

Jeanne Gunner and Gerri McNenny

## RETROSPECTION AS PROLOGUE

*When we approached Jeanne Gunner and Gerri McNenny about their possible contributions to this special issue, we didn't know if we should ask for something on the order of an introduction or something more like a postscript. It turns out they did a bit of both, composing separate but complementary pieces. We've decided to frontload them, though they are (as Jeanne's individual title suggests) afterthoughts. Jeanne Gunner, formerly of the UCLA Writing Program and now Core Composition Director at the Santa Clara University, Chair of the Conference on Basic Writing from 1995-1997, offers the unusual opportunity of examining the motives, personal and professional, for mounting such an enterprise as the workshop represents. Co-Chair of Conference on Basic Writing, Gerri McNenny is Director of Composition at the downtown campus of the University of Houston and is hard at work on an anthology of essays treating mainstreaming vs. tracking BW students; she chooses to highlight the issue of class, certainly the prominent note struck that day (perhaps because it seemed relatively undernoticed before), and her discussion provides an excellent overview of and introduction to the presentations of the other participants.*

Jeanne Gunner

### Afterthoughts on Motive

The CBW-sponsored workshop, "Race, Class, and Culture in the Basic Writing Classroom," at the 1997 CCCC in Phoenix, came about for many professional reasons. Applying for a slot on the conference program, Gerri McNenny and I wrote that the session would take the place of the national CBW conference, which was becoming increasingly difficult to organize and increasingly expensive for members to attend. We also cited the need for our members to meet as a group, to have a place at the conference where the discussion would be focused on basic writing, where the central topic would be the emerging issues in the field, mainstreaming being the center around which these issues have recently coalesced. In the session, the theory and practice of mainstreaming were to serve as the basis for political critique of various orders: analysis of class, identity, and cultural awareness in instructors' own experience; presentation by CUNY researchers speaking from the historical site of open admissions and assessing their current mainstreaming project; and an historical analysis of basic writers' social and educational context, which was to serve as a basis for formulating one's own personal and professional stance on mainstreaming in relation to issues of access and institutional status.

In inviting the workshop speakers, we were quite aware of the political truism that the voices heard are the voices that validate. To have our issues "spoken into existence," in a sense, we looked in some

cases to have speakers who themselves wield some professional and institutional power. Victor Villanueva, Gary Tate, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Ira Shor: were they themselves not so committed to inclusiveness, our invitations to them would really have been a kind of exploitation, of their names, status, and labor. Jane Maher brought with her the power and historical record invoked by the name of Mina Shaughnessy; if our field has icons, then Shaughnessy's image is clearly the pre-eminent one. Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason provided the power of empirical research and FIPSE sponsorship, in their reports on their project. Our intentions were not elitist; Gary's co-presenters John McMillan and Elizabeth D. Woodworth and Jackie's co-presenter Rebecca Taylor are new members of the field, whose contributions to the day and to the national discussion were and are important. But in addition to the goals we reported to the CCCC selection committee was the motive of using the workshop and its participants to signal the topic's importance in the profession at large, and our list of speakers was one element of this desire to enhance the status of the workshop—to give it national prominence.

For most of us, I expect the workshop served other professional purposes as well. In my case, I was looking for what I initially considered a kind of professional synthesis. I used to define myself primarily as a specialist in basic writing, since my teaching, conference papers, publications, and professional affiliations at one point related almost exclusively to the BW field. As my career path shifted to writing program administration, however, I, with only occasional awareness of the fact, distanced myself from basic writing. I continued to teach the courses, but increasingly my professional conversations shifted to new topics; other, seemingly more central writing program issues demanded my time and attention; and WPAs, in conference sessions and journals, seemed not to address basic writing as a field. The debates over such BW concerns as access and mainstreaming took place in other professional arenas, despite the obvious connection to the administrators who oversee the curricular and faculty issues that these topics necessarily invoke. Only at the first CBW-sponsored workshop at the 1996 CCCC in Milwaukee, organized by Karen Uehling, Geoff Sirc, and Sylvia Holladay, did I begin to question the seemingly unintegrated, parallel relationship between basic writing and writing program administration, and to sense a need to draw these parallel lines in the conversation into some more dialogic relationship.

