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INESSENTIAL WRITINGS: SHAUGHNESSY'S LEGACY IN A SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPE

ABSTRACT: *This article offers a rhetorical analysis of the charges that have been waged against Mina Shaughnessy's scholarship from poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist quarters. While arguing that the philosophical and political interventions such work has furnished are crucial, Gray-Rosendale contends that too often Shaughnessy's research has been somewhat mischaracterized. First, the paper investigates the contradictory terminological investments within the charges against Shaughnessy (i.e., "essentialism," "accommodationism," and lack of "materialist praxis"). Second, through close readings of Shaughnessy's texts, the paper maintains that the complexity and "self-difference" of Shaughnessy's own scholarship and its historical-political context indeed undermine such criticisms.*[1]

Of late, poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist theorists have made many critical interventions within Basic Writing theory and practice, espousing "contact zone" approaches. Focusing attention upon the material conditions of Basic Writing students and their teachers as well as the historical, social, and political influences upon their lives has been an incisive step for the field. Often such work has drawn strategic attention to the problematic ways in which Basic Writers have been represented within our own research as well as some of the ideological positions this research can potentially foster. This research has also frequently addressed our need to be self-reflexive, careful scholars within Basic Writing. In doing so, much of this work has given important voice to the needs of many marginalized Basic Writers and made many scholars more tentative about what kinds of claims they make about Basic Writers as well as how these claims might impact

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their students.

Despite such crucial strides, however, one troubling element often persists within such accounts. As argued within the 1993 "Symposium on Basic Writing, Conflict, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," many of these contributions tend to somewhat mischaracterize Shaughnessy's scholarship. Offering criticisms of Min-Zhan Lu's 1992 "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?," a text which served as a lightning rod for discussing such issues, scholars challenged depictions of Shaughnessy. Patricia Laurence, who worked with Shaughnessy during the early days of Open Admissions at CUNY, maintained that Lu's argument failed to historicize interpretations of Composition leaders and their pedagogical practices, stating, "How much is missing in cultural and educational analysis that flattens the differences that we espouse in fashionable forums!" (880) Moreover, Laurence remarked that as one reads Lu's text "one can only smile ironically" while "set adrift by Lu on an educational raft" since her claims unmoor different scholars from "their times, their institutions, their fields" (880). Countering Lu, Laurence claimed that while discursive conflict may or may not be experienced by the student, it should not be understood as a curricular objective in and of itself, neither operating as an educational and cultural precondition nor outright rejected as the enemy. Laurence also criticized Lu openly for not acknowledging the extent to which employing a "vocabulary of 'conflict' or 'struggle' (then or now) rather than the language of understanding, caring, exchange, and reciprocity would have been counterproductive, irresponsible, and explosive" during this time period (882).

Likewise, Peter Rondinone, a teacher of Basic Writers at LaGuardia Community College at CUNY, himself a product of the same Open Admissions system Shaughnessy first helped to establish, charged that Lu and her supporters' desire for a mestiza consciousness itself appeared "naive" (884). This "mestiza consciousness" is defined as an identity of border residency which "develops a tolerance for contradiction and ambivalence, learning to sustain contradiction and ambivalence into a new consciousness" what Gloria Anzaldúa calls, "a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts": "a mestiza consciousness" [Anzaldúa 79-80]. For Lu, adopting this new kind of identity required Basic Writers to usefully "hover between two worlds- the educated and the uneducated." Rondinone indicated instead that "it makes me suspect that Lu (and those who propose this) don't really know the street corners I'm talking about (or they've forgotten). These are places where being ambivalent, being in the middle, will get you trapped in a crossfire of lead and blown into little pieces" (884). The "mestiza consciousness," compelled a "hovering" for Rondinone then, which threatened to ultimately disable the

student. In short, Rondinone declared that Lu's argument divulged very little sense of the difficulties Basic Writers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds encounter: "Unless someone offers to pay my rent and to put shoes on my little girl, no one is going to convince me that hovering between the two worlds (educated and uneducated) is the place for me" (885).

Further, Barbara Gleason, Director of English Composition at City College, took issue with the logic of Lu's argument, demonstrating that poststructuralist critique alone often cannot do justice to Basic Writing pedagogy, program development and research because it centers on theoretical perspectives at the expense of the particular objects under analysis. Gleason advanced the point that sometimes "a foregrounding of students' internal conflicts influenced by poststructuralist theory may well serve the teacher-researcher's interests better than it serves the students' needs" (886), and that, as a result, this impulse needs to be interrogated like any other.[2] Such a concentration on poststructuralist theory could not, then, she argued, "adequately reveal the fullness and the complexity of the Basic Writing movement or even the ideas and experiences of one Basic Writing teacher" (887). In addition, Gleason elucidated that Lu's allegation, Shaughnessy's work failed to capture larger social and political dimensions, comes from a more problematic assumption that Lu maintained: formalist approaches themselves are inherently and inevitably naive or innocent. This itself compels a complete separation of form from meaning, according to Gleason and, more importantly, as Laurence herself argued, overlooks necessarily the significant historical conditions in which Shaughnessy wrote. Gleason affirmed:

> As for her linguistic premises, Shaughnessy was working within the dominant paradigm of her day, a time when transformational generative grammar was as intellectually forceful as poststructuralist theory is today. . . To say that Shaughnessy's pedagogy and research were based on the premise that form is separate from meaning is to say that Shaughnessy was influenced by some of the most commonly accepted premises and theories of her time. (887)

Gleason indicated that Shaughnessy's own theories were as much a product of her historical moment as they were the result of Shaughnessy's own teaching and research experiences.

What all of these scholars called for, then, was a greater historical and political contextualization of Shaughnessy's work. While these thinkers certainly recognized the attempts made by recent scholars to look at the "specific historical conditions surrounding the open admissions movement" (Lu 907), these thinkers also contended that this

historicization had to be fuller and more detailed in its scope. It could not simply reduce the people involved to "gatekeepers, converters, and accommodationists" (Lu 907). This paper aims to work between these perspectives, contributing a continuation of this significant "Symposium" conversation while also encouraging a dialogue with more recent poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist scholars. Though calling attention to the flaws inherent within Shaughnessy's work is unquestionably a valid venture, as a rhetorically-invested, poststructuralist thinker, I cannot help but question the three main contentions employed most often to highlight Shaughnessy's lack of attention to the political, historical, and materialistic considerations that shape how one conceives of the "Basic Writer": her work's 1) "essentialist" view of language, 2) "accommodationist" set of tactics, and 3) failure to interrogate "material" conditions.

Recognizing that these terms operate primarily as rhetorical conventions, in this paper I first probe the definitions for such terms as well as explore how they are deployed by scholars within Basic Writing theory. As Jonathan Potter claims, such rhetorical tactics inevitably invoke a range of tropes and a set of characters which, while they may appear coherent, nevertheless serve situated and practical needs as much as political ends alone (28). After challenging the ways in which these terms are deployed and the rhetorical effects they produce, I next investigate Shaughnessy's own texts to determine whether or not they warrant such criticisms. Through close readings of Shaughnessy's texts within the context of her historical and political moment, I evidence how the self-differences within Shaughnessy's works render ambiguous if not outright defy many such negative characterizations.

I. The Essential Shaughnessy, Accommodationism, and Materialist Praxis

First I will trace several texts within which Shaughnessy is depicted as "essentializing" differences, endorsing Basic Writers' "accommodation" to mainstream culture, and not paying adequate attention to "materialist" considerations. These examples are meant to be representative of such trends within our scholarship, but my analyses and the text selections are by no means exhaustive. Additionally, since some of these texts were published, numerous scholars' positions on particular issues are likely to have shifted somewhat, yet there have been few if any public reconceptualizations of their representations of Shaughnessy's work, the purpose of inquiry here. Finally, I in no way mean to recommend that the philosophical and political investments of such scholars are not themselves exceedingly valuable. Given the

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fact that I share the concerns of challenging Basic Writers' ghettoization myself, I hope to suggest that we need to be more aware of these investments' effects, applying rhetorical lenses to such texts so as to expose some of the potential pitfalls to which our own linguistic investments may unwittingly fall prey.

