

§ Preface

I write this preface only a few months after the 2024 U.S. presidential election, under the shadow of devastating assaults on nearly every component of American society, including higher education. It is clear that the rights that most Americans—and many around the world—hold to be foundational to democracy can no longer be assumed. When viewed through the lens of decolonialism, it is easy to see that the new administration is tightening its grip on the colonial matrix of power that Walter Mignolo (2007) and others have described. Take for example the following recent developments:

- Claiming that English is the official language of the United States (The White House, 2025a).
- Scrutinizing and punishing all kinds of institutions, including universities, for their support of diversity, equity, and inclusion (The White House, 2025b).
- Removing websites and withholding federal monies from centers of knowledge production, such as universities and governmental agencies (Bhatia et al., 2025; Hwang et al., 2025; Singer, 2025).
- Disappearing Black and Brown people—including legal permanent residents, international students, and U.S. citizens—in or outside of U.S. boundaries (Meyer, 2025; Uranga et al., 2025).

All of these developments, and many more, underline the colonial epistemology that is, and has always been, deeply embedded in American life. Many Americans are rightly shocked by these developments, but these actions spring out of a long tradition of colonial thinking. They could not occur without a fundamental belief in the superiority of White, Western ways of knowing. Colonial epistemology is what allowed Europeans to conceive of North America as empty and to settle land that was already occupied by Indigenous people. Colonial epistemology is responsible for a rich Western economy built upon slavery and the systemic exploitation of workers. I could go on. My point is that these developments are indeed shocking, inhuman, and immoral, but they are not new. They constitute the American dream. We arrived at this point in history due to the long tendrils of coloniality that are rooted in America as a nation and in American identity itself.

These long tendrils, I argue in this book, have shaped English-language literacy education, which in turn implicates the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies, a discipline based primarily in the United States and focused

on postsecondary contexts of writing practices and pedagogy. I investigate and expose these ties by looking outward, beyond U.S. boundaries, to Syrian Protestant College (SPC), an institution founded in 1866 by American Protestant missionaries in Beirut (SPC is today known as the American University of Beirut). This book provides a historical perspective on how American colonial epistemology—and resistance to such epistemology—emerges in English-language literacy education and language policy. I show through this historical account how literacy education and language policy traffic in discourses of coloniality to produce an imagined America that SPC students, faculty, and administrators negotiated rhetorically. Transnational and translingual discourses provide the backdrop and motive for the assertion of coloniality in contexts of literacy education such as SPC.

The geopolitical context of SPC, which I explicate in Chapters 1 and 2, makes the transnational and translingual elements of literacy education and language policy explicit, but uncovering such histories is only one part of the decolonial project. Another part—a part that this book hints at but does not explore at length—is exposing how transnational and translingual discourse circulated in and around seemingly monolingual and monocultural contexts, such as late-19th-century Harvard, where so much of the discipline’s historical understanding is rooted. New ways of knowing emerge when the history of the discipline is retold as a transnational and translingual one, and the account presented in this book provides one example of such a retelling. As I indicate throughout this book, retellings such as this one carry important implications for contemporary contexts of literacy education. While I primarily contextualize this book within the scholarship of my field, U.S.-based rhetoric and writing studies, many of these implications can be applied to related disciplines such as education, linguistics, literacy studies, communication, and even literature.

A Few Key Terms

Before continuing, I want to clarify a few terms that I use repeatedly throughout this book. When I refer to the discipline of *rhetoric and writing studies*, I refer to an academic field born in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (Nystrand et al., 1993). The discipline is characterized by the study of adult writing practices and writing pedagogy, including the study of public rhetoric and rhetorical education, as well as postsecondary writing programs. It is related to but distinct from fields such as communication, linguistics, literature, and education, and it is also referred to as “rhetoric and composition,” “writing studies,” “composition studies,” or some variation thereof.

The discipline of rhetoric and writing studies is partly constituted by numerous historical accounts that tie it to the emergence of first-year writing at Harvard in the mid- to late-19th century, as well as to the Western rhetorical tradition. I describe these historical narratives and how they have helped create a foundation for the contemporary discipline in Chapter 1. When I refer to the *history of rhetoric and writing studies*, I am specifically referring to the U.S.-based historical narratives that have tied the discipline to these earlier histories. As I elaborate in Chapter 1, the connections between the contemporary discipline and earlier histories have been established through the historiography of scholars such as James Berlin, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, and others. This book seeks to destabilize such narratives and thus alter scholars' conceptions of what constitutes the history of the discipline.

