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Bruce Horner

Discoursing Basic Writing

The teaching of basic writing occupies a peculiar position in composition studies. It is the specialty of some of the leading figures in composition studies and, simultaneously, the province of teachers and students placed at the bottom of the academic institutional hierarchy. The emergence of basic writing as an academic field in the early 1970s has been cited as crucial historically in the development of composition. John Trimbur, noting that “many of the teaching and research projects we now take for granted began in the wake of open admissions and educational opportunity programs in the late sixties and early seventies,” attributes “a number of remarkable innovations in the study and teaching of writing” to basic writing (14). James Slevin identifies the period as the time of composition’s “rise,” a “writing movement” addressing “broad questions about the aims of education and the shape of various educational institutions” and having as its focus “the revitalizing of the teaching of writing” (12). Ira Shor likewise describes this time as one when teachers faced “a creative and exciting frontier of cultural democracy” (*Critical Teaching* 269).

Trimbur, Slevin, and Shor all identify the lessons and insights of teaching from this period in political terms: a “movement” for “cultural democracy” that explicitly called into question the social and political role of educational institutions and the politics of representing students, or prospective students, and their writing in particular ways—as “literate” or “illiterate,” “college material” or “remedial,” “skilled” or “unskilled.” It is significant, however, that all three writers identify such lessons and insights as at risk of being lost or forgotten. We need, Trimbur notes, to “re-learn” the insights of open admissions (14–15). Slevin worries that the

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training of writing teachers typically does not include investigation of the history of writing instruction and its role in socializing those new student populations historically called "remedial" (14). Shor offers his own account of teaching in Open Admissions "as a means to resist the erasure of memory" (*Critical Teaching* 269).

In this essay, I explore why and how such insights of basic writing got lost to such an extent that they now need to be "relearned," in order that they not be "re-lost." I analyze a dominant discourse on basic writing whose meanings and forms are central to such works as Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, the *Journal of Basic Writing*, the 1987 *Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers* and various bibliographies on basic writing. I refer to this discourse as *Basic Writing* to highlight both its institutional power and its selective representation of the wealth of practices and projects in teaching basic writing. I argue that Basic Writing represents a response to another, powerful public discourse on higher education and those students deemed underprepared for college. I map the formation of that discourse by analyzing the key terms and assumptions operating in a range of public debate on open admissions in general and at the City University of New York (CUNY) in particular, the institution most closely associated with texts shaping much of Basic Writing discourse. I argue that public discourse on higher education and open admissions perpetuates the denial of the academy as part of the material, political, social, and historical worlds. The success of Basic Writing in legitimizing the institutional place of basic writing courses and students cannot be separated from the ways in which it works within the framework of public discourse on higher education and Open Admissions, particularly its silence about the concrete material, political, institutional, social historical realities confronting basic writing teachers, students, and courses. The costs of such a strategy, however, have been the erasure of the sort of critical insights that first propelled practices and projects in basic writing and the near permanent institutional marginalization of basic writing courses, teachers, and students.

This exploration should interest not just basic writing teachers but all those involved in the teaching of college writing. Not only has the emergence of Basic Writing contributed significantly to the field of composition studies, but basic writing students, teachers, and courses represent composition's problems of academic institutional status writ large. Like college composition generally, basic writing has long been perceived as marginal at best: expendable, temporary, properly the responsibility of the high schools, and therefore a "drain" on English departments specifically and colleges and universities in general. Basic Writing's efforts to work within and against the public discourse on higher education dramatically highlight the ideological and material constraints with which all teaching of

entry-level students has had to contend. Examining the strategic value and limitations of Basic Writing's response to these constraints suggests how and why college composition as a whole has, as Susan Miller puts it, "formed a continuing special circumstance" (81).

Addressing two possible objections to my focus may help clarify my project. It can be and has been argued that the teaching of basic writing (and the practice of open admissions) long pre-dates the *term* Basic Writing, discourse associated with that term, and CUNY's late 1960s-1970s Open Admissions policy. While this is true, my interest is in exploring how and why Basic Writing discourse has effectively eclipsed that other extensive, fluid, and heterogeneous work. My aim is to contest such a displacement by highlighting the conditions leading to it. Second, and relatedly, some may object that restricting my focus to dominant Basic Writing discourse as I have defined it perpetuates the silencing of alternative discourses and practices that transgress institutional boundaries of the discipline of basic writing, or any composition, teaching, whether by those involved in basic writing or by others, at CUNY or elsewhere. Patricia Lawrence, for example, argues that exclusive attention to Mina Shaughnessy's published writings ignores what once had to be "submerged," noting, for example, that "in reading *Errors and Expectations*, we are reading only part of a conversation in an urban educational institution at a certain historical moment" and we need to read it with such "historical specificity" in mind, as one of a plurality of voices (22, 27). While I would echo Lawrence's subsequent call for the emergence of stories once submerged, her criticism begs the question of how and why some stories have been kept "submerged" while others have been elevated. We need to know how and why this has happened, and with what consequences for our work as teachers, scholars, administrators. Examining this process should serve not to repress other stories but to make their emergence more likely, to provoke, if you will, their recovery, circulation, and application.

* * * * *

Many of the texts constituting Basic Writing discourse were produced under the specific conditions of the advent of Open Admissions at CUNY and in response to a dominant public discourse on open admissions programs, and particularly Open Admissions at CUNY. This discourse operated on a binary opposing student activism to academic excellence, identifying the former with lack of academic preparation and the latter with political disinterestedness. It thus imagined two types of students set in opposition to one another: the open admissions students, associated with politics and minority activism, and the ideal college students, assumed to be interested

in and capable of pursuing academic excellence because they were not distracted by political interests (see also Lu, Chapter Five).

