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REREADING SHAUGHNESSY FROM A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

ABSTRACT: *In "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," Mina P. Shaughnessy (1976) metaphorically likened the experience of basic writers to that of "uncultured natives" under European colonization. Gay takes the metaphor seriously. She questions colonizing basic writers to the extent that: (1) they risk losing their difference; (2) they do not develop their differences through the language they speak, the culture they know, the lives they've lived; and (3) those of us in the first world, not hearing difference, will fail to see outside our privileged lives. Gay advocates decolonizing our pedagogical practices and encourages a new pedagogy of voice in a dialogized classroom space where teacher and students keep constructing and reconstructing from their different locations, a nexus of identities.*

> *"Plus de frontieres!"/"No more boundaries!"*
> *cried the poet Jean Tardieu*

In a graduate course (Fall 1991) that I subtitled "What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Teaching Writing?" we were reading about the need to teach academic discourse to nontraditional students, especially basic writers for whom academic culture is particularly foreign. How do we help bridge the gap between the home culture of these students and the academic world where we teach? How do we help move them from the

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borderlands to the academic mainland? How do we get them to speak and write so that they can succeed in this new world? Philosopher Susanne Langer (1942) says that if we want to know about a particular historical period, we should look at the questions being asked. In 1977 Shaughnessy wrote *Errors and Expectations* in part to address these questions, but not without some concern, which I'll talk about later.

While I believe, as I believe Shaughnessy believed over 15 years ago, that it would be irresponsible not to help basic writers learn to Write for Success, I was becoming concerned about the underlying imperialistic assumptions of classroom practice designed to help these students into the academic colony. I began to question the colonizing of developing writers—I'm going to interrupt myself: I use the term "developing writers" to refer to students who are working on the development of their writing abilities, and I include so-called basic writers in this category. Perhaps Shaughnessy would approve, if not of the name, at least of my attempt to rename. She came up with "basic writers" to displace the pejorative "remedial." I began to question the colonizing of developing writers to the extent that: (1) they risk losing their difference; (2) they do not develop their differences through the language they speak, the culture they know, the lives they've lived; and (3) those of us in the first world, not hearing difference, would fail to see outside our privileged lives.

With these concerns in mind, I wandered into a talk about an African perspective on colonialism by Femi Taiwo (1991) at a conference sponsored by the philosophy department at my university. I felt like I had walked into Kenneth Burke's portrait of "an unending conversation." All the seats were taken; the talk had already begun. No one could stop and tell me what "had gone before" (1973, 110-11). I stood in the doorway and listened:

> During a prayer in an ancient town in Africa on a day of renewal, a chief was heard saying "In Christ's Name We Pray" and seen wearing a crucifix, shocking the townspeople.

The colonizing process had begun. The African chief was converting to the ways (and world) of the missionary-colonizers who had come to help civilize his people. I began to think about how the experience of basic writers is like the experience of Africans under European colonization. There are different forms of colonization. Colonization may involve one country. Internal colonization occurs when a dominant group treats another group as for-

eign.[2] If we think of basic writers as colonized in some sense, how might we change our pedagogy?

While I was pondering this question, in the graduate course we read Shaughnessy's essay "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" (1976) in which she describes, in a tongue-in-cheek tone, a four-stage developmental scale for teachers, which can be used as a framework for talking about how we have tried to address "the writing problem" since the early days of Open Admissions. Not surprisingly, the first reaction of many teachers to this group of nontraditional students we call "basic writers" was to GUARD THE TOWER (Shaughnessy's STAGE ONE)—to keep out, or down, those who "do not seem to belong to the community of learners," as Shaughnessy (234) puts it, or "the unbelonging," as Joan Riley (1985) calls Black British immigrants. Natives from various colonies come to the academic colony and, in Shaughnessy's words, strain "to approximate the academic style" (235). And teachers? Teachers "hold out for the same product" they "held out for in the past but teach unflinchingly in the same way as before, as if any pedagogical adjustment to the needs of the students were a kind of cheating" (235).