Rhetoric and writing studies refers to the name of a contemporary academic discipline. In contrast, when I refer to *literacy education*, I mean education related to literacy that may be broader in scope than what American rhetoric and writing scholars think of as writing instruction. In the context of contemporary U.S. institutions of higher education, first-year writing courses are a near-universal general education requirement. Literacy education is a better term to use for contexts outside of the US, in which English is often treated as both a language and an area of study, and also for historical accounts in which "writing instruction," as American rhetoric and writing scholars think of it today, does or did not exist in the same form. It is important, too, to make it clear that I am not referring to the field of literacy studies when I refer to literacy education, although much scholarship in that area is relevant to the history I have presented here.

Throughout this book, I use the terms epistemology and ideology repeatedly. When referring to *epistemology*, I mean a way of knowing or a theory of knowledge. *Ideology* is narrower in scope than epistemology, referring to a set of beliefs that are often political in nature and constitute epistemology. In this book, colonialism is epistemological, whereas nationalism and monolingualism can be understood as ideologies that constitute colonialism. Additionally, religious ideologies are not the same as religion itself. When religious belief is used for political purposes—such as contemporary Christian nationalism—we can call it ideological.

Additionally, as implied in the title of this book, I often use the words *America* and *American* metaphorically to refer to a place or identity that is constructed and therefore representative of colonial epistemology. I highlight the symbolic nature of these words by using phrases such as *an imagined America* or the *idea of America*. Of course, I also use *America* and *American* in ways we might expect, such as in reference to the country known as the

United States and to individuals who hold American nationality. In general, the distinction should be clear in context.

Since I frame this project in part through the lens of translingual theory, I want to clarify what I mean by the terms *monolingual*, *multilingual*, and *translingual*, and how they differ from *monolingualism* and *translingualism*. On the one hand, I agree with scholars such as Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, et al. (2011) and Suresh Canagarajah (2013) who argued that all communication is inherently translingual—that is, we are always already making meaning across linguistic and communicative boundaries. At the same time, I agree with those such as Scott Richard Lyons (2009) and Keith Gilyard (2016) who have argued that language difference exists and is consequential at a material level, particularly for historically marginalized groups. For this reason, I use monolingual to refer to those people who would self-identify as speaking only one language, and I use multilingual to refer to those who would self-identify as speaking multiple languages. Monolingual, multilingual, and translingual are used as descriptors for people, practices, institutions, or contexts, whereas monolingualism and translingualism are ideologies describing orientations toward language.

Positioning Myself: Languages and Limitations

It has taken me more than ten years to write this book, in part because I needed time to work out exactly what I could ethically and responsibly say about a place and population where I am an outsider. Part of the reason my focus throughout the book is on an imagined America and the discourses that comprise this imagining is because a large part of my identity and thinking is inextricably tied to White American (colonial) epistemology. At the same time, I can speak about a seemingly distant place and population because another part of my identity and thinking is now tied to that distant place and population through lived experience, personal relationships, and language. The relatively recent emergence of conversations about decolonial theory in the field of rhetoric and writing studies has also been important, in that these conversations have allowed me to articulate what I had previously only been able to gesture toward in previous publications about the same history (Arnold, 2014, 2016, 2018).

Given the decolonial approach I have taken in this book, it would be hypocritical to pretend that I am a detached observer of the material, people, or place that I analyze. This book represents a recursive and ongoing process of learning and unlearning that has forced me to come to terms with the limits and benefits of my positionality in relation to this history. I write today as an associate professor of rhetoric and writing at North Dakota State

University, an institution built on the traditional lands of the Oceti Sakowin (Dakota, Lakota, Nakoda) and Anishinaabe Peoples. I am a White American woman who grew up in the midwestern United States immersed in a culture and epistemology similar to that of the evangelical American Protestant missionaries who founded Syrian Protestant College. When I accepted my first academic position at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Fall 2011 as an assistant professor of English, I was like many Americans in that I had very limited experience with languages other than English and a very limited perspective on the world, even though I had traveled internationally.

It is an understatement to say that during the four years I spent in Beirut, my perspective changed. It is more appropriate to say that the experience fundamentally altered my thinking about the world and my work. I formed deep and lasting relationships with people whose differences challenged and enlivened me. I was exposed to critiques of America and American nationalism previously unavailable to me. I heard stories and learned histories (particularly about Palestine) that I had never encountered in the US, which greatly impacted my own understanding of global geopolitics. I learned that effective teaching and research meant complicating the knowledge that I previously took for granted, knowledge that had always been rewarded in America. There was plenty about the place, the politics, and the culture that I did (and still do) not understand, and I made many mistakes as an outsider—some of which I am aware of and others I am sure that I never knew about.