Min-Zhan Lu's aforementioned 1992 article contends that Kenneth Bruffee, Thomas Farrell, and Mina Shaughnessy all treated Basic Writing students' apprehensions about acculturation and their accompanying senses of contradiction and ambiguity as deficits. Lu further denounces these scholars for accepting an essentialist view of language, or "holding that the essence of meaning precedes and is independent of language," and an "*essentialist* assumption that words can express but will not change the *essence* of one's thoughts" (my italics 906). Lu then asserts that these thinkers apprehend discourse communities as discursive utopias. Urging that their efforts to curtail the psychic strain of such acculturation on Basic Writing students indicate that they regard conflict and struggle as necessarily enemies of Basic Writing instruction, Lu then chastises Bruffee and Farrell specifically for presupposing that "the goal of education is 'acculturation' into an academic community" (894).

In her argument, Lu proceeds to designate Shaughnessy's work as "accommodationist," since Shaughnessy specifically advises that a "'formal' approach is more 'practical' because it will help students master the academic meaning without reminding them that doing so might 'wipe out' the familiar reality" (905). Lu proposes that Shaughnessy champions students' decision to "'live with' the tensions of conflicting cultures" (906). According to Lu, this formal approach to Basic Writers' writing can only be taken as "practical" if "teachers view the students' awareness of the conflict between the home meaning and the school meaning of a word as something to be 'dissolved' at all costs," since this will interfere inexorably with their learning (905). For Lu, this evidences Shaughnessy's propensity to neglect the political dimensions of the linguistic choices Basic Writing students make when reading and writing, permitting Shaughnessy's separation of language use from the circumstances of lived reality. Lu concludes her essay with a bold call to action: "we need to find ways of foregrounding conflict and struggle not only in the generation of meaning or authority, but also in the teaching of conventions of 'correctness' in syntax, spelling, and punctuation, traditionally considered the primary focus of Basic Writing instruction" (910). [3]

Pamela Gay's "Rereading Shaughnessy From a Postcolonial Perspective" which appeared in the 1993 *Journal of Basic Writing* also employs this language. Gay maintains that Shaughnessy's 1976 essay "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" was predicated upon "imperialistic assumptions of classroom practice designed to help those

students into the academic colony" (30). Gay is particularly concerned by the ways in which Basic Writers risk losing their difference and are not able, by means of Shaughnessy's pedagogical suggestions, to cultivate and enrich such differences through the language they speak, the culture they know, and the lives they've lived. As a result, Gay advises that "those of us in the first world, not hearing difference, would fail to see outside our privileged lives" (30). In order to advance her claims within her article, a curious text in which the poststructuralist voice reads statements made by Shaughnessy ironically, Gay takes exception to Shaughnessy's four-stage developmental model for teachers. Rather than previous attempts by Shaughnessy and others, to, as Gay puts it, "convert the natives," Gay instead determines that one must perceive the classroom as a dialogic space, a place where "contradictory and competing voices may erupt, disrupt, or rupture the seams of the text we call classroom discussion" (35). According to Gay, then, this discernment of difference does not seek to bypass the struggle for power. Rather, it unmasks this struggle. For Gay, like Lu, the Basic Writing student's manifest battle for power and assertion of difference within the classroom and within our research emerges as an inherent good.

Similarly Bruce Horner's 1996 "Discoursing Basic Writing" in CCC presents an example of this recent turn within Basic Writing research to the contact zone/conflict model (Harris) and its criticisms of Shaughnessy. Horner denounces what he terms the dominant discourse on basic writing, remarking that it is housed within Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, the *Journal of Basic Writing*, and the 1987 *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. Within these texts, Horner contends, the material conditions of Basic Writing students and teachers are too often suspiciously missing. There is no interrogation in such works, Horner maintains, of aspects such as salaries, job security, teaching loads, class size, classroom facilities, office space, and secretarial support. He charges Shaughnessy specifically with acknowledging political pressures on basic writing teachers and students yet doubting their legitimacy, and instead turning "her attention in the (long) meanwhile to accommodating those pressures, calling for the development of more efficient means of teaching grammar and mechanics" (215). As a result of this criticism of Shaughnessy's major published works (and one archival report from January 1992 titled "A Second Report: Open Admissions," published by the CUNY English Department's Newsletter), Horner affirms, like Lu and Gay before him, that one must give voice to different and suppressed stories, heralding our students' "yet untold tales of struggles, defeats, victories, and resistance, thereby teaching and learning from strategies of resistance and outright opposition" (219). Once again, the criticism of Shaughnessy works strategically. Airing of student conflict and

struggle is then advocated as the end to which Basic Writing scholarship and pedagogy should tend. In closing, Horner calls for a recovery of the specific historical, material, institutional, and political context of teaching and discourse within Basic Writing.[4]

Deborah Mutnick's 1996 *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education* also indicates the value of the Basic Writing student's struggle and conflict as an intrinsic good which ought to be foregrounded within the classroom. Basic Writing, she establishes, is a "contact zone within the academy, particularly if it is reconceived as a location in which alliances between teachers and students could subvert the margin-center hierarchy" (xiv). And, just like the aforementioned authors, Mutnick probes Shaughnessy's view of education, terming it accommodationist, and pronouncing its educational goals as predicated upon acculturation and homogeneity. Shaughnessy's work, Mutnick (like Lu) contends, holds an "essentialist view of language in which thought, meaning, and content are seen as preceding or separate from linguistic forms" (129). Mutnick's text is rather distinct, however, in one important regard. She propounds a form of difference which is not "stable, fixed, and essential, thus maintaining racial, national, and gender stereotypes rather than demystifying and historicizing them" (10), instead working against such a conception of human experience. Seeing that even within social constructionism there are essentialist proclivities, Mutnick seeks effectively to eschew presumptions which concentrate on control, mastery, and self-expression rather than social location, intertextuality, and dialogism. Drawing widely from critical pedagogy, postmodern thought, and feminism, Mutnick upholds a social constructionist pedagogy which would notice language itself as a zone of conflict in which students- especially basic writers- struggle to make semantic and syntactical choices.[5]

Problem One: What is an "essentialist" view of language?

After the examination of such assertions against Shaughnessy by poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist critics, it is necessary to get a better sense of the lineage of the terminology being utilized. For example, what do scholars in Basic Writing accomplish rhetorically when they credit Shaughnessy with maintaining an "essentialist" view of language?

In order to better get at this question, it makes sense to trace something of the history of the term's use. The "essentialist" claim is a rhetorical tactic which has been used for ten to fifteen years within other scholarly quarters which have taken up the poststructuralist standpoint. Prominent among them, of course, has been feminist theory in

which scholars have struggled with the dilemma of needing to describe women as a social collective for political purposes but also of recognizing that creating a collective identity necessarily normalizes and excludes by trying to identify traits all women have. As Elizabeth Spelman has it, the essentialism charge has involved the attempt to posit an "essential 'womanness' that all women have and share in common despite the racial, class, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences among us" (ix).

Elizabeth Grosz asserts that the charge of essentialism pertains to those theories which assume women's essence is given and universal, often identified with women's biology and natural characteristics, but also with women's psychological characteristics or nurturance and empathy. For Diana Fuss "essentialism" is most prevalently reasoned out as a "belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (Fuss xi), or the notion that there are some natural givens which indeed precede social determination. The concept of identity that it typically invokes considers the self to be unitary, possessing a stable core that is self-identical. An essentialist view of language, then, proposes that language itself has trans-historical, eternal, and immutable essences that betoken a single reality rather than a complex system of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences. Words have one essential meaning rather than multiple meanings that are variable or context-dependent. In this view of language, the "self" maintains a fundamental continuity over time, and posits an essential distinction from other historical subjects.