This binary made invisible to most commentators those students who crossed the division between political activism and academic excellence—who had met traditional admissions requirements but who were also politically active. Indeed, public images of student activists regularly neglected the strong correlation of campus activism with highly selective admission standards (Keniston 120). Instead, student activism was regularly equated with illiteracy, as when Lewis Mayhew claimed that

dissenting youth . . . all too frequently seem unable to say or write a simple English sentence. Their concerns are expressed . . . in a . . . flow of words possessing neither syntax nor grammatical effectiveness. . . . So pronounced are these linguistic failures that I have begun to wonder whether or not they might represent a pathology worthy of some further study. (92–93)

In a widely-publicized speech, Vice-President Agnew went so far as to claim that the intrusion into universities of “those unqualified for the traditional [university] curriculum” was “a major cause of campus . . . unrest” (110). Such lumping of student activism with lack of academic preparation is further exemplified by frequent references to such students as the “new barbarians,” a phrase which links difference in language with a threat to (the speaker’s own) civilization.

A second, related myth marked open admissions students not only as being activists but as belonging to ethnic minorities. For example, all evidence showed that the majority of CUNY Open Admissions students were whites of working-class background (“Report Card” 27; “‘Open Enrollment’ Results Told”; “CUNY Open-Admissions Plan Found Benefiting Whites Most”; “Open Admission Found of Benefit to Whites, Too”). Yet the myth persisted in popular media discourse that all or most Open Admissions students at CUNY were Black or Puerto Rican (Healy, “New Problems”; Kaplan 220; Stoerker 1014; “Open Admissions,” WNBC-TV). Unimaginable within the framework of the binary were the so-called “white ethnics”: working-class whites, many of them at CUNY of Italian or Irish Catholic background, and many of them conservative in their political views. While the invisibility of white working-class ethnics speaks most obviously to the pervasive blindness of Americans to social class and the persistence of racism, it speaks also and more specifically to the constitutive power within and outside the academy of the public discourse linking minority students, political activism, and academic underpreparedness, a power which made invisible students who might lack both academic preparation and interest in political activism.

These myths pervaded the general debate on open admissions from both the left and right. For example, a statement of 18 June 1969 by what

came to be known as the “Weatherman” splinter of the SDS asserted, “any kind of more open admissions means . . . there are more militant blacks and browns making more and more fundamental demands on the schools” (“You Don’t Need” 282). A *Washington Post* editorial by conservatives Rowland Evans and Robert Novak critiquing open admissions as the “Wrecking of a College” identifies open admissions students strictly as Negro or Puerto Rican youth. William F. Buckley, Jr., drawing heavily on writings from City College English professor Geoffrey Wagner, seconded the Weatherman’s perception that the bulk of the CUNY Open Admissions students were militant, describing them as an “ignorant and disruptive” contingent. This association of Open Admissions with the student New Left extended to teachers of Open Admission students. Wagner himself described teachers favoring open admissions as “the balding, bearded guerrillas with tenure” (136), and he accused Basic Writing teachers of “teaching more about the injustices of society outside the classroom than the use of punctuation within it” (143).

The binary opposing academic pursuits to the pursuit of social goals was maintained not only by those who opposed Open Admissions but those making the case for it. For example, a 1973 editorial in *Change* magazine presenting “The Case for Open Admissions” asserts that the American university “was once more thoroughly dedicated than it can be now to the academic pursuit of knowledge. The challenge of open admissions . . . is to find an equivalent more suitable to the needs of its students and of the city of New York” (“Case” 10). The editorial thus maintains the distinction between “academic” and other pursuits even as it argues for the others towards which it claims open admissions works. The more general debate over the “politicization” of the university encapsulated this distinction. Conservatives warned against the increasing politicization of the university. As Miro Todorovich put it in explaining actions of the faculty group, University Centers for Rational Alternatives, “All available energies had to be mobilized in support of . . . the survival of a nonpoliticized, free, and open-minded university” defended against the “forcible incursions of the ‘barbarians of virtue’ into the academy” (xiv-xv). Those on the left retorted that the university had already been politicized, albeit with the politics of liberalism. For example, in a 1966 SDS position paper explaining the purpose of working towards university reform, Carl Davidson, like Todorovich, warns of an invasion—not of “barbarians”—but of “corporate liberalism,” whose “penetration into the campus community is awesome” (42). In either case, however, at least in the more common arguments, any politicization was viewed as a taint to be avoided or washed out rather than something inherent in university activity of which one ought to be aware.

Arguments for open admissions claimed to resolve these opposed goals by accommodating all. That is, they claimed to maintain the role of the

university in preserving and reproducing “academic excellence” but to add to that a different role for the university accommodating a different kind of student. Such arguments thus maintained the terms of the binary while offering a narrative of resolution. The New York City Board of Higher Education’s July 9, 1969 policy statement on Open Admissions itself enunciated the key terms dominating discourse on Open Admissions:

The issues with which the Board was confronted transcended the immediate concerns of City College, and in fact the University itself. They are the basic issues of our City and of our society. In dealing with these issues, the Board was faced with the necessity of re-examining our programs and structures so as to meet legitimate needs and aspirations of all the City’s youth, while at the same time preserving the educational integrity of the University, without which we would be perpetrating a cruel hoax upon all those who desire and deserve a higher education of true excellence. We believe that the actions we are directing meet both of these requirements. . . .