In addition to my experience of life in Beirut, my change in perspective can also be attributed to learning Arabic over many years. While at AUB, I took a few classes in Modern Standard Arabic (الفصحى or *al-fusha*), giving me a basic understanding of grammar as well as the ability to read and write Arabic script, and I also took classes in Lebanese Arabic at a local Berlitz language school.¹ When I left Beirut in 2015, I was at best superficially conversant in

1 Arabic is considered by linguists to be a diglossic language, meaning the formal and informal dialects of the language can be considered two distinct languages used by the same group of people. The different forms are used for very different purposes: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used in formal situations such as in newspapers or on TV news broadcasts throughout the region. The vernacular form, or عامية *amiyeh*, is used on the street. Different regions and countries use different vernaculars, and some of these are mutually intelligible (such as Lebanese and Jordanian Arabic), but others are not (such as Moroccan and Egyptian Arabic). The different vernaculars are all called “Arabic,” but it would be more realistic to call them each by a different name—a comparable example is that we call Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese by different names but they are all closely related through Latin (akin to MSA). A speaker of one is likely to be able to understand the others—to find some common linguistic ground—to some degree. In this sense, it might be said that I have actually learned four different languages (Modern Standard, Lebanese, Egyptian, and Sudanese Arabic) over the last 13 years—which makes me feel far better about my language journey!

the Lebanese dialect and could sound out words written in Arabic but was unlikely to understand most of them. There was little opportunity to study Arabic in Fargo, North Dakota, once I started living there because my new institutional home of North Dakota State University stopped offering courses in the language as soon as I arrived and because many of the immigrants with whom I interacted were from other parts of the world. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it the “silver lining” of online synchronous Arabic classes offered by the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, and a private tutor. I pursued the study of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for two years, advancing to beginner intermediate proficiency. After an extended trip to Sudan in the summer of 2022 during which I was unable to communicate well with most people in the artificial dialect that is MSA (no one speaks it in everyday conversation; see footnote 1), I decided to switch my focus upon return to vernacular Egyptian Arabic, which is almost universally understood by Arabic speakers because of the popularity and wide dissemination of Egyptian television and film. Since 2022 until the present, I have studied online with a private tutor based in Cairo for approximately four hours per week and am proud to say that I can now converse for a prolonged period of time and with relative depth in Egyptian Arabic at an intermediate or high intermediate level. Achieving this level of language proficiency has taken an almost embarrassingly long time (see footnote 1), but the experience has given me a great deal of humility and empathy for all language learners, including those who are at the heart of this study. The experience of developing functional multilingual literacy has also led me to form rewarding relationships with immigrants, children of immigrants, and international students here in the United States.² This development has enriched my teaching, research, and very being in the world. Ultimately, my multilingual proficiency and transnational experience has deeply informed the decolonial, transnational, and translingual approach I take in this book.

2 Since returning to the United States in 2015, I have facilitated English language classes as a volunteer (and voluntary volunteer coordinator) every weekend for adult immigrants in my community of Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota. Many of the immigrants are Somali and Congolese, and although actual progress in English is often slow, we regularly discover exciting commonalities among Arabic, Swahili, and Somali—reminding me over and over again that all languages, and all people, are related. Every weekend (and in many everyday encounters beyond the weekend), the abstract idea of “language difference is a resource” becomes reality. My multilingual and transnational experience has also impacted my professional life, in that I am able to understand the profound experience of arriving in a new country as an outsider. This has allowed me to connect more deeply with and provide more meaningful mentorship to international graduate students enrolled in my department’s graduate programs and also to emphasize transnational and multilingual perspectives in course content.

There are undoubtedly many shortcomings that will be evident to readers of this book. Most obviously, my attention throughout this book focuses on a college founded by Americans, and much of the archival material I rely on was written in English. It could be argued that this focus merely maintains the centrality of Western epistemology, which decolonial theory seeks to undo. But decolonial work does not seek to recenter knowledge; rather, decolonial work requires an acknowledgment of the many centers of knowledge that exist simultaneously—this is the difference between universal and pluriversal ways of knowing. Rethinking and rearticulating history through a decolonial lens means we need to study how colonial structures of oppression work. In order to understand how processes of exclusion have historically and continue to occur in the context of English-language literacy education, we must study the discourses of the American missionary founders of SPC alongside and in interaction with the discourses of SPC students and the surrounding community. This book conducts such an analysis.

Another shortcoming of this book, which I readily acknowledge, is that I am not a scholar of Arab or Islamic rhetoric, nor am I fluent in Arabic. I have tried to do my due diligence in contextualizing SPC within the history of the Ottoman Empire and the geopolitics of the region where the college was located, and I have developed my Arabic language proficiency over many years. However, I still relied on a translator to produce the translations that are central to this analysis, and I still have much to learn about the Arabic language, rhetorical traditions, and literacy education in the region. These efforts are ongoing but incomplete at the time of this book's publication. I invite others who are better suited to do so to (re)contextualize the history presented here through these lenses. In Chapter 5, I have included original texts written in Arabic alongside their translation in English in order for scholars fluent in Arabic to understand those materials on their own terms.