

Study of Teacher Error: Misreading Resistance in the Basic Writing Classroom

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ABSTRACT: Many scholars have argued for the important role of student resistance in building critical literacy. One common mode of addressing student resistance in the writing classroom, academic re-positioning, focuses on putting the resistant student in dialogue with the culture of critique traditionally valued by the university. This article explores one teacher's experience of the limits of this approach. After working with a student whose final act of plagiarism caused the author to rethink her assumptions about academic acculturation, she reconsiders the practical "meaning" of student resistance for both student and teacher. She concludes by arguing for the importance of more authentic power sharing in the basic writing classroom.

Much work on the issue of student resistance in the composition classroom has raised the suggestion that resistance, effectively addressed, is a crucial catalyst for the emergence of greater critical literacy among students. John Trimbur sums up the many uses of the term "resistance" in critical scholarship as "the divergent ways individuals and groups seize a degree of relative autonomy within the institutions of schooling, articulating identities and purposes that in one way or another withhold consent from the dominant enterprise and its hegemonic claims" (7). Theorists of emancipatory literacy have seen much promise in this withholding of consent on the part of the student because of its double-edged ability to both hinder student learning and to expand it beyond what the teacher or student originally thought possible. In this spirit it has seemed only logical to me, as an instructor interested in basic writing, to make my students' common forms of resistance—their skepticism, and partial or complete alienation from schooling practices—the unlikely gateway to their future suc-

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cess in higher education. The most suspicious and resistant students in any one of my classes of fifteen, I have thought, do not need to change their resistant attitude about the academy and the authority it represents, so much as to reposition themselves in a way designed to make their resistance a road to empowerment and possible cultural change. I have often presumed that in that very repositioning, my students' often critical attitude toward schooling, and particularly writing, will somehow (as in some academic Cinderella story) transform itself into a statement of carefully qualified critique exemplary of all that the academy values. This article is about the troubling results of one such effort of repositioning. This particular experience has taught me to reconsider how a common attempt to teach academic critique may effectively silence students at the very level on which they most want to be heard.

Late one October afternoon my basic writing class was sharing topics for their upcoming evaluation paper, a standard assignment culled straight from their textbook, Axelrod and Cooper's *Reading Critically, Writing Well*. Although nearly every student in the class chose to evaluate a movie or book, one student, whom I'll call Amber, planned to take her own path. Sitting right next to me, and looking in a neutral fashion into my eyes, she said: "I want to write an evaluation of paper writing, and how it's really pointless and doesn't teach you anything."

I smiled (or then again maybe I just bared my teeth, as one does when on the offensive), and tried to answer with enthusiasm. I told her I was really glad she was taking her own approach to the assignment, and gave her some suggestions about the most scholarly, analytical way to approach such an assignment. She received them silently; we moved on to the next topic on our agenda, and for the moment the topic slept.

But as promised, the first draft of Amber's paper was a fairly organized, deliberate and reasonably academic attack on the use of paper writing as a common method of evaluation in college coursework. She pressed two major points in her paper:

- 1) That papers are an inadequate way of assessing student learning. Students may not be able to write abstractly about their learning, but that doesn't mean they can not put their learning into practice in practical situations.

- 2) That students should be able to benefit from course activities that are more closely related to their field of study. "Is it better for a dentistry student to practice filling teeth, or to write a paper about it? We don't pay

our dentist for writing.”

Amber went on to argue that only English and Journalism majors use writing skills in their careers, and only they should have major required writing courses. Taking direct aim at some of my more practical, skill-centered writing lessons, she wrote: “Will a nursing student need to know the value of a good transitional sentence? I don’t think so.” If I had been in doubt before, such examples confirmed for me that Amber had my class (and the institution of the college writing requirement in general) in mind when she lambasted the relevance of writing instruction.

While the enthusiasm for Amber’s mini-rebellion was something I had to muster with some effort in the moment, it was not insincere. I was glad, thrilled even, to hear one student take an oppositional stance to academic conventions in her writing because I tended to assume that this kind of stance is the key (or one of them) to a basic writer’s successful transition to the questioning of ideas, which is highly valued in college. It was perhaps first and most powerfully noted in *Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts* that an effective basic writing curriculum should enable “successful readers and writers [to] actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university” (Bartholomae and Petrosky 305). Significantly, this by now well-known approach to basic writing pedagogy presumes that students will first necessarily move to the “center” of academic authority, before making the voluntary journey back out to the margins. By passing first into the “inside,” they will “learn how to speak with other forms of authority (to speak with intellectual rather than moral authority), including that form of critical authority that establishes itself by calling attention to and pushing against the voices and structures that enable a writer to write” (Bartholomae and Petrosky 299). And in so doing, they will presumably be newly in control of and able to garner power from an aptitude for institutional critique (or, a predisposition to resistance) that may well have always already been part of their daily lives. This fundamental understanding of what a “good” college writer must eventually be able to do, and thus what a “bad” college writer most urgently needs, has shaped much subsequent thinking about what should go on in the basic writing classroom. It certainly has influenced my own hopes for what might go on in mine.