- (a) [The plan] shall offer admission to some University program to all high school graduates of the City.
- (b) It shall provide for remedial and other supportive services for all students requiring them.
- (c) It shall maintain and enhance the standards of academic excellence of the colleges of the University.
- (d) It shall result in the ethnic integration of the colleges.
- (e) It shall provide for mobility for students between various programs and units of the University.
- (f) It shall assure that all students who would have been admitted to specific community or senior colleges under the admissions criteria which we [the Board] have used in the past shall still be so admitted. In increasing educational opportunity for all, attention shall also be paid to retaining the opportunities for students now eligible under present Board policies and practices. (New York City Board of Higher Education Policy Statement, 9 July 1969. pp. 1, 3–4)

Most remarkable is how the Board’s statement either explicitly or implicitly opposes ethnic integration to academic excellence, the academically prepared and those needing remediation (presumed to be students hitherto restricted from CUNY), the socio-political interests of the “City and society” and academic interests (represented, for example, by the reference to “the immediate concerns of City College”). In the Board statement, the goal of “preserving the educational integrity of the University” is set off as distinct from and in competition with the goals of meeting “the legitimate needs and aspirations of all the City’s youth” and achieving “the ethnic integration of the colleges.” The issues with which the Board has

wrestled are described not as those of the University but ones which “transcend” it. If only by implication, Open Admissions is assumed to threaten the educational integrity of the University, whether or not such a risk is justified by political exigencies.

This set of assumed oppositions becomes more evident if we imagine alternative ways the Board could have framed the issues. For example, the Board could have justified re-examining its programs and structures and admitting the new students as a means by which to *achieve* “educational integrity” rather than presenting the admission of the new students as something threatening that integrity. That the University should “provide for remedial and other supportive services for all students requiring them,” as the Board advises in its statement on Open Admissions, could be taken as a policy directive appropriate to any school regardless of its admissions policy rather than one made necessary strictly by a policy of open admissions, and it could be described as one integral to rather than distinct from maintaining and enhancing academic excellence. Issues of social justice could be presented as co-terminous with rather than as distinct from and potentially a threat to the academy and its “educational integrity.” But the Board statement instead works to represent prior practices and students admitted under earlier admissions policies as normal, possessing educational integrity and academic excellence, and to represent those students to be newly admitted as a threat to these. The university would add to its roles that of “change agent,” but the change was to be enacted on neither the definition of the university’s integrity as it had existed in the past nor on society but on the new students.

In keeping with this argument, students to be admitted were cast in the role of those desiring not to overthrow society but to join and become more productive members of it. In CUNY Chancellor Robert Kibbee’s 1971 testimony to the New York State joint legislative committee on higher education, Kibbee distinguished even protesters at CUNY in this way. Observing that in 1969 on some American campuses the “prime target may have been the war, racism, the system,” he claimed, “Here at City University, the focal point of protest was admission *to* the system” (4, my emphasis). As a *Change* editorial put it, the purpose of open admissions was “to give the poor and working-class people of New York City a chance to get into the mainstream of the city’s economic life. It is to qualify them for jobs that are more than marginal to the vitality of the city—to give them some purchase on what is called the American dream” (“Case” 9). Then vice-chancellor Timothy Healy put the case more negatively. Noting the steady decrease in the number of manufacturing jobs in the city, he predicted a vast increase in the number of poor “without a significant increase in our pools of educated men and women” (“Will Everyman”). But CUNY’s Open

Admissions, he argued, can serve "as poverty interrupter for New York," and in so doing "short circuit the terrible rhythm of disappointment and rage...[of] inner-city youth... that can create a new race of barbarians" ("Will Everyman"). That is, Open Admissions, by training people for service industry jobs, was represented as a measure preventing the poor from *becoming* barbarians rather than an appeasement of already existing barbarians. But in either case, the social change was to be enacted not on the "mainstream of the city's economic life," possibly the source of city residents' "terrible rhythm of disappointment and rage," but on the residents themselves.

In keeping with the emphasis on higher education as a means of changing students into more "productive" workers, stories promoting the "success" of Open Admissions took the form of "before-after" portraits, usually of students whose education at CUNY promised to help them secure employment in service sector work. September 18 1970 CUNY press releases highlighted the stories of new students whose high school experience hadn't marked them as "college" material but who had enrolled at CUNY under Open Admissions and aspired to careers in business and civil service ("News: Open Admissions"). Subsequent press releases on CUNY graduates who had entered CUNY under Open Admissions compared the students' high school grade records with their college grade point averages, showing significant change in their academic performance from high school to college. As a result of their college education, the releases emphasized, the students were now prepared for work in teaching, medical records administration, and "such diverse fields as accounting, data processing, physical therapy, psychiatric social work, social welfare and speech pathology" ("News from Hunter College"; "Brooklyn College Graduates," 6 June 1974; "Open Admissions," WNBC-TV). In place of the image of Open Admissions students as militant activists, the students were portrayed as well-adjusted and well-placed citizens, modern day Horatio Algiers, in such stories as "Hard Work Pays Off" and "Lad Finds Open Way to Degree." CUNY's identification of the goal of social "service" as one additional to its goal of preserving academic excellence maintained a hierarchy between the goals that privileged the latter while placing it in opposition to but not in competition with the former. Such arguments rendered Open Admissions vulnerable to attack from conservatives like Evans and Novak, who acknowledged that Open Admissions might be effective in "taking slum youth off the street" but doubted that this result merited the financial cost and the "high price of drastically lowered academic standards." In short, the strategy of accommodation rendered Open Admissions vulnerable by representing it as additional to and a potential drain on programs assumed to be integral to the university and its "stan-

dards.” Those adopting this strategy were thus necessarily circumspect regarding financial costs of open admissions programs, conflicts among and between those programs and students and other programs and students, and any political interests motivating such programs, their students, and their teachers.

* * * * *

It is not . . . political stances which determine people’s stances on things academic, but their positions in the academic field which inform the stances that they adopt on political issues in general as well as on academic problems.

