form to amorphous information, perhaps even making visible relations among materials that were not previously obvious, is to betray our own lived experience as well as our theoretical understanding of what it means to write.

And we can't even quite deny that in such acts of writing, something *new* is created. I am convinced by Kenneth Burke's claim that we all participate in a "poetic" process by which we generate "gargoyles" and "grotesques," a bringing together of things that have not been previously joined to create a "perspective by incongruity" that allows us to see familiar things in unexpected ways (see, for example, lv–lvi, 90, 110–13). This conjoining of things that do not ordinarily go together is at the heart of metaphor but also informs much persuasive analytical writing. For example, we may take theory that has become a shared body of knowledge and apply it to a situation to which it has not been applied before, or to different texts. In doing so we make available for future communal use insights on which others can base "new" uses of "old" ideas. Perhaps this is not the meaning of "original" that the Romantic poets had in mind; perhaps we need a different term for it. But whoever invents that term will have ironically done some "new" and "original" work.

Possibly the emphasis on the individual contribution in such claims still galls. Yet this rejection of the existence and by implication the rights of the individual lies in unstable counterpoint to another strongly felt disciplinary belief. This instability marks a clash of theories, a contradiction that our efforts to understand the dialectic between the individual and the collaborative group may never fully reconcile. For at the same time that we work to demolish the autonomous subject, we sense that in doing so we commit another ethical wrong.

A particularly salient discussion of what this wrong might be appears in Susan C. Jarrett's 2004 essay, "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing." For above all else, plagiarism is about representation: how we represent the information we use. In her essay, Jarrett argues for a distinction between two kinds of representation, metonymic and metaphoric (113–14). In metaphor, she contends, the representation stands *in front of* the subject to which it is connected. It purports to *be* that subject, to speak for it, to reduce it to what the representation says it is, to occlude whatever else the subject itself might have to say. As a trivial example of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson pointed out nearly thirty years ago, to say that "love is a rose" is to ask us to ignore the features of love that are not like a rose and to highlight in our minds those that do fit the representation, thus reducing "love" to its representation. In contrast, metonymic representation is associative: the representation stands *beside* its subject; it announces itself *as* a representation rather than as the thing itself, so that observers can compare the two and see what else there might be to say about the subject in addition to what the representation highlights. Jarrett proposed such metonymic representation as the more ethically defensible alternative when we make choices about how we presume to speak for and about others, as the nature of knowledge creation as a shared communicative enterprise so often calls upon us to do.

There are many ways in which we can stand in front of those we must inevitably represent, and no doubt we often do so inadvertently. But it has always seemed to me that working hard to respect the difference between representing another's ideas or words as our own and rigorously crediting that other is one way of opting for a metonymic versus a metaphoric representation. A citation, even of an idea or insight that may not properly be said to "belong" to the individual I am citing, is a way of saying to readers that I am purporting to bring forward only part of what that individual might have had to say, and at that only my interpretation. It is an invitation to my readers to seek out the other I am representing and compare her version of her own

thoughts with what I depict them as meaning. To refuse readers this citation, this acknowledgment that the information did not spring full-blown into my own head, is to occlude that other, to reduce what she might have had to say to what I choose to lay before readers.

This strikes me as the simplest of courtesies, let alone of ethical choices, and indeed, it is one eagerly observed in our own scholarship. No one in the plagiarism debate thus far suggests abandoning this courtesy by advising our students to ignore the distinctions inherent in these kinds of representational choices. But we have been zealous about debunking the concept of original genius in an effort to break down the hoarding of knowledge that intellectual property laws can foster. Perhaps admirable and necessary in itself, this zeal may lead students to assume that we find it ethically permissible to appropriate others at will, when our own visible practices show that nothing could be further from the truth.

Thus, plagiarism rightly vexes us both emotionally and intellectually because it confronts us with a thorny intellectual problem: how can we claim that no one owns what one writes without also claiming the right to determine who *does* own it, and thus to lay claim to it in the name of an “everyone” that erases others and becomes a sort of totalizing and unassailable past?

For me, the problem is that no piece of this conflicted theory can quite be abandoned. The problem becomes how to present these nuances in a fifteen-week semester, how to help inexperienced writers work through this challenging task of entering a complex conversation without simply parroting—or perhaps just as often, misparroting—the unfamiliar texts they must internalize and use in far too short a time. If I tell them that current intellectual property practices are theoretically unsound and unjust besides, I risk setting them up for accusations like those Zwagerman depicts; on the other hand, I know from experience that going too far in the other direction produces painfully tortuous prose in which any hope the writer has of making an appearance as himself or herself utterly evaporates. Interrogating the practices and assumptions of the plagiarism industry is certainly an option, one that all scholars in this debate seem to support. Yet I can’t help ending on a note that distresses me as much as it will no doubt distress those to whom I am responding: I must return at last to the need to leaven that interrogation with a final word of caution: “If you do this and this, you will have plagiarized.”

Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. 1954. 3rd ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Howard, Rebecca Moore. "Sexuality, Textuality: The Cultural Work of Plagiarism." *College English* 62 (2000): 473–91.
- Jarratt, Susan C. "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing." *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Andrea A. Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2004. 110–28.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- Robillard, Amy E. "We Won't Get Fooled Again: On the Absence of Angry Responses to Plagiarism in Composition Studies." *College English* 70 (2007): 10–31.
- Zwagerman, Sean. "The Scarlet P: Plagiarism, Panopticism, and the Rhetoric of Academic Integrity." *College Composition and Communication* 59 (2008): 676–710.