Perpetuating the emphasis on academically situated critique, or the “critical gesture,” Jane Hindman, in her 1993 “Reinventing the University,” traces Bartholomae and Petrosky’s paradoxical definition of developing aca-

democratic authority in writing—that of the insider’s voluntary movement to the margins—primarily in order to point out how the *Facts* curriculum fails to allow students to achieve it. Hindman argues that the *Facts* curriculum, while it does emphasize an understanding of academic knowledge construction from the “inside,” still inadequately teaches students to reposition themselves in a tenuous and voluntarily marginalized opposition to that same “inside.” Although Hindman critiques the *Facts* curriculum for being perhaps too accommodating and insufficiently critical in its approach to college writing transition, her article still leaves the value of this paradoxical “critical gesture” as central pedagogical goal unquestioned. It remains unquestioned that basic writing students, already likely to be alienated from and critical of academia, should be (only for their own benefit, of course) re-taught their critical disposition in an academically legitimate form. The assumption that we can and should “re-channel” student resistance toward explicitly academic ends appears again in the more recent work of Elizabeth Flynn, who stresses the potentially “productive” nature of reactive resistance when channeled into the right avenues of academic research (32).

When approaching Amber then, basic writer and eager critic of institutional practices, I was happy to imagine that she was well on her way to achieving the critical gesture in her writing, to “setting [herself] against the bias of other critics, other disciplines, other practitioners, even our own conventions” (Hindman 71). After all, my own reading in the composition literature had led me to assume that on this “critical gesture” so very much hangs. Beyond strengthening academic writing, according to Hindman, the mastery of this gesture will ensure students’ ability to prove that they have secured “a place for themselves in academic discourse” (57), that “they know how to think” (71), that they can “resist implication” and even “subvert the dysfunctional power structure of a system” (61). To me, all this big talk heavily implied an even bigger pay-off for the critical gesture: That it would make pressured and sometimes disadvantaged new college students into intellectuals (armchair or grassroots, it’s not so important here). It would make them successful citizens of the university, if that is what they wanted to be. Maybe that has simply been a way for me to translate my own conviction that basic writing should improve the retention rate of “at-risk” students, and to make it meaningful to this discussion. But nonetheless, I was sure that Amber’s resistance could be and should be the beginning of an overall successful acculturation into the academy that would somehow not compromise her already apparent critical ideals. And so I set about trying to

make good with Amber on the supposed promise that her resistance could hold for her future as a student writer in the university.

On her draft, I decided to present my objection to her argument as a “counter argument” (hence, merely some possible objection floating out in academic space, and not necessarily my own) that she might take into account:

What you say here is very true, and a lot of people in education have a similar argument. But it’s also important for you to understand why people in education have thought writing is important, at the very least in order to argue more effectively against it. A lot of people who plan what’s taught in schools think that strong reading and writing skills are basic requirements for your further education. So, even if you want to be a dentist, you still need to be a strong writer and reader in order to learn the more difficult things involved with dentistry.

On the other hand, it’s important to keep in mind that you are attending a liberal arts college, not a trade school. While at a trade school you might just learn a skill, part of the purpose of a liberal arts education has always been to help you understand and take command of more abstract, general kinds of knowledge—not just how a tooth gets filled, but how we came to live in a culture in which dentistry is available to us. You might be asked to learn more during your four years of college about the history of modern science, or the changes brought to all of our lives by advancing capitalism in the industrial revolution. Writing and reading difficult texts and being able to respond to them will help you get your money’s worth out of this kind of education. You are right, it won’t all provide you with a manual for tooth-filling, but it will (ideally) help you understand who you are and where you are when you are filling it—and what has made that life possible.

I’d like to see you work to acknowledge these important counter arguments in your paper, and let your claim about paper writing evolve by coming into contact with them. At the very least, you’ll get a more serious hearing from those people who are least likely to agree with you—who just so happen to be the same people whose minds you are trying to change!