—Pierre Bourdieu, (*Homo Academicus* xvii-xviii)

The writings of CUNY basic writing teachers and of Mina Shaughnessy in particular have been perceived as crucial in constituting Basic Writing discourse. Shaughnessy is credited with christening the field with the term “Basic Writing” and with founding its flagship academic publication, the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Her book *Errors and Expectations* has been described without irony as the “gospel” of basic writing (Horning) and as having “almost on its own established basic writing as an important subfield within composition” (Faigley 61). If one’s position in the academic field informs the stances one adopts on political issues in general as well as on academic problems, as Bourdieu suggests, then these teachers’ representations of basic writing students, programs, and pedagogies need to be understood in part by the knowledge that the positions they occupied were institutionally marginal and highly vulnerable: their academic status and political motives were in question, many lacked job security, and they taught students whose own political leanings were also questioned, whose worthiness for college admission was constantly challenged, and whose demands on institutional resources were constantly lamented and scrutinized. That positioning both required that they contend, and shaped how they contended, with terms of the public discourse prevailing in debate on the educational rights and capacities of their students.

As I’ve shown above, the larger public discourse on open admissions most commonly described open admissions students as “barbarians”: outsiders by virtue of their racial and/or ethnic identity and illiteracy who threatened the university—Western civilization’s palace of rationality—whether by their mere physical presence and demands, with “politicization,” and/or simply by virtue of lacking the qualifications for university work. In response, while Basic Writing discourse accepted the identifica-

tion of basic writers as “outsiders,” it characterized them as nonthreatening, apolitical, as beginners or foreigners seeking and able to join the American mainstream. For example, Sarah D’Eloia, in defending “Teaching Standard Written English,” the first essay appearing in the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, argues that the decision of “most students, including those at City College . . . to enter college and their perseverance in pursuing their degrees indicate a desire to participate in mainstream American culture” (9). Shaughnessy describes Basic Writing students at CUNY in similar terms, claiming these students “were in college now for one reason: that their lives might be better than their parents’, that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been,” and explaining that “BW students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes” (*Errors* 3, 5). Such images argued for allowing these students in college by emphasizing their educability, defining both them and their difficulties with writing as not fixed but *in process*, and aligning them with the mainstream and its standards in their aspirations if not their current status (Horner 31–32). It thus “naturalized” them both in a cognitive developmental and a civic sense, locating them at a particular stage in a natural sequence of learning and attributing to them the aspiration to join with rather than disrupt mainstream American society.

At the same time, these images consolidated the dominance of the binary of political activism and academic excellence by sidestepping the specific circumstances in which the students found themselves: most obviously, the historical circumstances leading to their arrival in schools—the disruptions and negotiations leading to CUNY Open Admissions in the first place—and more generally, the economic, social, political, and technological pressures in the U.S. making college education a requirement for social, economic, and political survival. Moreover, they left unchallenged particular notions of “academic excellence” and how the achievement of such excellence by basic writing students and their teachers was ultimately to be measured.

A City College English Department memorandum by Shaughnessy illustrates the institutional pressures confronting teachers concerned to defend the education of such students:

There is . . . a kind of pressure to do a quick job of producing correct writing since the ability to manage Standard English is often unconsciously accepted as proof of educability, and this kind of proof is sought after by most critics and some well-wishers of open admissions.

Yet our sense of our students and of the skill we are trying to teach suggests that our priorities ought to be different from those pressed upon us by the exigencies of open admissions. . . . Students and teachers both feel the urgency, but they are caught in a kind of Catch-22 dilemma—a student can use up so much energy mastering the mechanics of English that he misses the chance of learning how to write, but if he doesn't master the mechanics he may not have a chance to write. . . .

I am not of course suggesting that it is debasing education to help a student gain control of Standard English and the mechanics of formal writing but only that the effort to do this quickly can lead to doing it exclusively, which means almost inevitably the neglect, at a crucial point, of the deeper and ultimately more important resources our students bring to the classroom.

I see no immediate solution to this problem of conflicting goals. . . . Meanwhile . . . it seems to me we must try to develop more efficient and challenging ways of teaching grammar and mechanics so that we have some time left over to do something else. ("Basic Writing and Open Admissions" 3-5)

The memo highlights a tension between the "conflicting goals" of what teachers perceive as ideal for their students and what the institution demands. While it rejects the idea that "the ability to manage Standard English" constitutes "proof of educability" and stresses "the deeper and ultimately more important resources our students bring to the classroom," it accepts that, at the moment, the goal of meeting such debased "proof" must take precedence over the goal of attending to those other resources, else the students will lose any chance of learning how to write—they will no longer be admitted to class.

The devotion of the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* to the subject of "Error" speaks to the effect of these pressures on Shaughnessy and the contributors to that issue, all of them, significantly, Shaughnessy's colleagues at City College. In that and subsequent work, the conflict between the demand to "develop more efficient and challenging ways of teaching grammar and mechanics" and to acknowledge and draw on the resources students bring to the classroom is resolved by exploring how those same "resources" can inform the mastering of standard English. The power of *Errors and Expectations* can be attributed to just such a resolution: showing how students' errors in many ways result from those resources and thus speak not to their illiteracy but their educability. At the same time, the strategy of such a resolution operates within the dominant conceptual framework on education positing the ability to be educated as a cognitive rather than political matter, and it accepts, in however qualified a manner,

traditional definitions of that educability. The focus resulting from such a strategy is on pedagogical technique, the designing of “more efficient and challenging ways of teaching grammar and mechanics” rather than on questioning the legitimacy of such measures of educability or the possibility of political resistance to their imposition. The Catch-22 within which such a strategy participates is that those measures continue unabated, and thus, as Shaughnessy predicts in her memo, “the effort to [teach students to produce ‘correct’ writing] quickly” not only can but does in fact all too often “lead to doing it exclusively.” A 1986 survey of Basic Writing courses cites a teacher complaint that largely echoes Shaughnessy’s quoted above:

The problem . . . is that surface amenities are given far more attention than the actual writing process. For example, the departmental syllabus is directed towards the error count for comma splices, misuse of semicolons, and the like. (qtd. in Gould and Heyda 18)

Just as Basic Writing discourse defined basic writers as beginners, it defined the enterprise of teaching basic writing as new, “frontier territory,” “unmapped” (*Errors and Expectations* 4) and the teachers as “pioneers” of a “new profession.” Such definitions helped legitimize Basic Writing in several ways. First, the enterprise of Basic Writing was aligned with a depoliticized conception of educational practices and goals. The frontier imagery invoked was utopian, a purely intellectual rather than political space. In contrast to the American frontier experience, on this frontier, no natives were displaced or herded into special reservations, no territory was conquered from others, and people’s appearance on the scene was compelled by no obvious social, political, economic, or historical force (Horner 35–38). Rather, teachers ventured into uninhabited territory as so many pedagogical Eves and Adams, pursuing a mysterious, divinely ordained destiny. Introducing a list of “Suggested Readings” for teachers, Shaughnessy claimed in *Errors and Expectations* that each title “offers a place to begin in a field where almost everything remains to be done” (298). The introduction to the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* in 1975 characterized the aims of the journal as beginning a “new discussion about teaching writing,” a discussion which the journal’s editors hoped would enlarge the experience of what it labeled “a new profession” (Shaughnessy, Introduction 3, 4). The purported “newness” of the dominant discourse, its subject, and its practitioners had the further advantage of defining both the teachers and the *problems* they addressed as “new.” Cast as frontier pioneers, Basic Writing teachers could be granted both credibility as “professionals” and leeway to experiment with what practices might “work” and even with those that might not “work” while exploring a “pedagogical West” that, as new, poached on no one’s turf. In so doing, teachers aligned them-

selves to CUNY administration arguments which emphasized the magnitude of the numbers of “new” students Open Admissions promised to bring into the mainstream to explain away particular blunders. Regarding CUNY’s Open Admissions program as a whole, for example, CUNY Vice Chancellor Healy had announced, “We’re going to get more and bigger results and make more and bigger mistakes—because we’re moving faster and farther than anyone else” (qtd. in “Open Admissions: American Dream or Disaster?” 66).

While defining the field of basic writing as a “new frontier” has had, as I have argued, strategic uses, it is nonetheless worth recalling warnings about frontiers. Shor accepts designating college as the site of a “new frontier” but reminds us that a frontier “gets developed by settlers who use tools and ideas from old sectors of society. Their material and ideological resources create the character of what emerges. . . . The same forces which propel development also limit it” (*Critical Teaching* 14). Shaughnessy similarly warns teachers heading to the “pedagogical West” that they “are certain to be carrying many things . . . that will clog their journey as they get further on” (*Errors* 4). These warnings point to several related blindspots consequent on conceptualizing basic writing, or indeed any work on the teaching of writing, as new, “frontier” territory: blindness to history; blindness to the politics of such imagery; blindness to the politics of the “new” tools that seem closest at hand. Most obviously, constructing Basic Writing as a “pedagogical West” has prevented teachers and administrators of basic writing programs from learning from past endeavors. As critics have begun to point out, the history of remedial writing instruction, though not labeled “basic writing,” began long before the 1970s (Connors, Lunsford, Rose). Acknowledging the history of remedial writing instruction would not only enable teachers “not to make the same old mistakes over and over again” (Lunsford 252); it would enable them to counter damaging representations of their own work and of their students as temporary, marginal, and therefore easily expendable. The divorce of Basic Writing from the history of “remedial” writing instruction effected by its claims to “newness” has prevented teachers from arguing for the historical centrality of their teaching of writing. “New” programs tend to be viewed as experimental, responses to “crises” by definition “temporary” and so worthy of only temporary, and limited, funding. And as “new,” they are automatically defined as non-central, add-ons to what is imagined to be an already integrated system. Defenders of CUNY’s Open Admissions frequently complained that the “experiment” had not yet been given a chance to succeed. But their language allowed critics to demand constant evaluation of the program, defined as an “experiment,” and to challenge its funding to an extent that would be unimaginable for programs conceived of as “central”

or “traditional.” In fact, however, there is a long tradition of “remedial” college writing instruction in America, however problematic the methods and aims employed, to which teachers might point in refuting attempts to exclude basic writing from the academy, to remove its “credit,” or to place or keep it on the periphery. Miller has observed of college composition instruction in the United States that,

defined as the field around a freshman course, [it] began in a political moment that was embedded in ambivalence about how to assimilate unentitled, newly admitted students in the late nineteenth-century “new university,” which was in turn formed to address its era’s social, economic, and political changes. (79)

By substituting the word “nineteenth-century” with “twentieth-century,” one could easily say the same of Basic Writing. But talk of Basic Writing as a “new” field or “frontier” and of students as themselves “new,” “beginners,” or “foreigners,” ignores this tradition. And while such talk may have secured a place for Basic Writing in the academy, it has also insured that place securely on the academy’s margins, and with a lease that, if perennial, is also perennially short-term.