At the 1996 workshop, I served as a respondent to a paper presented by Charles Schuster on the WPA and basic writing. It was clearly a kind of first: because most BW instructors seem not to become WPAs, and most WPAs seem not to teach BW (in each case, for fairly obvious reasons related to the politics of rank and subject), little opportunity for exchange between the two groups had ever arisen. If we consider

the ways in which basic writing figures into articles in the WPA journal over the past decade, we see that the field and its students are defined in limited and limiting ways—for the most part, they are objects in a discussion of placement, testing, and program assessment. Only in the past two years do discussions and program descriptions of mainstreaming projects appear in the WPA literature (see Cambridge et al.; Elbow; Grego and Thompson; Glau). If BW occupies a vulnerable and marginalized institutional position, then surely this vulnerability results in part from its alienation from the administrators best positioned to defend it. Helping to organize “Race, Class, and Culture in the BW Classroom” would be helping to bridge the two fields.

But I have to revisit the question of motive yet again, for what I brought away from the actual workshop experience enables me to see the motives I’ve cited above in yet a new light. In all cases, my motives include in some degree a concern for status: for BW as an academic field, for BW instructors and students as members of the field—and for me as someone whose identity is to a degree bound up in it. The workshop helped me to see that I am drawn to BW in part because I at once identify with and rage against the outsider status its members continue to have attached to them, a position that entails a sense of lost agency, of powerlessness. This identification and rage, I see now, is personal as well as intellectual. In the presentation by Tate, McMillan, and Woodworth, we were asked to consider in writing how the stories we tell about our backgrounds influence our teaching and life in the academy. Part of my story reads, “I’m acutely aware of my difference from my middle and upper class students, who make me uncomfortable: I am both threatened by and sometimes despising of them . . . I grew up about eight miles from Princeton but never once considered applying there; it was another world that didn’t exist for me. I’m conscious always of having my degrees from what a former English Department colleague once called, ‘Oh, your *state* university’ . . . With [BW] students, I’m aware of feeling relieved to deal with those who are also different. The marginalization of BW students has ironically created a safe place for me in the academy.” Again writing from experience, this time in response to Royster and Taylor’s presentation, the same themes appear: “I realize my own rage at the system, at being disenfranchised by my rank, field, and gender.”

So perhaps my real reason for organizing the workshop with Gerri was an unarticulated sense of conflict over my own social position, in the field and outside it, accompanied by a felt desire for agency, for power—the power to bring about change, to regain a sense of agency. If in my work I have overtly protested the assigning of low status to BW, I have felt oddly alienated when I have moved outside it—into the world of the WPA, for instance, which is less familiar on the levels of class origin and relation to power (no surprise that my work in this

field is dominated by criticism of its hierarchical systems). My desire for synthesis of such realms reflects this anxiety over identity and status; like many BW students, I'm attempting to negotiate multiple cultural contexts, some of which I have experienced as conflicts of allegiance and a hierarchizing of personal and professional worth.

For me, the workshop was a wonderful vehicle for exploring the implications of the professional lives on the boundary that I and, I expect, many of us in basic writing contend with. By creating a space for the personal in the professional discussion, the workshop succeeded, not only as a forum for basic writing teachers, but as a catalyst for those of us challenged by it to reconsider identity, action, and interaction; to see the boundaries that we construct, and have constructed for us.

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Gerri McNenny

## Notes On the Future of Working-Class Studies in Basic Writing

Since Jeanne has provided the background for the workshop, I'd like to discuss the future that considerations of race, class, and culture have in basic writing pedagogy and theory as they emerged in the workshop. While the impact that race and cultural location have on the teaching of writing has been more visibly explored in the past decade or so, class seems to be the newcomer. The invisibility of class as a site of struggle and a place wherein our students might regain a sense of empowerment has both historical and cultural roots.