My hope was that in using counter argument to qualify her points, Amber would easily find her opposition contextualized in a larger academic conversation. In so doing, she would achieve the Batholomaeian paradox of critical acculturation: She would make her own gesture of institutional critique an academically sanctioned one by placing it appropriately in an insider's context. She was already a student predisposed to throw stones at authority from the margins of the university. Perhaps after seeing her marginality as a ticket to the academic club, something that allowed her access to success (as long as she followed a few key rules of academic articulation and acknowledgment), Amber would throw the same stones with a difference.

The final draft of Amber's paper took my counter arguments into account, acknowledging their validity as academic positions and qualifying her own position as a result. Paper writing may not be worthless, she conceded, but it remains overused as a method of evaluation. Her final paper still bristled with resistance to me and to the class, but did so while obediently hedging her own voice with the voices of others. I returned her final to her, with an unqualified "A" and some references to Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, which I thought might interest her. I was certain that her performance on the paper was a successful approximation of the critical gesture (at the very least because it showed a reasonably nuanced understanding of what she was critically gesturing against), and that it therefore improved her chances of success as a college writer and thinker.

Also, and maybe even more importantly, I felt confident that I had been instrumental in Amber's successful transition into the academic writing community. Working with her already very spirited critical posture toward the whole enterprise of writing, I tried to link it to academic debates that address the same concerns in a perhaps slightly more qualified way. My intentions, of course, profoundly influenced how I saw the results in her writing: When she weighed some contradictory evidence and represented both sides of the issue in her argument, I felt sure that she had made a significant (though maybe small) step into an "academic discourse community." Certainly, that was all my classroom could be expected to provide.

Feeling that I had won a minor teaching victory with Amber, I remained very involved with her classroom ideas and how they played out in her writing. I had high expectations for Amber's final paper for my course, a position paper on affirmative action in higher education. As she spoke earnestly to me about it beforehand, I happily suggested ways to refine and complicate her argument. I was confident by now that her somewhat ren-

egade intensity had found a home in the academy, and I had made it all happen. It wasn't until our last class was finished and I sat with only a pile of papers to remember it by, that I realized Amber had plagiarized well over half of her final argument in favor of affirmative action from an easily recognizable published work on the topic, authored by a well-known public intellectual.

Somewhat incredibly, although she was one of the most adroit writers in my class and by far the best at working with sources, Amber's was the most obvious case of plagiarism that I can recall in my recent years of teaching. The journalistic commentary on affirmative action she had "borrowed" was inserted into the middle of an argument (I assume, hers) which it hardly seemed to relate to, let alone support. She had not even changed any of the words or phrasing (a common student trick to avoid detection). In short, her act was so sloppily executed as to be detectable at a glance. And in retrospect, I realize that had it not been so obvious, I might not have caught it. After all, as I've explained, I had developed a set of assumptions about her as a student that gave me no reason to expect that she would cheat.

Naturally the few minutes spent matching up her paper to the original text on the internet were somewhat bewildering ones, in which several months' worth of emotional investment in teaching quickly unraveled before my eyes. In the context of a semester-long relationship with this student, it goes without saying that I was stung with a sense of betrayal, a feeling that she had reneged on some unspoken promise between us. I was obliged to admit to something hasty and over-simplified in my original assumptions about her progress. I had imagined that the critical pose Amber adopted in her writing toward the educational system I represented could give her purchase on some kind of emerging academic authority. As a result she would achieve, if she wanted it, the academic belonging that writers in her position are often presumed to lack. While her writing showed a good approximation of that critical authority, her plagiarism showed a lack of esteem for it and for the context in which it is valued. By which I mean, though her initial resistance did offer a doorway to improved critical writing, it did not change her more fundamentally negative attitude toward the institution of schooling. And it was exactly this attitude (or resistance) that may have resulted in her willingness to endanger her future in college by performing such a flagrant act of plagiarism.

In claiming that Amber's plagiarism reflected some enduring resistance that my re-positioning tactics failed to address, I realize that I am

making a leap across all of the many unknowable factors that are always operating in any instance of human behavior. And while it may be true that I can't know for certain *why* Amber plagiarized, I can be reasonably sure that she understood the consequences of that act within the academic community. The university within which I work, Indiana University at Bloomington, shares with many institutions a significant and growing problem with plagiarism in the first-year writing course. In response to this problem, I and many other instructors have made a continuing effort to connect "anti-plagiarism" instruction more closely to the ongoing work of the course itself. Students began my course learning to paraphrase, summarize, and quote critical sources, and they incorporated those skills into longer assignments that required them to use sources as critical lenses while still adequately distinguishing the source's position from their own. In this curriculum, I hoped that plagiarism would become the opposite of good writing practice as it has been presented to the students. Plagiarism is, in its mildest interpretation, a failure to work with sources effectively—and thus a failure to satisfactorily meet the requirements of the course.