More damaging, naturalizing basic writing and basic writing students by positing them as “new” and “beginning” erases the ties of both to history and society. Bourdieu, writing of the discourse of geopolitical borders, notes that

Regionalist discourse is a *performative discourse* which aims to impose as legitimate a new definition of the frontiers. . . . The act of categorization, when it manages to achieve recognition or when it is exercised by a recognized authority, exercises by itself a certain power: ‘ethnic’ or ‘regional’ categories . . . institute a reality by using the power of *revelation* and *construction* exercised by *objectification in discourse*. (*Language* 223)

It is thus that, as he puts it earlier, “The frontier . . . produces cultural difference as much as it is produced by it” (*Language* 222). Defining Basic Writing as frontier territory effectively constructs the differences between those students labeled Basic Writers and those not, establishing the legitimacy of the distinction. As Bartholomae has described the situation,

As a profession, we have defined basic writing . . . by looking at the writing that emerges in basic writing courses. We begin, that is, with what we have been given, and our definition is predetermined by a prior distinction; by a reflex action to sort students into two groups (groups that look “natural” or “right”). . . . We know who basic writers are, in other words, because they are the students in classes we label “Basic Writing.” (“Writing on the Margins” 67)

Such categorizing, stripped of its politics, ends up instituting “Basic Writing” as an objective reality rather than a set of social practices. Rather than describing basic writers and basic writing in historical, social, and political terms, the binary of academic/political is maintained, so that statements about basic writing are presented as objective, scientific truths descriptive of facts about who the Basic Writers—this new breed of student—are, what they need, what works for them and what doesn’t. As the dominated members of the dominant, teachers can use such representations to negotiate their own interests and those of their students, as I have shown above, establishing by traditional measures of academic worth a legitimized place for basic writing and basic writers in the academy. But this “objectification” of basic writing also masks the role of basic writing instruction in the larger ongoing social, economic, and political drama of history. Though in one sense that drama can seem sufficiently removed from the immediate demands of the classroom to be safely ignored, in fact its force inevitably mediates the values, beliefs, and actions of students and teachers in the classroom, the location and conditions of that classroom, and the aims and performance of all concerned with the course, day by day, year by year. Recovering the “practical” operation of that force in our teaching would be a start toward theorizing our practice and practicing our theory, locating both in society and history.

Such a recovery would counter the alliance of much Basic Writing discourse with the ideology of equal opportunity, an ideology behind Open Admissions itself. That ideology has long been subject to dispute. Less obviously, it has tended to equate the work of basic writing, like the work of composition teaching generally, with the provision of skills (to ensure equal opportunity). The seeming innocuousness of that equation stems from its denial of social and political oppression, substituting the provision of politically innocent “skills” for political means of fighting such oppression and thus renaming oppression as cognitive lack. Though such a substitution may render composition teaching more politically palatable to some, it has also contributed significantly to the marginal position of composition in the academy and so to the material impoverishment of composition programs. Mike Rose has shown how the identification of the teaching of “remedial” writing with skills acquisition has led to its marginalization in the academy. But ignoring the ideology and the social and political forces underlying that marginalization has prevented teachers from doing more than decrying it, as in Barbara Kaplan’s bewailment, in a 1972 critique of CUNY’s implementation of Open Admissions, that, “skill development work has not been treated with the respect it deserves” (217).

Aligned to the depiction of the work of basic writing as provision of “skills” is the “practical” bent of much Basic Writing discourse. The *Journal*

of *Basic Writing* has for a number of years included a warning in its “Call for Articles” that the editors “seek manuscripts that are clearly . . . related to practice.” Shaughnessy has described the literature in basic writing as “a miscellany of articles on what has been working, or appears to the teacher to have been working, in a variety of places with a variety of teachers and pedagogies” (“Basic Writing” 147). Shor has noted that in response to the “pedagogical confusion” resulting from “the permanence of mass higher education,” there has appeared “a prodigious number of publications . . . spew[ing] forth no end of tonics and cure-alls for bewildered teachers” (*Critical Teaching* 19).

What makes this “practical” bent problematic is what it excludes or discourages from consideration in pursuit of its “practical” results. Raymond Williams, writing on the term “realistic,” observes that it often

shares the implicit impatience of one sense of *practical*. ‘Let’s be realistic’ probably more often means ‘let us accept the limits of this situation’ (*limits* meaning *hard facts*, often of power or money in their existing and established forms). (217–18)

The “practical” bent in much Basic Writing discourse accepts the “limits of this situation” in two ways. First, and this seems to have earned it the most criticism, is its neglect of the whys and wherefores of work in basic writing. Stephen North observes that Practitioner inquiry is fundamentally “reactive: The Practitioner needs to decide what to do as a means to an end determined by someone or something else. . . . imposed from outside, beyond the bounds of [teachers’] immediate relationship with the students” (37). Like the articles Shaughnessy describes as concentrating on “what works,” practitioners and their lore are “concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing” (23). However,

Practitioners need to know *what* to do, not necessarily—other than “It works”—*why*. This bedrock pragmatism is habit-forming. Practitioners tend to become habitually impatient with complicated causal analyses, which in turn makes them relatively cavalier about such analyses even for the purposes of inquiry. (40)

Errors and Expectations fits North’s model in documenting Shaughnessy’s need, as North puts it, “to come to grips with this radically new situation [of Open Admissions at CUNY], and to invent new ways to deal with it, as well” (North 34). The book does not investigate the policy itself or how it has been implemented but simply finds ways to deal with the conditions to which that policy has led. As Shor observes of her work, Shaughnessy, while taking a “sympathetic and inside view” of students’ writing, “did not

investigate the question of critical literacy, or writing for what?" (*Culture Wars* 98). Instead, the presence of the students and the need for them to work on their writing to meet conventional expectations of it are taken largely as givens. While this can serve to secure the place of both basic writing students and teachers in the university, as Shaughnessy argues in the report cited above, it also accepts a particularly marginal position for both to occupy there and a limited notion of the work they are to carry out. That is, while historically the enterprise of basic writing can be seen as foregrounding the politics of how and why one teaches, such a potential is suppressed by the quest for the practical/realistic, which occludes attention to the political through its focus on "skills."