Shaughnessy's STAGE TWO: CONVERTING THE NATIVES: At this stage, says Shaughnessy, "the teacher has now admitted at least some of the community are educable. These learners are perceived, however, as empty vessels, ready to be filled with new knowledge" (235).[3] The teacher's purpose, continues Shaughnessy, is "to carry the technology of advanced literacy to the inhabitants of an underdeveloped country" (235). Basic writers, in David Bartholomae's words, are seen within this imperial frame as "uncultured natives" (1987, 69). In this stage, the missionary, colonizing, civilizing metaphor takes hold, if we're talking about developmental stages of teachers of basic writers, or "took hold" if we're talking about a stage in the short history of composition studies. Let's civilize the natives! Let's help them into the culture. ("Culture," perhaps you didn't know, is a cognate of "colonize.")[4] But how can we *educate* them? "And so confident [are teachers] of the allure of what they are presenting," explains Shaughnessy, "it does not occur to [them] to consider the competing logics and values and habits that may be influencing [their] students" (64). We still had a writing problem. Well, let's study the natives we're trying to colonize. If we closely observe them writing, maybe we can figure out what's wrong with them and convert them to our ways.

Shaughnessy's STAGE THREE: SOUNDING THE DEPTHS: "...careful observation not only of...students and their writing but of...[self] as writer and teacher" (236). In composition studies, this is the period of the late 1970s and 1980s when we conducted case study research of skilled and unskilled writers and studied the content of their essays, including Shaughnessy's own classic study (1977) in order to find out what was wrong with them—What's their problem?[5] Maybe if unskilled writers adopted the composing habits of skilled writers, that would solve the writing problem. Maybe if their erroneous beliefs about the nature of writing and how writers work were cleared up. Maybe if we studied the content of their essays. Maybe their cognitive development was arrested. They were stalled at the egocentric stage. Maybe that's the problem.

Like the composing process, however, the colonizing process is not linear; it's recursive. So after SOUNDING THE DEPTHS, we went back to the new frontier to what Shaughnessy called in *Errors and Expectations* (1977) the "pedagogical West" (very much into the colonial motif here) and tried to conquer this new "territory," as Shaughnessy characterized "basic writing." (4). Bizzell and Bartholomae and Rose emerged with a different view of the problem, a view which sent us back to "converting the natives":[6]

Bizzell (1982): Students are unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse. That's the problem. Bartholomae (1987): We need to help students learn to approximate academic discourse. Rose (1989): Students do not know critical strategies. That's the problem.

In the 1980s, we were all working on this problem. I was looking at the relationship of attitude toward writing and the development of writing abilities. Maybe attitude was one of the problems (Gay, 1983).

Talk about changes in pedagogy focused on ways to ease the transition of students into the academic colony in the land of educational opportunity. To use Shaughnessy's words, these students were "on the wrong side of the academic gap" (1977, 275). How can we "bridge the gap" between these two worlds? Teachers became linguistic parents whose role was to move students closer and closer (ever closer) to the academic center where the cultural capital was located. I'm going to insert the cautionary voice of postcolonial critic Trinh Minh-ha from *Woman, Native, Other* (1989): Students who move "closer to the civilized language" come "nearer to equality" (56). (Her tongue's in her cheek, too.) When "colonizer and colonized have come to speak the same

language," when "the Powerless have learned to parrot the language of the Powerful," that's equality (58). So much for the road to equality and the land of educational opportunity. Read "equality" here to mean "equal/like us." "They are entrapped in a circular dance," continues Minh-ha, "where they always find themselves a pace behind" (59).

Now I'm going to return to the voice of Shaughnessy (1975):

> The phrase "catching up" so often used to describe the progress of BW students, is illuminating here, suggesting as it does that the only person who must move in the teaching situation is the student. As a result of this view, we are much more likely in talking about teaching to talk about students, to theorize about *their* needs and attitudes or to chart *their* development and ignore the possibility that teachers also change in response to students, that there may in fact be important connections between the changes teachers undergo and the progress of their students. (62)

So what're we gonna do? Teachers, suggested Bartholomae (1986a) can teach students "what's at stake" (105). Shaughnessy (1977) talked about what she thought was at stake:

> College both beckons and threatens basic writers, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world . . . to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience [I'm going to add here, their difference] as outsiders (292).

Fifteen years ago Shaughnessy asked members of the academy to look more critically at ourselves and the academic culture we are trying to help students join: What kind of a club is this?

Bartholomae (1986b): The academic culture is a "closed culture" (85).

Rose (1989): "Nothing is more exclusive than the academic club" (58).

Bartholomae again (1986b): Entry into this culture club requires students to "enter another's thoughts by using another's language" (85).

Bizzell (1986) lingers and asks (I'm paraphrasing here): Do they have to move out to move in?[7]

I interject here also from the year 1986, the voice of decolonizing critic Ngugi who warns: "Language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (13).