In addition to stressing the importance of source use in critical writing throughout the course, in this particular semester I had at least three fairly time-consuming conversations with my students about the consequences of plagiarism (a zero on the assignment and possibly an F in the course, as well as a report filed with the dean). Students were given supplementary materials on avoiding plagiarism to refer to when proofreading their own written work. My presentations eventually led to a lengthy troubleshooting session on the topic, in which my students posed multiple examples from their own work—"Is this plagiarism? What about this?"—and challenged me to explain in ever clearer terms the exact nature of the infraction. As a point of comparison, perhaps it is worth noting that most of Amber's classmates moved during the course of the semester to a habit of excessive citation as a way of avoiding possible problems. For most of my students, the possibility of institutional sanctions seemed very real and even frightening, as evidenced by the trend to cover their academic bases as carefully as they could.

It is still possible, although not particularly convincing for me as her teacher, that Amber's plagiarism was a mistake. It may have resulted from her confusion about the rules of citation, or even simple laziness (the end of the semester is, after all, a busy time for any student), and not a re-surfacing of resistance to the material of the course. Of course I cannot know for cer-

tain. But even if part of Amber's act of plagiarism could be traced back to laziness, or to the common student impulse toward efficiency (maximum outcomes for minimum effort), I am not convinced that makes the act any less appropriately categorized as "resistant." Working within the parameters of John Trimbur's definition of resistance with which I opened this essay—as a variety of acts and expressions of identity that allow the student to "seize a degree of relative autonomy" and "withhold consent" (7) from the dominant structures of schooling—it is possible to see both lazy avoidance and deliberate rebellion as resistant attitudes. In either case, the student's self-construction and/or lived reality is interfering with the objectives and rules of the course.

As my initial disappointment with Amber started to dissipate, it was replaced with a nagging sense that I was guilty of a misreading. I had imagined that if Amber could stage the critical debates of the academy's "inside" and her oppositional responses to them in a way that satisfied me, she would also be capable of (and interested in) claiming insider status for herself within the academy. While my simple equation of verbal and social initiation is probably in itself very naïve, my assumption that Amber valued this insider status repackaged in the "critical gesture" is even more so. Certainly, her final statement on the value of writing instruction—a blatant act of plagiarism—indicates a lack of regard for the rules and values of the "inside" that changed very little since her first encounter with me in the classroom. Whether motivated by indifference or deliberate treacherousness, Amber was in the end unable or unwilling to perform even the appearance of full consent to the rules. Given that, I have to wonder if my reading of Amber's initial speak-out against the college writing requirement as an opportunity to teach critical positioning in an academic context was more than just ineffective, but fundamentally misguided. Had I misread both the significance of and the appropriate response to Amber's first "stand" against me in the classroom?

I return to Amber's statement—"I want to write an evaluation of paper writing, and how it's really pointless and doesn't teach you anything." Is there a way in which, by focusing only on how I could relate her comment to dominant theories on student resistance, basic writing development, and the transition to higher education, that I failed to hear the cogent critique of academic authority that Amber was already trying to express? Very simply: she does not value academic essay writing, has no internal motivation to excel at it, and is nonetheless compelled to practice it by

an institution that insists on a universal value for academic writing that she just doesn't buy. Many years ago Adrienne Rich wrote of the dehumanizing effect of college life on struggling students—the registration, the endless administrative bullying, and finally “a semester in courses which they never chose, or in which the pace and allusions of a lecturer are daunting” (61). Students in general, and particularly those in some sense “new” to the academy who often end up in the basic writing classroom, are burdened by disappointments and roadblocks that begin to smack them in the face from the moment they enter college. Meditating on a similar problem of student alienation and disempowerment in the classroom, Ira Shor asks: “With negative feelings smoldering from the Siberian corners [of the classroom] forward, how much performance can we expect [from the students]. . . if we pretend their alienation isn't there or that disempowerment is not an issue?” (34). In one light, I can understand Amber's initial attack on paper writing as a complaint about how my course as an institutional requirement creates one more demand on her, one more hoop to jump through that she was not allowed to at least select for herself.