Secondly, and less noticed, this "practicality" tends to accept as "givens" the material constraints on the work of basic writing. I refer here to such seemingly mundane but nonetheless crucial matters—especially at the time of Open Admissions, but also at present—as salaries, job security, teaching loads, class size, classroom facilities, office space, and secretarial support; also to the conditions giving rise to the problems many basic writing students bring with them to college, such as health problems, lack of child care, inadequate financial aid, and a history of inadequate schooling; and finally to the immediate historical circumstances leading to the presence of these students in college and the ongoing family, economic, and social pressures on those students. No one teaching basic writing, at the time of Open Admissions or since, can be unaware of the power those constraints exert on the work both students and teachers produce, yet Basic Writing discourse gives little space to addressing such issues as intrinsic to teaching and learning. In her report cited above, for example, Shaughnessy acknowledges political pressures on basic writing teachers and students, doubts their legitimacy, and yet turns her attention in the (long) "meanwhile" to accommodating those pressures, calling for the development of more efficient methods of teaching grammar and mechanics. When references to material and institutional constraints do appear in the literature, they generally do so as asides, presented as seemingly unalterable facts about which one might joke, curse, or grieve but not as the subject of analysis. For example, in a 1977 address in which she considers why most English professors fail to take an interest in teaching writing, Shaughnessy includes among her reasons the fact that

as writing instruction is presently organized, the teacher who wishes to give his best energies to the instruction of ill-prepared freshmen must be ready to forego many of the rewards and privileges of his profession. He must be resigned to being an altruistic teacher. . . . [though] the fact remains that systems do not function efficiently on altruism, and the educational system must offer the same sorts of prizes and incentives that energize people in

other systems—money, time, security, and working conditions that encourage excellence—if the teaching of writing is to advance beyond its present state. (“English Professor’s Malady” 95)

This has the makings of a manifesto on working conditions, and what follows at least suggests why writing instruction is “presently organized” as it is in spite of public outcries about the “literacy crisis” (96–97). But the general effect of the argument is to warn teachers of the conditions they should expect for the foreseeable future: such teachers “must be resigned” to working altruistically. It thus echoes a similar call for altruism, mixed jarringly with appeals for better working conditions, sounded in the conclusion to a 1970 essay by Howard Weiner on “The Instructor and Open Admissions”:

While funds, temporary buildings, counselors, technology, tutors, and grand plans are essential, the fate of open admissions, perhaps, will be determined most by the amount of motivation, sensitivity, and hard work the instructor can muster and the presence of plausibly small classes. (293)

Shaughnessy seems to have had just such ideal instructors in mind when she refers to her discovery of “the number of [CUNY] teachers who, without fanfare or remissions and with heavy class loads, have been at work developing imaginative new materials for our students” (“Miserable Truth” 114). Shaughnessy says teachers have been “pedagogically radicalized” by the experience, through teaching CUNY Open Admissions students, of “what it means to be an outsider in academia,” by which she seems to mean that teachers have come to reject the “traditional meritocratic model of a college” (“Miserable Truth” 114). But that “radicalization” does not seem to have affected a basic position of accommodation to the conditions about which Shaughnessy complains in “The Miserable Truth,” the conditions of retrenchment at CUNY in the mid 1970s. Instead, as Shor has noted of this period, “Low-cost basics made students and teachers settle for less at the very moment they were in schools running on austerity budgets” (*Culture Wars* 94).

Such “settling” is pervasive in the literature, from Weiner’s 1970 complaint, cited above, to the present. “Survival of the Fittest,” an unusual description of a university basic writing program from 1976 to 1987 by six successive directors, illustrates the constancy of that settling (Roskelly). The essay is a series of mini-histories by each of the program’s directors during a ten-year span, who tell tales of cockroaches, flooding, tiny and precarious budgets, and budget staffing requiring constant attempts to economize. Though the program undergoes several changes as directors attempt to implement different theories about writing instruction, the “basic,” basement conditions under which the program operates (in an actual

basement) prevail throughout the ten years. Hephzibah Roskelly, one of the directors, notes that one of the difficulties for the program lay in the fact that all of the directors were graduate students, requiring them to assume "a strangely subordinate-but-equal role in administrative politics" (14). But the practice of hiring graduate students as directors itself both speaks to and ensures the continuing subordinate status of the program. In sometimes humorous fashion, the directors recount heroic efforts to secure paychecks due them, acquire a mimeo machine, and fight floodwaters. But those efforts operate within delimitations that virtually guarantee the ongoing necessity of similar efforts to "survive." The Orwellian "subordinate-but-equal" position of the graduate student/directors, as one of the "conditioning" delimitations, makes any challenge to those limitations unlikely, since such a challenge would put the individual director's own position at risk. Moreover, those conditions define the "fittest" sort of graduate student/teacher/administrator precisely as someone who can learn to endure under such conditions: someone who "fits."

Those conditions are not restricted to ten years at one university. Nor is such channeling of the efforts of basic writing teachers and administrators unusual. Given the combined oppressiveness and pervasiveness of such conditions, it might seem surprising how few references to them one finds in the texts instrumental in establishing Basic Writing as an academic field. However, given the vulnerability of the teachers' position and the dominance of a discourse that defines academic work in opposition to material and political considerations, their rarity is not surprising, nor the fact that, when such references do appear, their presence is often muffled, set off in conditionals, asides. Indeed, "Survival of the Fittest," though it presents such matters primarily as "background," is unlike most essays describing basic writing programs in mentioning them at all. This tendency dominates even descriptions of those programs that have enjoyed substantial institutional support. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's description of their program in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, for example, mentions the considerable institutional support given their program only in the Preface.