The denial of class has a long history. Both in and outside of academia, the erasure of class has served a privileged minority well, masking those mechanisms that support their privilege while co-opting ideological frameworks in ways that are convenient to their continued status. Long held values consistent with our American idealism such as egalitarianism and the democratization of culture inadvertently act to deny class in ways that are convenient to the moneyed classes. Michael Lind, writing in his "Notes on the Progress of the American Class War," underscores the ways in which classlessness is encouraged in our popular mythology:

The American oligarchy spares no pains in promoting the belief that it does not exist, but the success of its disappearing act depends on equally strenuous efforts on the part of an American public anxious to believe in egalitarian fictions and unwilling to see what is hidden in plain sight. Anybody choosing to see the oligarchy in its native habitat need do nothing else but walk down the street of any big city to an office tower housing a major bank, a corporate headquarters or law firm, or a national television station. Enter the building and the multiracial diversity of the street vanishes as abruptly as the sound of the traffic. (36)

In effect, the invisibility of class facilitates a wishfulness that suppresses a critical scrutiny of the ways in which class, race, gender, and culture intersect and thereby shape institutions. Yet the importance of class distinctions on literacy development and writing pedagogy is increasingly apparent in a wide range of publications that seek to address the effacement of class from the academy. As TheodoreSizer, Jean Anyon, Joanne Kadi, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Anthony Petrosky, C. H. Knoblauch, Harriet Malinowitz and others have pointed out, the privileges of class and the access to resources and benefits it provides are

neatly structured into the very institutions that are held up as a means of social mobility .

For our students, anxious to become a part of that popular mythological transformation, a critical understanding of class, a sense of ownership for their own class affiliations, and a recognition of how class privilege operates may be the last thing they want. Why, after all, would they want to challenge that which they yearn desperately to be part of? In fact, the hurdle that those of us in basic writing confront is our students' resistance to a critical scrutiny of the class system and its underlying assumptions—of individualism, free market values, and all the ideological baggage that capitalism packages itself in.

Yet, as Janet Zandy points out in her book *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness*, the recovery of a sense of class consciousness is essential in helping our students reclaim a sense of identity and community that has been effaced by a dominant bourgeois culture which asks our students to collude in their own loss of identity. The common tendency to deny working-class backgrounds, as something that one gets rid of, "is an assumption that reduces human interaction and potential to mere commodity exchange and personal enhancement" (Zandy 1). Along with the self-objectification that such an attitude calls upon us to enact upon ourselves, it reduces us, in effect, to a mindless repetition of a classist ideology that sanctions the forces of capitalist privilege in our culture without really acknowledging or appreciating the value of our work. Moreover, it banishes the possibility of the development of a critical class consciousness, and with it a collective struggle. Zandy's analysis of the development of class consciousness is especially useful here in its critique of some commonly accepted polarities:

A critical, working-class consciousness is both expansive and grounded. Individual and collective. It is an alternative to the bifurcation of politics and culture, work and home. It recognizes ambiguity and contradiction without excusing the damage that one individual can do to another. It is multigenerational and historically situated, but, paradoxically, not dependent on linear time. This consciousness is not "success." It is not a safe harbor. It does not deny death. Nor is it bourgeois cynicism or despair. Working-class consciousness includes identity, but it is not fixed on identity. It is an aperture. A radical, portable alternative to the individualistic way out. It is that crucial attentiveness to others that fuels and enables resistance to injustice. (2)

The development of a critical class consciousness is more than a recapitulation of the idiosyncratic ways in which the individual elements

of one's own life determine one's place, as many of us experienced at the workshop. To recover a sense of one's class identity is to explore the webs of relationship that create a sense of place and identity in a specifically conceptualized system. By doing so, all of us, teachers as well as students, can begin to understand the ways in which our knowledge of the world is constructed and framed within class-defined assumptions—assumptions that determine who is empowered and who is not, who is entitled to a sense of agency and who must simply submit to the ideological rationalizations of others, who should be the decision makers and who their followers. In effect, the recovery and ownership of a sense of class identity, along with the complexities that the multiple locations of gender, race, and culture contribute, enable students to adopt a critical perspective that would be impossible otherwise.

It was toward these ends that our workshop presenters aimed. In their discussion of class issues in and out of the academy, Gary Tate, presenting together with John McMillan and Elizabeth D. Woodworth (also of Texas Christian University), laid the groundwork by recapping the impact that Working Class Studies has had on Composition and Rhetoric in recent years.<sup>1</sup> McMillan and Woodworth then went on to discuss the ways in which academic contexts present occasions for the erasing of narratives that would account for the class consciousness that shapes our students' critical perspectives. Workshop participants then examined in writing how the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and our class locations influence our teaching and our lives in the academy. The result was a rich blending of narratives from across a wide spectrum of class locations.