An inessential concept of language, then, would not suggest that the referential function of language is negated but rather, as Trihn Minh-Ha recommends, is "freed from its false identification with the phenomenal world and from its assumed authority as a means of cognition about that world" (31). As Chris Weedon contends, inessential conceptions of language recognize that "different languages and different discourses within the same language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways which cannot be reduced to one another through translation or by an appeal to universally shared concepts reflecting a fixed reality" (22).

However, despite the wide use of the term "essentialism" within feminist circles, as early as 1989, poststructuralists began to call attention to the problematic rhetorical effects of the use of this term as well as the dubious essentialism/difference binary. According to Fuss, this charge of "essentialism" often emerges due to problematic rhetorical purposes: the desire 1) to deny or annul the radicality of difference, or to ignore the many differences within essentialism, 2) to create the sense that "the bar between essentialism and constructionism" is "solid and unassailable" though it certainly is not (xii), and 3) to de-

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velop the notion that essentialism is inherently good or bad, progressive nor reactionary, beneficial nor dangerous rather than looking at "what motivates its deployment" (xi). Fuss then also warns that much poststructuralist thinking has failed to concede that it is sometimes itself predicated upon a determinist view of social constructionism, what she calls a "sociological essentialism," or the conception that the "subject is, in essence, a social construction" (6).

Lawrence Grossberg similarly argues that social constructionist perspectives can rely upon one type of social construction as essential, one which perceives identity and language as historical constructions alone, privileging temporal dimensions over spatial or relational aspects. In this way, then, the rhetoric of poststructuralism may perhaps also risk providing a very circumscribed conception of social relations' operations. A non-essentialist view of language, which Fuss and Grossberg stress may or may not include poststructuralist tenets, recognizes not only that subjectivity is constructed, but that language is the space wherein individuals' subjectivities are socially constituted (i.e., essentialism is possible in spite of one's political or linguistic allegiances).

On Fuss's view, however, the most "essentialist" aspect within such deployments of social constructionism includes "place" or "positionality." This notion can provide a fixed, determinate understanding of the differences between subject-positions. For example, Gayatri Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" affirms that there should exist one good form of essentialism, a "strategic essentialism" for those who are oppressed by society. In certain cases, she proposes, there may be a necessity for those from oppressed groups to declare their own essential raced, classed, and gendered bodies strategically, drawing attention to diverse histories of oppression. Spivak's call for a "strategic essentialism" raises the unsettling possibility that in certain cases one's subject-position may not be temporary, shifting, and provisional, as her arguments indicate it should be, but rather determinate, depending on who is doing the constructing and for what reasons. At such moments, strategic essentialism runs the risk of sounding oddly like an argument for a sociological essentialism in a new guise.

Since Fuss' excellent interrogation of the rhetorical effects of the "essentialism" charge, other scholars have also furnished useful insights. In *Critical Confrontations: Literary Theories in Dialogue*, Meili Steele proposes that

> one of the unfortunate effects of the poststructuralism/ essentialism nexus is that it turns differences into a bunker. The oppressed protect themselves with new self-understandings against the dominant culture. The poststructuralist, suspicious

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of all languages of constitution and justification, intervenes strategically and without principles or waits for the birth of a radically new culture. (94)

Likewise, in *Theorizing Textual Subjects: Agency and Oppression*, Steele also affirms that the whole opposition between essentialism and decentered multiplicity depends upon the problematic "poststructuralist insistence that any first-/second-person account of the subject is an essentialism" (139), making it exceedingly difficult to articulate other potentialities. Furthermore, in *Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* Iris Marion Young recognizes this binarism as flawed, rather calling for gender and other such categories to be seen as a "seriality." In this way, the essentialism/ constructionism binary could be dismantled, providing unity to the series "women" through how they are positioned vis a vis their relationships to the material organizations of social relationships, not through their roles as individuals. Drucilla Cornell also criticizes the essentialism-constructionism binary, advising that linking a biological or naturalist account of feminine sexuality to an essentialist rendering of women's reality has led to the faulty assumption that "any attempt to write feminine difference, or even to specify the construction of Woman or women within a particular context, has been identified as essentialist" (4). Finally, within Composition Studies recent attempts have been made to call attention to the limits of the essentialism-constructionism debate (Jarratt and Worsham) and to recognize that the conception of "essentialism" itself is far from static (Brady). The term "essentialism" can have many rhetorical purposes, then, but many of them seem to obscure the relative complexity of the term itself. Chief among such purposes, of course, is the swift negation of the political efficacy of another scholar's assertions.

Problem Two: What is "accommodationism"?

Much like the rhetorical problematics of the term "essentialism," the designation "accommodationist" is one that arises frequently within poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist theoretical frameworks to characterize Shaughnessy's scholarship. As a result, an examination of the history of this term and its definition is also necessary. The term "accommodationist" submits that the mastery of academic codes depends upon assymmetrical power relations, and that this mastery is sometimes valued in ways that literally wipe out or negate a Basic Writing student's other linguistic abilities and choices. This can pressure the student, conceived as "other," to "accommodate" her/himself to the dictates of hegemonic discourses. Much like forms of "acculturation" or "assimilation," the word "accommodation" indicates

that Basic Writers come to construct and represent themselves according to the dominant dictates of Standard English and other hegemonic cultural codes rather than also being taught to value their own linguistic difference, employing it as a disruptive force against privileged conceptions of language use.

While the term "accommodation" has been used in varied circles, much like "essentialism," it has a strong history in feminist circles as well. Drucilla Cornell's *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* proposes that "accommodation" by women involves the appropriation of sexual difference to masculine domination rather than the creation of a new form of the feminine which is designed in resistance to such domination (13). This term has also been employed in Marxist circles in which it is argued that lower class people need not "accommodate" themselves and their identities to the whims of upper-class hegemonic discourse.

As with the term "essentialism" which has been challenged of late for its rhetorical purposes, numerous criticisms have been made concerning the term "accommodation." While it seems that the term "accommodation" is inherently negative, indicating that one is giving up one conception of oneself in favor of another, accommodation need not necessarily operate as such. In the cases of women and the economically disadvantaged, "accommodation" may not always be an entirely negative political concept since one can reasonably engage in "accommodation" to dominant cultural codes for many, often complicated reasons. Externally accommodative behavior also does not always reflect the many social identities one may have (De Vos 37). Likewise, there are many varieties as well as degrees of "accommodation" precisely because there are "many different norms and constellations of subjectivities . . . depending on differences among fields of study, discourse roles, and ideologies of knowledge-making" (Ivanic 244). Similarly it is evident that there are paradoxes involved within scholars' recommendations that Basic Writers should not be asked to accommodate themselves to the dictates of Standard English. According to Elizabeth Ellsworth's *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address*, forcing democratic dialogue and requiring students not to accommodate themselves to academic discourse is often as likely to be as anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian as any other pedagogical alternative. This becomes a particularly troubling issue for those "Basic Writers" who, while they acknowledge their socio-cultural positioning, may not want to interrogate it to the exclusion of exploring how to use academic writing conventions.[6] Requiring them to do so may indeed compel another kind of "accommodation," the accommodation to one particular political framework at the expense of others.

Problem Three: What is involved when one focuses on "materialist conditions?"