Though Shaughnessy herself and others speak more critically of such matters in unpublished work, even in these unpublished documents they are presented as "background," and a similar acquiescence to them appears in place of the questioning one might expect. For example, in a January 1972 intradepartmental report on Open Admissions, Shaughnessy, after speculating on the social and economic pressures affecting basic writing students, concludes:

But for whatever the reasons, here [the students] are . . . [and City College] is assuming, or learning to assume, their educability at the college level and

moving on to the question of what, given harsh limits on time, space, and money, can be done to make Open Admission succeed. ("A Second Report" 6)

Though the "question" she alludes to might suggest an interest in challenging the "harsh limits on time, space, and money," the possible challenges are represented as unrealistic:

An experiment that proves, for example, that ten students working with two exceptional teachers four hours a day can make impressive gains in writing is of no use to us. It tells us what we know but can't afford. We are working, in Basic Writing, with about 3500 students a semester, and our innovations must be feasible on that scale. (6)

Thus, while the report mentions a variety of conditions imposed by and on Open Admissions and basic writing, this passage has the effect of closing discussion of those conditions with its mock suggestion and its series of assertions of "givens," and it aligns teachers with current institutional policies: "here they are . . . City College has chosen. . . given harsh limits on time, space, and money. . . *We* are working." Later in the report, Shaughnessy warns, "Certainly the greatest peril we face at City [College] is the limitations not of our students but of our budget," but she then ends on this note: "In three semesters, under grotesquely inadequate conditions, we have begun to see how Open Admissions might be made to work. The decision of whether it will be allowed to work now rests with those who have the power to set public priorities" (7, 8). We can see Shaughnessy walking a kind of tightrope here, arguing for the effectiveness of the work done by her and her colleagues, aligning herself with the institution while simultaneously pleading for better treatment from it. Unfortunately, her note can serve not only as a call to improve conditions but as a reminder of what it is possible to accomplish "under grotesquely inadequate conditions," and its acceptance of a crucial distinction between teachers and "those who have the power to set public priorities" reinforces the position of teachers as powerless altruists who work to achieve under grotesque conditions. As a consequence, the note has the force less of a demand for improvement of those conditions but a plea for sympathy (which comes much cheaper). That it had such an effect is suggested by evidence that the complaint was one of many preceding and following it which went unheeded. Pedagogies labeled "effective" at producing results within the constraints of degrading material conditions unfortunately work in tandem with such reports and protests to legitimize those conditions—conditions of "crisis" that seem somehow never to be relieved. Silence about such conditions in much Basic Writing discourse further legitimizes such conditions by its lack of protest or guidance. Teachers of basic writing seeking advice on improving their marginal institutional positions will find noth-

ing on such matters in Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, despite her noted administrative expertise, nor in much of the other Basic Writing literature. The denigration of basic writing teachers and students which those material conditions both speak to and maintain position the "subject" of Basic Writing as tied to those conditions. Teachers are cast into the position of being hard-working servants doing service, devoted and underpaid to the point of being altruistic volunteers; students are expected to be grateful for their chance to get ahead, being presumably in *no* position to complain. Paradoxically, defining the "practice" of Basic Writing in "academic"—that is, nonmaterial and nonpolitical—terms, is eminently *impractical*, leaving undeterred the ways in which material constraints, rather than academic theories, come to determine the how and what as well as the why of teaching.

* * * * *

Educational historian Michael Katz has warned that while educational institutions and structures represent choices that "reflected circumstances at the time of their origin and the priorities of their founders. . . . the reification of these historical products has become one of the great obstacles to change. For it casts them as inexorable, transcending history, even natural, and, as a result, it limits the terms of the debate" (*Reconstructing* 1). The construction of Basic Writing provides an exemplary instance of compositionists' need to heed Katz's warning. Indeed, in an eerie echo of Katz, Bartholomae has recently expressed concern that the "provisional position" which the term "Basic Writing" once represented has become "fixed, naturalized," suspecting that calling certain courses and the students in them "Basic Writing" no longer has "strategic value" ("Tidy House" 21). Of course, the "success" of Basic Writing discourse in becoming "fixed" speaks to its "strategic value," especially during the early years of Open Admissions. The price of that success, however, has been the loss of what some teachers now identify as the crucial lessons of Open Admissions.

Bartholomae argues that, at best, Basic Writing should "continue to mark an area of contest, of struggle, including a struggle against its stability or inevitability," a "contested area in the university community, a contact zone, a place of competing positions and interests" ("Tidy House" 8, 21). For this to happen will involve giving voice to different and suppressed stories, finding and sharing in our specific experiences and those of our students as yet untold tales of struggle, defeats, victories, and resistance, thereby teaching and learning from strategies of resistance and outright opposition. But to engage in *that* sort of "frontier" work, we will have to abandon the naturalization and fixing of basic writers, or any writers, on a developmental scale, and we will have to acknowledge, in our teach-

ing, administering, and our professional discourse, the place of teaching writing in immediate, ongoing history, part of a larger education not only of students but of teachers and institutions about the place, purpose, and practice of higher education in the life of society.

Shaughnessy has noted that “[r]estricted . . . notions of what writing is for” caused by the lack of understanding of the history of “what has gone on in the name of freshman composition over the past hundred years or so” “encourage us to accept current ways of organizing and assessing writing instruction. . . . lock[ing] us into convictions about what is most important to learn, who should learn what, or who should teach whom at a point when the uses of literacy in this society need to be re-examined” (“English Professor’s Malady” 93). Slevin has argued that to be fully prepared for their profession, teachers of writing ought to know not just “how to teach writing, but the history of writing instruction” (14). The literacy historian Harvey Graff has promised that “the proper study of the historical experience of literacy . . . has much to tell us that is . . . relevant to policy analysis and policy making in the world in which we live today” (77). But until discourse on the teaching of writing recovers the specific historical, material, institutional, and political context of that teaching and that discourse, it will be difficult for us to hear what study of the historical experience of literacy has to say, including the historical experience of basic writing, forcing us to re-learn what that history should have taught us long ago.

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