Shaughnessy asked us to DIVE IN (STAGE FOUR) and shift our "What's wrong with them?" accusative stance to "What's wrong with us?"[8] The gulf between the colonizer and the colonized, between them and us, this inequality, this "killer dichotomy," as Berthoff (1990) would say, is one component of what theorist Albert Memmi (1992) calls "colonial racism." "The colonialist," Memmi points out, "stresses those things which keep him separate rather than emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community" (71).[9] Instead of trying to separate teachers from students ("us" from "them") like colonialists, what if we ask what students can contribute to the foundation of a joint community? What if, as Bizzell (1988) recommends, we revise the prevailing notion of academic literacy and come to see the production of literacy as a collaborative effort, as a process of construction based on classroom interactions?

Shaughnessy speaks about the need to acknowledge the experience, the *difference* of basic writers. Henry Giroux agrees that it is important to find ways to give all students opportunities to speak and to voice difference, and as bell hooks (1990) tells us, "it is no easy task to find ways to include our multiple voices" (147). Giroux (1991) goes further. He argues, as have Audre Lorde (1984) and Chandra Mohanty (1989–90), and other feminists that we need to do more than acknowledge (tolerate) difference and more than celebrate difference as "interesting material." Inclusion and celebration are not enough.

Giroux (1991) believes that we need to redefine voice "not merely as an opportunity to speak" but to engage critically in "rigorous discussions of various cultural texts" (249). Moreover, teachers, according to Giroux, must "cross over borders that are culturally strange and alien to them" in order "to analyze their own values and voices as viewed from different ideological and cultural spaces" (254-55).[10] Sharon Welch (1992) argues that listening to and engaging the stories of the Other can educate members of the dominant culture to a redefinition of responsibility through what she calls an "ethic of risk." Are we willing to give up our text-centered selves, our teacherly authority, our authorship, and surrender to what Neuleib (1992) calls the "basic otherness" of many student writers? Are we teachers willing to educate ourselves?

If we are going to confront colonial inequality and work toward a pedagogy appropriate for a postcolonial world, then we must learn to use difference as a source of strength. In the words of Audre Lorde, who spoke at the Second Sex Conference in New

York two years after the publication of *Errors and Expectations*, difference must be "seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can speak like a dialectic" (1984, 111). A colonial model, a reductive us-them discourse, won't get us through the 21st century, not without war or more riots anyway. Postcolonial theory encourages a new pedagogy of voice in a dialogic classroom.

"Precisely because writing is a social act, a kind of synthesis that is reached through the dialectic of discussion, the teaching of writing must often begin with the experience of dialogue." (Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*, 83). "Yet classrooms in their usual asymmetrical arrangements with the teacher on one side, talking, and the students on the other, listening—or looking at the backs of other students' heads—do not breed discussion." *Whose classroom is this? What kind of a place is this?*

I imagine this place where we're going "where there are no charters" (Lorde, 1984, 111) as a space, not a frontier, for frontier brings up conquest and the colonial metaphor, but a "space of dialogue" (as Maxine Greene, 1988, 13, says) or a "dialogized space" (as Bakhtin would say), a dynamic space (I'm saying) that we keep constructing and reconstructing together from our different locations (a nexus of identities: gender, race, class, enthnicity, sexual orientation, and so on). This space "is not a 'safe' place," to quote bell hooks again, (149)—both teachers and students are at risk.

In an "open forum of voices," Don Bialostosky (1991) warns, "there is no guarantee [students] will not interrupt one another" (20). Contradictory and competing voices may erupt, disrupt, or rupture the seams of the text we call classroom discussion. This view of difference, however, does not bypass the struggle for power; rather, it brings the struggle out in the open. And it is this "multicentric perspective," argues Giroux (1992), "that allows students to recognize and analyze how the differences within and between various groups can expand the potential of human life and democratic possibilities" (34).

Much of what Shaughnessy called "the territory of basic writing" is still unmapped. As Grewal et al. explain in *Charting the Journey* "It is safer to stick like nervous glue to what we know," to "defined land" (118). Teachers need to take risks, too. Basic writers, Shaughnessy (1977) told us over 15 years ago are "a unique group from whom we have already learned much and from whom we can learn much more in the years ahead . . . . They are urging us . . . through their needs and their capabilities, to become

better teachers" (291-92). "Teaching [students] to write well,"
Shaughnessy (1976) reminds us, "is challenging work for those
who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy" (239). In the
1990s, our work is perhaps even more challenging than Shaugh-
nessy anticipated. Rereading Shaughnessy from a postcolonial
perspective can help us meet this new challenge and decolonize
our pedagogical practices, thus creating educational opportunities
for all in classrooms without borders.

Notes

¹This article was a talk presented at the 4th National Basic
Writing Conference held at College Park, MD in October 1992.