Lastly, a lack of focus on "materialist conditions," drawing upon Marxist ideology, is another rhetorical tactic often adapted to discredit the findings of other scholars, particularly Shaughnessy. In this case, one is being charged with not making the social, cultural, political, and everyday pressures upon a particular situation visible objects of inquiry. This can involve a lack of attention to working conditions, political machinations and their impacts, and allocations of resources. While more recent scholars from post-Marxists to conservatives have challenged the ways in which this charge functions rhetorically (for a good overview, see Gordon), Kenneth Burke perhaps remains its most sympathetic and therefore perhaps most thoughtful critic to date.

Burke argued that the motivations of Marxist-influenced rhetorics can most frequently involve a critique of capitalist rhetoric to the exclusion of other interests. Put simply, Marxist rhetoric can often be employed specifically to unmask the factional interests inherent in professed universal interests, especially those of bourgeois orientation (102). For Burke, the call for "materialist inquiry" was itself rather complicated rhetorically, and therefore worthy of critical examination, requiring 1) an account of extralinguistic factors in rhetorical expression, 2) the use of dialectic as one of its main principles while evidencing the inability to embrace the pragmatics of such dialectic because of an unwillingness to give "equally sympathetic expression to competing principles" (103), and 3) an analysis of the hidden advantages within other terminological investments while simultaneously seeking to obscure its own. Beyond this, the reference to "material conditions," Burke recommends, can be somewhat contradictory. For Burke, the same Marxist system of ideas which professes the universal aim of social and political action can also at times provide a rather limited or partial view of reality that can sometimes overemphasize the discussion of controversial political and social issues at the expense of other equally critical concerns.

II. Rhetorical Power and the Inessential Shaughnessy

After a brief rhetorical analysis of the terms "essentialist," "accommodationist," and "materialist praxis," it seems clear that the logic of these words and their uses can indeed be rather complicated, sometimes even paradoxical. The rhetorical purposes of such charges, of course, raise questions about whether the assertions themselves are particularly meaningful as claims about specific texts.

If one suspends these questions of the rhetorical function of these

terms, however, one is left to look at how such charges against Shaughnessy themselves hold up in light of her actual texts, perhaps an equally valid consideration. This is, of course, the consideration that has dominated much contemporary inquiry of Shaughnessy's work. One then confronts a series of other critical questions that demand answers: To what extent did Shaughnessy actually produce an "essentialist" view of language? To what extent did Shaughnessy truly extend "accommodationist" perspectives to her Basic Writing students through her research? To what extent did Shaughnessy fail to concern herself with the "material" considerations of the Basic Writing program in which she worked?

Recently some very substantial work has placed Shaughnessy's research much more fully within historical and political context. Jane Maher's *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work* indicates how Shaughnessy's moment made it exceedingly troublesome for her to take up social and political topics overtly. As Maher describes, "by the time Mina finished the conclusion [of *Errors and Expectations*], a chapter she entitled 'Expectations,' the budget cuts that had been imposed on CUNY had taken a devastating toll not only on the number of students being admitted, but on the quality of the programs that remained to serve them" (194). The constraints that such political pressures placed upon Shaughnessy's texts must be recognized prior to any full examination of her work and its complexities. As a result of such historical pressures, it is necessary to look more closely for the political and social commentary that Shaughnessy makes about language, ethnic and race relations, and material conditions.

Much of the work I now turn to comes from my own research at the Mina Shaughnessy Archives at City College.[7] Offering an odd forewarning of how Shaughnessy's 1977 *Errors and Expectations* would be taken up by contemporary scholars, one reader from Prentice-Hall Publishers, Bill Oliver, made an important claim about how the book was likely to be received in his 1976 review of the manuscript. It was not overtly categorizable within one political category, but seemed to disrupt both leftist and rightist expectations:

> I suspect that Mina's work will be roundly condemned from both the right and the left: from one point of view, it is entirely too sympathetic with the poorly prepared student, putting too much blame on the English language itself rather than on the student's ignorance and of the high school teachers; from the other point of view it is another honky trick, an exercise in liberal deceit which, when the rhetoric is penetrated, still attempts to impose a minority dialect (i.e., standard written English), blaming the students for their inadequacies as writers instead of blaming society for its biases as readers. (1)[8]

Neither characterization, Oliver warned, would be fair to the complexity of Shaughnessy's argument itself. Personal correspondence between Oliver and Len Kriegel revealed that Shaughnessy also felt she "would be attacked both from the left and from the right." As Maher has it, "Mina's concern with criticism from 'the left' centered around the (very legitimate) fear of 'exposing' errors of basic writing students to the public by publishing samples of their writing" (188). Shaughnessy's apprehensions about leftist criticisms were something Maher indicates Shaughnessy tried to account for in *Errors and Expectations*. Maher points to Shaughnessy's many attempts within her written work both in the *Journal of Basic Writing* and in *Errors and Expectations* to codify student errors and find their own value and intrinsic logics.

Within her historical and political moment, many scholars commented upon the gamble Shaughnessy's book was taking. In a 1979 speech, Bob Lyons applauds Shaughnessy for what then was a very risky move: "It was clear from several essays on Open Admissions and from several letters to the *Times* that examples of unskilled writing by non-traditional students were considered a powerful weapon by those opposed to the broadening of higher education. From his point of view, Mina had great courage in choosing to examine publicly such quantities of error-laden student writing" (1979; 4). Importantly, Oliver proceeds to assert that, "Mina has anticipated all these objections in her book; and the careful reader will perceive that what she has to say to writing teachers is much more subtle and much more valuable than anything yet to emerge from either of the extreme camps" (1). As I will argue here, a close examination of Shaughnessy's works reveals that the charges of "essentialism," "accommodationism," and "anti-materialism" appear not to account for the radical intricacy of Shaughnessy's actual assertions.

Shaughnessy's Challenge to the Essentialist Charge

Contemporary scholars who charge Shaughnessy with essentialism scarcely ever contribute thorough or direct textual evidence from her work to support this assertion. Oftentimes the charge of essentialism is evidenced merely by Shaughnessy's overt concern with the formal, detailed linguistic choices Basic Writers make rather than larger political or social concerns. Shaughnessy's preoccupation with the Basic Writer's linguistic situation in her research is often reduced by critics to a view that her conception of language is naively essentialist rather than that, as she contends, language acts are dependent upon diverse rhetorical constraints and conditions, many of which rely upon external issues of context and social environment.

In order to examine the strength of the "linguistic essentialist" charge against Shaughnessy's actual texts, I turn to Shaughnessy's own discussions concerning how language operates. In her 1977 *Errors and Expectations*, the text most often criticized for its essentialist conception of language, Shaughnessy curiously announces that language ought to be defined rhetorically, as contingent, as well as both situationally and socially determined. This new view of language, Shaughnessy understood, would have to involve a "revolution" in thinking about linguistic acts, something she was fairly certain teachers and scholars might not be ready to address. This "revolution," then, would necessarily shift the ways in which "errors" were perceived since now they were no longer linked to a referential conception of language use but an understanding of language use as context-dependent:

> It [this new conception of language] is a revolution that leads not inevitably or finally to a rejection of all rules and standards about language, namely that it is variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to others but none of which, also can substitute for others. But it does produce a different view of error and of students who make errors . . . his [the Basic Writer's] errors reflect upon his linguistic situation, not about his educability. (121)

Thus, Shaughnessy's call for an examination of the "logic" within student error appears in part to be premised upon the assumption that language is not simply transparent or representational. Rather language use, and thereby "student error," while certainly "shaped by conventions" and "bound by situations," shifting according to the different socially and linguistically determined situations students themselves encounter, does not lead "inevitably or finally to a rejection of all rules and standards about language."

