Introduction: The Forward Arc of Projection

What leads an 18-year-old Chinese woman to pack up her things and fly across the world to study at a U.S. university? She carries with her all she has accumulated over her life and all that has been shaped by generations—if not centuries—of sociocultural history? This journey across cultural spaces is engendered by a particular policy context: the recruitment and enrollment of international students in U.S. institutions of higher education, often driven by global flows as well as an active institutional agenda for internationalization. And where do such students land? Among other places, they land within our institutional curricular frameworks and classrooms. A pilot interview for the research this book is based on captured this young Chinese student’s perception at a moment of entry: When registering for a section of the university’s required first-year writing course, she felt a sense of connection with one of the sections whose course title implied the “rewriting” of the classic novel *Jane Eyre*. She remembered that she “had much feeling” about the topic because she had read the book *Jane Eyre* as a middle school student in China, and she was “really interested” in what the American teacher would tell her about it. Throughout her life, she had related to the character of Jane Eyre because she viewed herself as an independent woman like Jane and also had a sense of self that shaped her experience within a particular historical period.

This student’s hopeful feeling about the course content, however, was tempered by her confusion at the notion of being
asked to “rewrite” this classic novel: “Do I need to rewrite the whole book?” she asked herself, “Does this mean the writer is not good?” Then after reading the syllabus on the first day of class, she considered withdrawing and changing to what she thought would be a less challenging section of the course. She found the content of the syllabus to be dense and filled with terms she had never heard before, and she felt that the weighted grade of writing assignments was overwhelming. Her heart became heavy, but she spoke with friends and reflected and, in the end, decided to persist because the class had initially piqued her interest. In early class meetings, she was attentive but quiet, finding that by the time she had formulated her words enough to share something in the class discussion, someone else had already made a similar point. She knew that active participation was a component of the final grade, so she was highly aware of the need to contribute to class activities and discussions, but she found it hard to explain her ideas and worried that others could not understand her spoken English. Though initially she felt she was “not in this class” and was more like an outsider, her confidence grew when an American classmate referenced a comment of hers in a class discussion and when she realized that some of the American students in the class had not even read the book Jane Eyre before. How does the rest of her journey unfold?

The central content of this book explores this journey for ten second language (L2) international students, all of whom had migrated transnationally to pursue an undergraduate degree in an urban, private research-intensive university in the United States. Through a series of three interviews during the semester that participants were enrolled in a mainstream first-year writing (FYW) course, the “arc” of their experience was captured over time, starting as they were “projected” forward into this new socio-academic space and culminating with their reflections as they completed this experience.

In other words, I sought to understand the lived experience of these participants in a U.S. curricular context, to understand how they constructed and revealed their experiences in this mediated socio-academic space. Because an understanding of this derives
from both a description of the facts of the lived experience—a phenomenological approach—and an interpretation of its meaning—a hermeneutic consideration—I applied van Manen’s (1990) action sensitive pedagogic approach to this research. Part of my pedagogic intent for this study was influenced by my own role as an educator and my belief that the findings of studies like this can inform both policy and praxis. Once a description of the lived experience of diverse students illuminates our understanding of this phenomenon, we can then open up our own perspectives on the overall trend of internationalization, as well as our institutional policies and practices. This is based on the fundamental premise that our consciousness links us to the world. By intentionally entering into the experience of others, “our presuppositions are thrown into relief, exposed in new ways, and made available for revision” (McCaffrey, Raffin-Bouchal, & Moules, 2012, p. 217).

I have always been broadly interested in the movement of people across borders and have directed much of my own recent scholarly work toward the discourses and practices related to the internationalization of education and the development of global perspectives and competencies. On a more local level, in my everyday teaching of L2 writing I am focused on helping international students develop both the knowledge and skills to manage the expectations of university-level writing in the United States. I also act as an advocate for the international student population on campus whenever I can. In my opinion, the presence of international students—in growing numbers—on U.S. campuses is often touted as evidence that schools are globally connected. Yet at the same time, L2 students tend to be viewed through a deficit perspective by administrators, faculty, and fellow students and may be isolated academically and socially from the mainstream academic community. We would all benefit from a deeper and more reflective understanding of these culturally and linguistically diverse students.