Jacqueline Jones Royster and Rebecca Taylor of Ohio State University, in their presentation, "Constructing Teacher Identity in the Basic Writing Classroom," then led workshop participants in what Royster termed "the debunking of master narratives" by inviting attendees to identify their locations as teachers within institutional and regional contexts, thereby creating "a leverage point from which to reflect." By doing so, we as teachers can arrive at new solutions to the difficulties that class differences pose in basic writing classes, with the recovery of location as a factor in understanding our own roles and our students' difficulties.

Other workshop leaders helped to focus the dialogue by touching on some of the many issues central to basic writing. Jane Maher shared her research from her recently published book *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work* by revisiting the beginnings of the basic writing movement with a portrait of the extraordinary energy and commitment to equal access Shaughnessy brought to open admissions programs. Her awareness of her own good fortune and privileged position strengthened her advocacy for her working-class students in



a revolutionary writing program that she hoped would begin to address those discrepancies. Victor Villanueva directed an exercise he conducts with his basic writing classes, creating word poems out of concepts. By directing participants to cut from their list of terms the number they could then use in writing, he demonstrated the constrictions that students likewise experience when we prohibit the use of their home community's languages.

Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason from CUNY introduced workshop participants to their 3-year FIPSE Pilot Project on mainstreaming. Their video of students' presentations of their writing together with the holistic evaluation session that they led, with participants scoring writing samples from students' portfolios, persuasively argued for the mainstreaming of basic writers in other equally supportive programs. Concluding the session, Ira Shor's "Farewell to Educational Apartheid: Basic Writing and Cultural Democracy" added an historical dimension to the workshop, retracing the roots of the contradictory forces at work in the democratic impulse in education and institutional policies for tracking. All of us were enriched by Shor's scholarly account of the impetus for the community college movement, the "cooling-out function of higher education," and subsequent efforts to place working-class students in vocational tracks that denied them further social mobility and failed to recognize their potential as critical thinkers and citizens.

Central to all our discussions was a concern for the ways in which academic discourse communities' mores and conventions have been mystified by unconscious class assumptions about agency and power. For our students and for ourselves, much of that can be deconstructed through an examination of the unmarked positions we're regularly presented with and through a recovery of our own class narratives. In her ten-year long project of collecting the narratives of working-class cultural workers, Janet Zandy gives us some clear insights into the value of autobiography in class struggles. She identifies what she calls "a usable past" and the value that reconstructing an account of one's past holds. "Memory," Zandy stresses, "has purpose. It is a bridge between the subjective and intersubjective—the private and unprivileged circumstances of individual lives—and the objective—the collective history of class oppression. It is a way of moving from personal pain to public and cultural work. The 'stuff' of one's life can be transformed into fruitful practices. Even grief can be put to good use" (4). As many of us at the workshop experienced, an effort to repossess one's origins, to see them as they were, replete with the class distinctions that often reproduce a classist bias, is essential to a critical stance. For our students, the stakes are equally high. For when they see the ways in which their imagined futures have been inscribed in the class assumptions built into the schooling and institutional acculturation



they have experienced, they can begin to unravel that process. Without it, they probably won't. Whether they do so is a choice they should have.

### Note

1. Especially significant is the role that the Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State University has had in foregrounding the influence of class politics inside and out of academia. YSU's Second Biennial Conference on Working Class Lives, held in June 1995, led the way in promoting a dialogue across the academy, among labor studies and public policy professionals, literary critics and rhetoricians, historians and union organizers, about the ways in which class continues to be effaced in our culture. Their work, combined with recent publications by Janet Zandy (*Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working Class Consciousness*, Rutgers 1995; *Calling Home: Working Class Women's Writings*, Rutgers, 1990) and issues by *Radical Teacher* (Spring 1995, No. 46) and *Women's Studies Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 1995) devoted wholly to issues of the working class, investigate the need to understand our own class histories, to inquire into the stories we tell about ourselves, about where we belong and who we are within designated class systems whose boundaries are often blurred by competing and unconscious allegiances. YSU's most recent biennial conference, held June 11-14, 1997, strengthened participants' commitment to a multi-disciplinary dialogue about class, labor, and academia.

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