Looking more carefully at *Errors and Expectations* divulges that in many ways Shaughnessy may indeed have been tackling both a view of all standards as relative as well as a very similar essentialist conception of language use, one that she is often accused of utilizing herself. Until the publication of this text, many teachers maintained essentialist conceptions of language and therefore transparent conceptions about Basic Writers' situations. As a result, such Basic Writers were previously seen to be naturally uneducable and remedial, their identities determined almost solely through their language choices. Shaughnessy strategically sought to disrupt that, not by ignoring the fact that presumptions about "error" existed, but rather by examining the false conceptions about "error" themselves. Shaughnessy did this precisely because she held that the "alternative course of ignoring error for fear

of inhibiting the writer even more or of assuming that errors will wear off as the student writes is finally giving error more power than it is due" (128). Rather than viewing "error" as an essential part of Basic Writers' language use (such that their ideas cannot be separated from the varied logical choices through which they are conveyed), Shaughnessy suggests that "error" is due in large part to the intelligently-reasoned, rhetorically-based choices Basic Writers make. Instead, Shaughnessy invites teachers to acknowledge that every linguistic situation, shaped by contextual, rhetorical, and social features, is limited and constrained in particular and yet different ways for the Basic Writing student.

Though Shaughnessy certainly does not concentrate a great deal of attention on the problematic assumptions of academic discourse altogether, its multiple internal contradictions and variations, or radical overthrow of remedial programs, Shaughnessy does do something very critical, even rather revolutionary, for her historical moment. She continues to mark the dilemmas of the Basic Writer's rhetorical situation, particularly the predicament of moving between and amongst different discursive conventions. Here Shaughnessy references the artificial nature of the rhetorical situation of academic writing for the Basic Writing student:

> It is, first, a situation that requires him [the Basic Writer] to communicate with an anonymous reader (for whom the teacher might be said to act as a surrogate), generally on an impersonal subject and in a formal register. It is, second, a politely polemical situation in which the reader is assumed to be, if not hostile to the writer's view, at least obliged to consider it carefully, according to criteria for evidence and sound reasoning that are themselves part of the legacy of academic language. It is, finally, a situation that is locked peculiarly into time- distanced from the present by the absence of a listener and linked to the past by a tradition of discourse that has in large measure determined what topics and terms and styles of thought are appropriate to the subject. (188)

According to Shaughnessy, then, student error is as much a function of complexities raised by the ever-shifting rhetorical situation which has temporal, spatial, and social aspects as it is students' lack of familiarity with academic codes and conventions. Such codes are the "legacy of academic language," a troublesome, seemingly impenetrable method of communication which the Basic Writer has not yet inherited. Shaughnessy maintains that until this point, traditional modes of Composition teaching have failed to highlight for Basic Writers that contrasts between languages are largely a "function of different social and

linguistic situations" (188) and their complexities. It is finally recognizing language as not essentially referential but rather as rhetorical or context-dependent that Shaughnessy proposes is critical for future Basic Writing pedagogy.

In fact, within Shaughnessy's "Introduction" to *Errors and Expectations*, she clarifies that since "teachers' preconceptions about errors are frequently at the center of their misconceptions about BW students, I have had no choice but to dwell on errors" (6), despite the fact that, as becomes clear when one looks at more of her writings, this was not her only research interest. Error comes not from the student's preference of one linguistic form over another, according to Shaughnessy. Rather it emanates from a series of conflicting sites, including "the generally humiliating encounter with school language, which produces ambivalent feelings about mastery" (10), and a great deal of painful psychic conflict for the student. Shaughnessy is not then recommending that painful psychic conflict must be avoided at all costs, but that one should not turn a blind eye to the assumptions one has about language or the ways in which these can impact our students. Such passages also communicate Shaughnessy's keen discernment of the rhetorical and situational nature of language-use and the ways in which it is impacted by social and institutional conditions. Removing the concept of "error" from the problems of encoding and decoding as well as seeing it as a form of meaning-making with a set of its own internal logics which were based on rhetorical, cultural, and social factors of Basic Writers' individual linguistic situations was precisely what Shaughnessy's book set out, at least in part, to establish for its readers.

Shaughnessy also voiced versions of her understanding of an inessential conception of language use in her lesser known works. In a speech to the Conference of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors, then Director of Instructional Resources, Mina Shaughnessy, overtly considered the need for Open Admissions programs. In the Congressional Record minutes from the House of Representatives on Thursday, September 9, 1976, Andrew Young, an African American member of Congress from Georgia, reproduced this particular speech in its entirety. Young chose to do this precisely because he hoped that her comments might "arouse a greater public interest throughout this nation in the concept of open admissions at public institutions of higher learning" (Maher 183). Since financial crisis in New York had led to the abandonment of the Open Admissions policy, Young felt that his publication of her text might renew this policy.

Shaughnessy accomplished many things within this speech, one of which was a fairly elaborate discussion of how language itself functions. Here Shaughnessy gave utterance to both the difficulties she saw within the dialect issues operative in Basic Writing student circles, as well as the flexible, fluid nature one associates with a rhetorical,

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perhaps even a nonreferential conception of language itself:

> How we have argued and puzzled, and struggled over the issue of mother-tongue interference, over whether to change, how to change, when to change those nonstandard features of a student's language that distract the general reader . . . But looking back, the important point seems to me that we grappled with both the phenomenon of diversity and the phenomenon of linguistic convention and in doing so developed greater respect for our students' linguistic aptitudes and for the subtle, stubborn, yet mercurial quality of language itself. (E4956)

One might rightly interrogate Shaughnessy's propensity to call one's "mother-tongue" an "interference" from the privileges afforded by this present historical moment, legitimately questioning whether Shaughnessy is calling here for an outright erasure of the student's own home discourse or a modification of it. Equally possible here, however, is that Shaughnessy is proposing a complicated co-existence for both teachers and students. In other words, Shaughnessy appears both concerned with the formal features of students' texts and the diversity of students' own linguistic choices. In this passage once again Shaughnessy betrays a willingness to 1) esteem students' own unique linguistic aptitudes as necessarily complex and rhetorical, and 2) concede that language is not merely transparent but is "mercurial," itself highly rhetorical in nature, not only *revealing* but also *constructing* meaning.[9] This passage divulges that one of the main points of Shaughnessy's work was not to advocate a linguistic conception with which merely teachers or merely students would agree. Rather, she sought to create a conception of language which would simultaneously recognize the social and linguistic situations of both students and their teachers.

Shaughnessy's Challenge to the Accommodationist Charge

One of the main reasons for the accommodationist charge against Shaughnessy most probably emanates from examples such as the one above (i.e., Shaughnessy's choice to label issues that influence Standard English as "interference errors" in *Errors and Expectations*.) Here Shaughnessy indicated that there are certain "errors" whose logic can be traced to differences in the rules within the students' home languages and the Standard English of the academy. And, though, as I proposed earlier, one certainly has reason to question the ambiguity of Shaughnessy's use of the term "interference," which she borrowed from ESL literature popular at the time, one also needs to look at whether the use of this term alone warrants her work's equation with *an*

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accommodationist political agenda.