This project originated out of those interests and concerns as well as a recurring anecdotal experience of mine: Every semester, when L2 students leave my English for Academic Purposes
(EAP) writing class to go on to take the mainstream FYW course that is required of all undergraduate students, I listen to their concerns about which section of the course to choose. Though each of the sections shares the same overall objectives and writing expectations, the thematic content of each instructor’s course is different—a policy decision that was intended to enable students to choose a theme that aligned with their intellectual interests. L2 students go to the writing program website and see course options, for example, that link Darwin to U.S. politics, examine the use of African-American speech in public domains, or explore American cultural identity through the lens of Western film. These are innovative and intellectually challenging course themes and potentially powerful platforms for critical thinking, argumentation, and writing at a university level. Yet, as I try to explain to L2 students what the genre of Western film is or its intimate connection to the American identity, I often think: In addition to the pressures of writing on that level, how will they respond to the content expectations of the class? particularly when many American students will have a more natural fluency with the thematic content, including its underlying assumptions and knowledge domains. What does it feel like to be a student coming into such a course from the position of a cultural or linguistic outsider, expected to interact with the thematic content, with assignments and activities, and with their American peers and instructor?

The Socio-Academic Space Model

A key contribution of this book is the conceptual model this study engendered. Though existing research explores various aspects of L2 students’ experiences—for example, campus acculturation, writing or language development, writing processes, interaction with peers or instructors—this book advocates for the classroom itself to be considered a socio-academic space and a unique site for research. In short, the classroom is a socio-culturally constructed “space,” in line with the constructionist theory that learning is a profoundly situated social activity
(Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Figure I.1 illustrates the way I have envisioned my socio-academic space model.

Though situated in a specific classroom context, that of a theme-based FYW course at a U.S. university, the conceptual model that emerged out of this study has relevance across myriad classroom and institutional contexts. It is socioculturally grounded, drawing on German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s advancement of Heidegger’s notion of “thrownness,” in which individuals are thrown or projected into new experiences informed by the sociocultural history and the forestructure that shaped their previous understandings. Once projected into a new experience, in this case the socio-academic space of a U.S. college writing class, they engage in mediated activities with others in that setting. Their navigation of the experience—both the details of the experience as “lived” and how they make meaning of the experience—then shapes their future understandings and perspectives.

The content of this book has direct relevance for educators across disciplines, particularly writing program administrators and faculty of writing and writing-intensive courses. It would also be of interest to policymakers and to scholars across fields.
such as second language writing, applied linguistics, second language acquisition, writing studies, international education, higher education, and curriculum and instruction. Though not necessarily intended for use in a course, this book could be of value for those pursuing graduate coursework in composition/rhetoric, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), international education, or even qualitative research studies. Readers will conclude this book with an understanding of the multiple forces that shape global mobility on a higher educational level while deeply engaging with these participants’ individual stories as expressed in their own voices. These narrative accounts—thematicallly analyzed across participants—help readers connect the particular to the universal, a key tool in developing an understanding of a phenomenon. In fact, we can apply Gadamer’s “arc of projection and reflection” to readers’ interaction with this text: By entering the world of this book, we invite intentional reflection that then informs our future understandings, attitudes, and practices—particularly as they relate to the growing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our educational communities.

This book is organized broadly as follows: Chapters 1 through 4 introduce and situate the study and its participants; Chapters 5 through 7 provide vivid description and interpretation of the “arc” of the lived experience at three points in time: the beginning, middle, and end of the semester in which participants were enrolled in the mainstream first-year writing course. Chapters 8 through 10 revisit participant perspectives as they reflect from a distance, present analysis of the key themes and implications of the research, and offer conclusions and recommendations.