²Victor Villanueva pointed out this distinction to me in re-
sponse to an early draft of "Teaching Writing in a Postcolonial
World," a work-in-progress.

³Fill'em up. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts,"
says the schoolmaster in the opening chapter of Dickens' *Hard
Times*, while sweeping with his eyes "the inclined plane of little
vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial
gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim."
Paulo Freire's term for this transmission view of knowledge is the
"banking concept of education." See Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the
Oppressed* (NY: Continuum, 1968). And Sartre talks about the
feeding metaphor.

⁴My colleague William Spanos pointed this derivation out to
me and also that "colonize" comes from the Latin colunus ("tiller,"
"cultivator," "planter," "settler") and colere ("cultivate," "plant").
See William Spanos. *The End of Education: Toward a Posthumanist
University*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992, 213. See also
Raymond Williams. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Soci-
ety*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

⁵I think of Ed Koren's collection of cartoons from the *New
Yorker* called "*Well,* there's *your problem!*" (NY: Pantheon, 1980).
In one cartoon, a car owner is waiting for the mechanic's verdict.
They are both looking under the hood. The mechanic says, "Well,
there's your problem!" pointing to a furry creature who has made
its home in the engine.

⁶I'm categorizing somewhat unfairly here and being, as aca-
demics say, overly reductive. These three scholar-teachers have
written extensively about the academic discourse controversy and
have made significant contributions to the field of composition

studies and to basic writing in particular. I've reduced their positions to a couple of lines in order to argue my position in this conference presentation. For example, Bartholomae (1986b) tags his belief (academic culture is a "closed culture") with an embedded question: "The question is whether they can do this and still remain themselves" (85). He also raises this question elsewhere in his work. I've expressed Bizzell's early (1982) position; she repositioned herself in the late 1980s: "I changed my mind," she explained to me at another conference. But even in this 1982 article, she calls into question "the project of initiating students into . . . the school's preferred world view" (237). In 1988, Bizzell argues that "the prevailing notion of academic literacy needs revision," though she concedes that it's difficult "to make education truly reciprocal, and not something done to one person by another" (151-52).

[7]Bizzell (1986) phrases her question this way: "Do basic writers have to give up the world views they bring to college in order to learn the new world view" (298)? Bartholomae (1986b) believes that basic writers (and all students) must be given access to the New World (capitalization mine) of academe. He adds, "It is a question of whether they can, as Shaughnessy says, use someone else's language and yet create out of this language their own statements" (85).

[8]Min-zhan Lu, who also read a paper at the 4th National Conference on Basic Writing (October 1992), said in conversation that "diving in" did not fit in with talk about borderlands. Lakoff and Johnson (*Metaphors*, 1980) would call "diving in" a container metaphor. The movement is from "out" to "in." But the word "border" is also problematic. "Border" can suggest a line of separation, as the editors, Grewal, et al. of *Charting the Journey* (1988) point out: "Whenever someone crosses a border there will be someone else on the other side, sceptical—either on the side she's crossing to or the one she's coming from" (118). "Borders," writes Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderland/La Frontera*, 1987), "are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (3). Borders can be edges ("This is my home/this thin edge of barbwire") and can make "border residents" edgy. At the edge, earth and ocean overlap, sometimes bringing "a gentle coming together/at other times and places a violent clash" (Anzaldúa). Borders can be blurred boundaries, amorphous space-shapes for ever-shifting, residents who, like the nomads of Somalia, pack up their temporary housing in search of greener pastures. Borders can be what Mary Louise Pratt (*Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

Transculturation, 1992) calls "contact zones," which she defines as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism" (4). Yes, like colonialism. Classroom scenes will still be asymmetrical; only the teacher won't necessarily dominate the power structure.

⁹Unfortunately, Memmi wrote his other-Wise & Wonderful treatise without using the NCTE *Guidelines for Non-Sexist Language*. While we may perhaps excuse him for this discrimination in 1957, when the first edition was published in French, it is difficult to make excuses for him in this 1992 edition. However, according to Susan Gilson Miller ("Afterward"), Memmi "has come to regret" this omission and his male-center stance.

¹⁰However, as Neuleib (1992) observes, when text-centered teachers begin to analyze the texts of nonacademic readers and writers, they frequently feel confused and alienated:

> We who have never been outside the academic community are positioned inside our own familiar ways of knowing about reading, writing, thinking, doing, and deciding. We should not be surprised when we are unable to see the potential for knowledge in many of the students we teach or study. Our problem is how best to listen to students and in turn best to learn from them. (235)

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