It becomes especially difficult to condemn Shaughnessy with simply advocating accommodation alone when one looks more closely, for instance, at her full discussion of dialect within *Errors and Expectations*. This is in large part because Shaughnessy also took note of the fact that Basic Writing students are likely to find learning Standard English particularly debilitating for several reasons. Chief among them, Shaughnessy insists, are racist and classist societal interpretations of dialects which inevitably impinge upon students' conceptions of themselves, making them feel like outsiders. According to Shaughnessy, such interpretations are vicious and wrong. However, they do exist, and they understandably result in students' attempts to "try to resist the interpretations that the world imposes on them" (138). This leads to two possibilities, according to Shaughnessy: 1) some Basic Writers may absorb the negative views of dialect that society holds (or, as Lu puts it, accommodate "their thoughts and actions to rigid boundaries" rather than on actively engaging in 'breaking entrenched habits and patterns of behavior (Anzaldúa 79)' (900): or 2) they may never fully learn various conventions of Standard English because of the threats they pose to their sense of selfhood and to their other linguistic allegiances. As Shaughnessy puts it

> When we remember the ways in which the majority society has impinged upon the lives of most BW students and when we recall the students' distrust of teachers and their language, engendered over years of schooling, it is difficult to see how the desire to identify with the majority culture, and therefore its public language, could possibly have survived into young adulthood. (125)

While Shaughnessy recognizes the existence of both of the above options for her students, neither one finally emerges as satisfactory. Academic discourse, for Shaughnessy, then, appears not to merely function as a means of empowerment while conflict and struggle act as the "enemies of Basic Writing instruction" (Lu 890). Interestingly, the first option is similar in description to what many contemporary scholars might call an "accommodationist philosophy" while the second is more in line with what recent scholars have themselves advocated. Instead, Shaughnessy sought an unconventional ground, one that would not erase the value of difference while also not disempowering her students by failing to make them aware of the "tools of the master" and how they functioned so that such students might put them to their own strategic uses.

Given Shaughnessy's own project with regard to issues of accommodation, recent claims against her work emerge as somewhat

problematic. One charge is that Shaughnessy holds an accommodationist perspective, proposing that she necessarily descried students' conflicts and struggles as inherently negative. It is fairly clear, however, that she did not. This claim is compounded by an assumption that formalistic approaches to Basic Writers' situations are inherently flawed. For example, Lu asserts that the

> experiences of Anzaldúa and Rose suggest that the best way to help students cope with the 'pain,' 'strain,' 'guilt,' 'fear,' or 'confusions' resulting from this type of conflict [the conflict between students' home languages and academic discourse] is not to find ways of releasing the students from these experiences or to avoid situations which might activate them. Rather the 'contextual' approach would have been more 'practical,' since it could help students deal self-consciously with the threat of 'betrayal,' especially if they fear and want to resist it. (905)

Seeming to in part overlook the contextual element of Shaughnessy's own approach, Lu then maintains that Shaughnessy's formalistic emphasis is "likely to be only a more 'practical' way of preserving academic vocabulary and of speeding the students' internalization of it" (905). Lu curiously does not point to places within Shaughnessy's texts where Shaughnessy considers conflict or other such difficulties as immanently negative. Instead, Shaughnessy implies that the kind of resistance Lu advocates, while in part helpful, may make it seriously difficult for students to ascertain the conventions of academic discourse, conventions about which they have a fundamental and democratic right to know. Moreover, Shaughnessy recognizes something which many Composition teachers themselves have experienced: forcing a foregrounding of such conflict and struggle can be incapacitating to students who may not wish to foreground it themselves. Simply assuming that students do wish to foreground such conflict risks taking students' agency and responsibility out of their own hands. In other words, while Shaughnessy appears to be weighing the positives and negatives of both approaches, implicitly Shaughnessy's assertions contest the idea that foregrounding Basic Writing students' cultural and psychic conflicts is in itself an inherent good.

Likewise, Lu's injunction that Shaughnessy's position can rightly be classified as accommodationist because of her preference for citing minority writers such as Howe, Dubois, and Baldwin, liberals who, she remarks, "'live with' the tensions of conflicting cultures" (906), emerges as somewhat problematic. Lu would then go further to define the resistance to accommodationist tactics in these terms:

> The residents of the borderlands act on rather than react to the

"borders" cutting across society and their psyches, "borders" which become visible as they encounter conflicting ideas and actions. Rather, they use these "borders" to identify the unitary aspects of "official" paradigms which "set" and "separate" cultures and which they can then work to break down. That is, for the mestizas, "borders" serve to delineate aspects of their psyches and the world requiring change. (900)

This description of the borderland identity as inherently resistant to accommodation, however, begs several questions: While cutting across such borders is an ideal with which most scholars would agree, is that not a great burden to place upon the student and the teacher, and is it a realizable goal for the composition class? Does "living with" such tensions necessarily connote a lack of political attention to them, their effects, and their possible potentials at all given moments? Despite Lu's advocation of a new mestiza consciousness which involves multiplicity and fluidity over fixity and dualism, Lu's own language appears here to intimate in part that the political stances one might take up involve either accommodation on the one hand and conflict or resistance on the other. Certainly it bears exploring whether there might indeed be moments when "living with such tensions" may be itself politically strategic, a form of intervention within accommodationist tactics themselves. Likewise, one might reasonably call into question Lu's characterization of these writers' work as "liberal," especially the rhetorically complex scholarship of Baldwin among others which, several contemporary scholars have argued convincingly, thoroughly calls into question traditional conceptions of "raced identities" altogether, in fact disputing the "problematics surfacing in discussions of educational reform aimed at accommodation without change" (Lu 904). The recent descriptions of Shaughnessy's and these other authors' work seem to inadvertently deny any other potentialities than the binary prescriptions they hand out.[10]

Shaughnessy's Challenge to the Anti-Materialist Charge

As already observed, among those ascribing to the conflict metaphor, Horner and others condemn Shaughnessy for ignoring "material conditions," a Marxist focus on the discrete situations with which Basic Writers and their teachers are dealing. Horner specifically intimates that there is a troublesome level of conservatism within Shaughnessy's work, and an unwillingness on her part to talk about the actual political situations of Open Admissions. Much like Lu, Horner contends that her focus on the "practical" considerations "tends to accept as 'givens' the material constraints on the work of basic writ-

ing" (215). This enterprise has forced Shaughnessy and others, Horner claims, to disregard questions of

> 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. (215)

For Horner, the public discourse on higher education and Open Admissions of Shaughnessy's time "perpetuates the denial of the academy as part of the material, political, social, and historical worlds" (200). He proposes rather that one needs to examine, for example, "teachers' representations of basic writing students, programs, and pedagogies," and that these "need to be understood in part by the knowledge that the positions they occupied were institutionally marginal and highly vulnerable" (207).

The distinction Horner makes from here, however, seems a bit problematic, given his desire to point to the material conditions of the historical moment that shaped the production of Shaughnessy's texts. Horner indicates that the "enterprise of Basic Writing was aligned with a depoliticized conception of educational practices and goals" that naturalized basic writing and basic writers by "positing them as 'new' and 'beginning'" in ways that stripped their situations of an understanding of the impacting historical forces and social circumstances (211-212). The comment is somewhat ironic: it appears fair to challenge Shaughnessy with ignoring the social and political circumstances of her own moment within her published texts, but unfair to challenge Horner for his choice to ignore the social and political circumstances of Shaughnessy's own historical moment and how these shaped her texts. While this irony is important, of course, it should not lead us to overlook Horner's consequential advice that these are important aspects of Basic Writers' and Basic Writing teachers' lives to which all should pay more attention in both scholarship and teaching.

While Horner is absolutely correct that Shaughnessy did not tackle all such issues within her scholarly works, as I shall show, quite clearly she did examine some of them. Shaughnessy's own historical context certainly involved a great many institutional considerations. Trapped between wanting to retain the Basic Writing students at CUNY, enormous budget cuts, and arguments that tests should be administered so as to determine "student entrance," Shaughnessy had occasion to re-

flect not only on the hypocrisy of asking Open Admissions students to take tests for entrance, but the social forces responsible for this set of events. Particularly in the speech in the Congressional Record mentioned earlier, Shaughnessy calls attention to just such issues:

> For the first time in the history of the city, we created, through open admissions, a massive feedback system which revealed an unconscionable failure to meet the educational needs of the poor and dark-skinned. To be sure, the roots of failure are tangled, and now that college teachers have begun to talk with and meet with high school teachers (largely as a result of open admissions) they are more sensitive to the many institutional conditions that have made teaching almost impossible in many of our schools. (E4956)

In this piece, Shaughnessy explicitly connects the failures of Open Admissions and her fears about student retention to larger material and institutional problems, asserting an unwillingness to let the Open Admissions program take the fall for larger economic, systemic, and educational difficulties which were then impacting it.

In this same text, Shaughnessy talks about this crisis in both historical and social terms, recognizing the impacts that such direct changes in Open Admissions policies would have upon Basic Writing students and teachers alike. "The Miserable Truth" was a speech delivered to a group of CUNY administrators, all of whom were suffering budget cuts and layoffs. The situation she portrays is a dire one:

> * Our staffs are shrinking and our class size increasing.
> * Talented young teachers who are ready to concentrate their scholarly energies on the sort of research and teaching we need in basic writing are looking for jobs.
> * Each day brings not a new decision but rumors of new decisions, placing us in the predicament of those mice in psychological experiments who must keep shifting their expectations until they are too rattled to function.
> * Our campuses buzz like an Elizabethan court with talk of who is in favor and who is out. And we meet our colleagues from other campuses with relief, "ah, good, "we say (or think to ourselves)- "you're still here."
> * We struggle each day to extract from the Orwellian language that announces new plans and policies some clear sense of what finally is going to become of the students whom the university in more affluent times committed itself to educate. (E4956)

In the above text, Shaughnessy investigates the historical moment

and cultural context which is instituting the constraints upon the production of her own research and teaching. These constraints shape the realm of what is possible for her to address in this situation. This perplexing condition of having Open Admissions students, Shaughnessy goes on to indicate, committed CUNY to being a teaching institution in ways it had yet to conceive fully. She then references the disparities between the imaginative approaches of the Basic Writing teachers at CUNY and the lack of adequate remissions for them in the forms of salary raises or reduced teaching loads, precisely the kind of attention to the material conditions of Basic Writing pedagogy for which Horner calls.

Shaughnessy also keenly draws attention to the fact that there were numerous societal conditions which contributed to this state of affairs in problematic ways. She does not point to general pressures, but instead to a very specific set of societal assumptions. These assumptions, Shaughnessy counsels, produced a society in which Basic Writing students continue to be oppressed, marginalized, and ghettoized:

> After no more than a generation of open admissions students has been allowed to lay claim to a college education, and in the first faltering years of Open Admissions, the decision has come out against them. Not, one suspects, because anyone has taken a close look at the experience itself but because the times have shifted and allowed the society to settle back into its comfortable notions about merit, notions which have produced a meritocratic scheme that perpetuates the various brands of race and class prejudice that have pervaded this society since its creation. (E4955)

Shaughnessy indicates, then, that the re-entrenchment of specific meritocratic assumptions has enabled race and class oppression of Basic Writers and their construction as "other." She also points out clearly that these meritocratic assumptions are not merely incidental, rather shaping and influencing the academy itself in many ways. According to Shaughnessy, this kind of societal oppression disables Basic Writing students as well as forces the Open Admissions system's collapse.

Inessential Writings and Concluding Comments

Despite such charges now waged against Shaughnessy as an essentialist, accommodationist, and anti-materialist, Shaughnessy herself appears to have gone so far as to see her work as an overt political intervention, and to call it such. In the 1972 "A Report on the Basic

Writing Program at City College and on the Writing Problems of its Students," Shaughnessy once again characterizes her historical moment and Open Admissions' part in it as "revolutionary" (3). This revolution, brought about by the new effects of Open Admissions,

> can be productive . . . forcing us to re-examine our assumptions about language, to confront our ignorance of whole territories of linguistic experience, to look more carefully at the process of writing to understand just how we have managed as a profession to become so unsuccessful with so many students. (3)

Interestingly, Shaughnessy, like many scholars today, points to the important political ramifications of her work. However, she also warns that the call to politicize can itself be merely empty rhetoric, a set of assertions with no real plan of action, and therefore one ought to be somewhat suspicious of it.[11] Shaughnessy goes on to caution about the perils of vague conceptions of social revolution, suggesting that they can be "wasteful . . . encouraging a kind of experimentalism that springs from shallow roots and spreads, without direction or control, often at the expense of what is truly valuable from the past" (4). Conceptions of social revolution are not intrinsically worthy of merit, then. Rather, they have to be well planned and well constructed in order to realize their goals.

Also, Shaughnessy interestingly calls attention to the variety of metaphors which have been utilized to make sense of Basic Writers' situations, metaphors which she asserts are inexorably disabling to them:

> metaphors of disease, of debility, decay, paralysis, contagion, and even of mortality rates. 'Preparation' for Open Admissions seemed, in such a context, to mean 'protection' for the teachers and their bright' students, those who had been classified by their academic records as college material.' (5)

Criticizing the way in which these scholars have used language in order to construct certain identities for Basic Writers, Shaughnessy then proceeds to challenge the new mantra of "maintaining standards" which had arisen as a result. She regards this as flawed in two modes: 1) it "pressed most directly on the remedial teachers of the college, who were charged with the task of transforming within a semester or two their 'disadvantaged' students into students who behaved, in academic situations at least, like "advantaged" students" (5), a task which overburdened teachers and forced Basic Writers to adopt false identities, and 2) it "started things off in the wrong direction: it narrowed

the base of responsibility for Open Admissions students to the remedial programs, giving 'regular' departments an illusion of immunity from change" (50), ghettoizing Basic Writers away from the rest of the academic institution.

Shaughnessy's own discussion about the homogenizing of student identity alongside the institutional impacts of such language use once more reveals Shaughnessy's willingness to take the rhetorical nature of language seriously as well as attests to her concern for the materiality of institutional relations as they impacted her students. As Shaughnessy commences to claim, language is key in this regard since it not only *represents* but also *constructs* our situations. As she indicates, "our very formulation of the problem [as an issue of 'correcting' students] keeps us from understanding it" (6). Quite clearly, then, Shaughnessy did perceive the way in which our representations of our own students could operate against them.

The 1973 "Open Admissions and the Disadvantaged Teacher" is one of Shaughnessy's rallying cries made in an effort to reformulate the conception of the problem or question itself within scholarship on language and remediation. Here Shaughnessy contests the widespread pessimism about Open Admissions, the examination of "crude measures of attrition rates, grade-point averages, or objective tests" (401). Shaughnessy advises teachers, administrators, and society at large to become accountable for Basic Writing students' complex situations. In this piece Shaughnessy also summons this audience to "resist" those people "who have tried to isolate the phenomenon of disadvantage from the society that caused it" (404), to ignore the complex ways in which social and political aspects of Basic Writers' situations, as well as their teachers' participations in them, construct debilitating identities for Basic Writing students. Initiating a political interrogation of the students' own material situations, then, Shaughnessy credits Open Admissions itself with "foregrounding the real question" or problem which is "not how many people society is willing to salvage, but how much this society is willing to pay to salvage itself" (404).

While Shaughnessy's work certainly warrants critical commentary, in this paper I hope to have revealed that both the terminological investments used recently to criticize Shaughnessy's scholarship as well as the content of the criticisms themselves are somewhat problematic. This is the case in large part because of the rhetorical contradictions that can sometimes be found within political positions frequently espoused as well as the self-difference of Shaughnessy's own texts. These are factors difficult yet quite important for those of us with poststructuralist agendas to admit.

As a result of this research, I have not made an argument for Shaughnessy's works as essential or foundational readings for Basic Writing scholars. Quite clearly Shaughnessy's works have been foun-

dational to the field, and such arguments have already been made wonderfully by others who may or may not hold my particular perspectives on language use. Perhaps more importantly, though, I have attempted to add to this conversation and to initiate further dialogue by investigating how inessential Shaughnessy's crucial texts truly are. We should not allow her writings' foundational status within our discipline or her concern with the formal features of language use to obscure her work's linguistic complexities and ambiguities or its political potentials. Recognizing the self-difference within Shaughnessy's texts may allow all of us to embrace Shaughnessy's legacy for what it still accomplishes and for what it can continue to teach scholars about Basic Writing. Reading Shaughnessy's texts in this light may also enable us to have a fuller sense of Basic Writing's history in all its rhetorical contradictions. It is Shaughnessy's inessential legacy, then, which may finally be equally critical in illuminating and shaping the landscape of Basic Writing's potential futures.

Notes

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[2] There have, of course, been other significant attempts to work practically with a "contact zone" pedagogy which have realized some of the limitations of enacting this strategy institutionally. Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson's February 1996 "Repositioning Remediation: Renegotiating Composition's Work in the Academy" in CCC offers the main claim that "as long as the basic writing 'slot' exists, Compositionists thus privilege narrow institutional languages for describing and understanding student-writing," forcing basic writing to act as "the institutional means for positioning remediation as the gatekeeper for composition's feminized work within the academy" (82). When confronted with the possibilities of enacting a "contact zone" pedagogy, however, the authors clarify that since student writing is institutionally feminized, adding writers of other genders, races, and classes to the canon or to our classrooms does little to change that unequal power relationship. As long as that inequity exists, they contend, contact zone pedagogy "cannot be actively realized" (70).

[3] To date, none of the scholars I mention here have fully revisited their specific conceptualizations of Shaughnessy and her work. However, the release of Lu and Horner's 1998 book, *Representing the Other: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*, is imminent and

may well seek to address some such issues. Even since the publication of Lu's initial text, her perspective on her own rhetorical tactics as well as the issue of essentialism has altered a bit. In her 1998 "Reading and Writing Differences: The Problematic of Experience" Lu does not separate "experience" into the sphere of "individualism" but instead asserts usefully that experience itself should be interrogated carefully and examined for the material conditions which give rise to it. Likewise, at the 1998 Thomas Watson Conference, Lu suggested in "Redefining a Literate Self" that she wanted to move away from using rhetorical techniques such as "attack and defense," ones which she felt she may have employed with reference to Shaughnessy's work. In examining Richard Miller's work in "The Nervous System," she suggested importantly that scholars must become more self-conscious about their own ethics of reading and the politics of citation. In this spirit I posed a question to Lu about her own characterization of Shaughnessy and the ethics of her own reading of Shaughnessy's work. Lu did not suggest that she would alter her reading of Shaughnessy's research, instead indicating that she had been misread by various scholars who believed that she was challenging Shaughnessy's politics rather than how Shaughnessy presented that politics, her more immediate concern.

[4] Horner's position on the larger social issues concerned with material conditions has become increasingly complex as well. In his 1997 "Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition," he would draw attention to problems within static conceptions of the "individual" and the "social," suggesting that they should be seen importantly as "dialectically interrelated and fluid" (507). Here he instead critiques the limitations of monolithic social determinism. Again, however, heretofore he has not reconceptualized his original representation of Shaughnessy or her work.

[5] Gail Stygall's 1994 CCC piece, "Resisting Privilege: Basic Writing and Foucault's Author Function" also argues for resistance to the reinscription of power and the definition of the author that currently resides in many Basic Writing classrooms. Stygall's criticisms of the way in which the term "basic" is held to be something "temporary, contingent, requiring emergency methods, quick fixes, 'bandaid' solutions" are very astute. Likewise are her suggestions that there can be no homogeneous Basic Writing students or classrooms, and that for institutional reasons it may be important to keep the label in place, but scholars should fight hard to see that tenured positions for Basic Writing are established and that experienced teachers teach these classes.

[6] Xin Liu Gales's 1997 "'The Stranger' in Communication: Race, Class, and Conflict in a Basic Writing Class" provides a very thoughtful criticism of how the call to "deconstruct white supremacy" can also lead to unfair practices which debilitate Basic Writers.

⁷ For a review of how Basic Writers' identities have been taken historically, see my other published work on Basic Writing, "Revising the Political in Basic Writing Scholarship." *Journal of Basic Writing*. 15.2 (1996): 24-49.

⁸ Oliver, of course, anticipated the reviews of Shaughnessy's 1977 *Errors and Expectations* which emerged immediately after its publication as well. Most of these different perspectives, at first, appeared in the form of praise. In Maurice Hungville's April 4, 1977 "Mistakes in Writing: Symptom or Sin?" published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, for instance, Shaughnessy is praised for her "approach to error as symptom rather than sin" and for her sensitivity to the "cultural roots of error" (18), language which indicates an appreciation for Shaughnessy's liberal but not too liberal perspective. Kenneth Eble's May, 1977 review "When Words Fail Them" published in *Change* praises it in just the same fashion, offering only one criticism, the "use of 'BW' throughout to identify the 'basic writing'" student. Eble worries at the similarity between the acronym and Black Writers, fearful that it might further enforce the dichotomy of Black/White. This is an issue raised very well in William Jones' 1993 *JBW* article, "Basic Writing: Pushing Against Racism" as well. Harvey Wiener's March 1977 review of the book in *College English* reveals both applause for the political insights the book delivers as well as the following concern: "the turn to the larger elements of paragraph and essay at the end of the book will support, I fear, the untested notion (so far as I am concerned) that instruction in writing must proceed from words to sentences-to paragraphs- to essays" (717). Similarly, Susan Miller's review of February 1977 in *College Composition and Communication* called attention to the way in which the book takes up the important "political aspects of teaching Basic Writing." On what one might now call the more conservative side, E. D. Hirsch and Sheridan Baker also applaud Shaughnessy's work in their correspondence to John Wright, an editor at Oxford University Press. Hirsch states that the book "gives solid grounds for the belief that intelligence and patience can, after all, create the literate citizenry envisioned by the founding fathers," while Baker calls it the "best approach and the best guide yet for helping the educationally deprived. I think it will save many a student whose 'right to his own language' would have otherwise left him in limbo." During this same period, in David Bartholomae's correspondence to the editor, he also applauds the book, this time from an even different perspective, saying "it is only with this groundwork, and the model it provides of the writing process for students at this level of development, that we can begin to develop methods and curricula that make any sense, that are based on what our students do when they write rather than on our prejudices about what they fail to do."⁹

Shaughnessy's characterization does recognize variations within

dialects themselves, calling attention to the fact that reasons for such variation are multi-layered, complex, and socially-constituted.

[10] Interestingly, in Shaughnessy's 1977 "Some Needed Research on Basic Writing," she reveals her concern with previous scholars' conceptions of students' situations, calling attention to the lack of favor afforded to "such images as the contest or the dispute as acceptable metaphors for writing" (102), and suggesting that Basic Writers, in particular, might find such writing exercises useful. This problem, she charges, has resulted in an overinvestment in expressive and narrative modes, or what she terms "worn and inaccurate formulations of the academic mode." Clearly, then, it was not conflict or struggle that Shaughnessy sought to avoid but discussions of conflict which had the potential to damage the student. In this piece, Shaughnessy also calls attention to the fact that there is "as yet no sociology or psychology (not even an adequate history) of teaching the advanced skills of literacy to young adults who have not yet acquired them" (103). Here Shaughnessy reveals her interest in seeing such work accomplished.

[11] John Lyons' 1985 piece on Mina Shaughnessy in John Brereton's edited collection *Traditions of Inquiry* clarifies this point. He credits her with contemplating "grammatical pattern from the perspective of its multiple misuses . . . and thereby recognizes not the rule's authority, but its susceptibility to misconstruction" (182). Similarly David Bartholomae's 1986 "Released Into Language: Errors, Expectations, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy" in Donald McQuade's edited anthology, *The Territory of Language: Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition*, also recognizes that teachers and students must "see error as relative to the actual writing situation," that it is itself a rhetorical concept (68).

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