Entertaining such an interpretation (or reinterpretation) of Amber's rebellion against paper writing, I can see that I may have taken the wrong approach in responding to her obviously resistant attitude. What if I had read Amber's objection as an attempt to initiate what Ira Shor calls “power sharing” in the classroom—the process of democratizing classroom discourse and allowing students to actually have a say in what goes on in the class? While the term “power sharing” sometimes names the pedagogical practice of negotiating the curriculum, at the least it usually indicates some nod toward “shared authority or cogovernance” (Shor xi). But more importantly, “power sharing” means allowing our sense of where students must go to give way to an acknowledgment of where they presently are, and how they experience the power exercised over them by the academy while in their current position (as “outsiders” I suppose, but outsiders with immediate social and material interests). Analyzing a debate with his students over attendance requirements, Shor writes:

I suppose that the student dislike of classes and attendance can easily be mistaken as mere anti-intellectualism, or as plain resistance to a required course, or as simple laziness. Some of these conditions no doubt exist. But, there is also a power issue here—the control of time, space, and motion in life. (94)

One could easily insert the issue of paper writing in this passage, if only in

order to make a very similar observation. In objecting to paper writing, Amber could certainly be objecting to an exertion of power over her—the power to dictate what skills will matter for her in life, which she should presumably agree to pay for, and at which she should try to excel. Viewed in this material context, it should become less important *why* Amber plagiarized than that she plagiarized at all, and that her doing so was very likely in some way connected (as it would be for most of us) to her lived reality as it came into conflict with academic expectations. In this context, maybe my attempt to “win her over” by speaking in the language and the interests of academic authority was pretty frail. Perhaps she was asking primarily to be heard by the academy, not to be subsumed by it.

You could easily object at this point that I failed to observe some fairly obvious classroom dynamics if I could not intuit from the start that Amber was struggling against academic authority, and you would of course be right. But it was not so much a question of not realizing her struggle, as failing to take that struggle seriously. From one perspective, I am always willing to concede that academic literacy and not “democratic co-governance” is the job at hand for a composition teacher. If you actually succeed in teaching a student to write in “academese” and she still decides to spit on the whole enterprise, maybe that is as much as can be expected from any of us. But that is still to overlook the fact that basic writing programs continue to justify their survival by playing on the common assumption that we do something in the classroom to help students with a few strikes already against them “survive” in college. When working under the rubric of basic writing, I am associating myself with a historical commitment to expanding access in higher education. If I cannot help my students work within the expectations of the university (or change those expectations to suit them), as Amber eventually failed to do, then I am left uncertain that they will be able to reap the benefits of that access. This fact alone makes me more than willing to reconsider how effective my own pedagogy was or could have been in helping a student like Amber achieve those more general goals.

At present, however, many continue to offer variants on a theme of academic repositioning as the best that basic writing can do for the resistant outsiders we govern, and still rarely co-govern. At the moment of Amber’s first confrontation with me, it was unfortunately not within my power to stop assigning writing in the writing classroom and take up some other topic Amber found more practical. It might, however, have been possible to explore what kinds of writing she and other students thought would

evaluate learning more accurately and provide more practical career training. Such a move could begin with syllabus negotiation, a practice Shor describes at length in *When Students Have Power*. At the start of the semester, I could have invited students to examine the terms of the syllabus, and use their rhetorical savvy to negotiate for ones they judged to be fairer or more educationally productive. This initiating activity in the classroom could potentially function as more than an empty gesture of egalitarianism; it could re-introduce students to the practical value of verbal acumen in a way that is hard for many students to miss. Written work could easily be incorporated in this opening negotiation, to work more closely with skills of exposition and argument. Even more appropriate, when thinking of Amber's situation, I could have created assignments that actually allowed her to direct a critique of paper writing to a larger forum of those responsible for such decisions, teachers and administrators. By encouraging her to write to and for faculty committees, university publications, or even individual professors, I could possibly have helped Amber create rhetorical contexts outside the classroom in which to express her concerns about paper writing and actually have a chance of receiving an authentic response. Expanding the curriculum of basic writing to include public writing tasks seems to me to offer excellent opportunities to tap student "resistance." Offering students contexts for writing beyond the classroom is a simple but powerful way to help them fight their own immediate social and educational battles and simultaneously move them toward a goal of greater academic literacy. Most importantly, it could help the instructor avoid my error: Simply repositioning a student's critique of schooling, rather than helping the student find real ways to use writing to change what she doesn't like about the world.

Critics might describe the "critical gesture" as a key element of discursive authority in academia, the element of our own professional lives through which we feel ourselves to be renegades with a pen, outsiders with the implicit sanction of the inside. But in handing this ideal off to transitioning students, particularly basic writing students, don't we ignore what might matter most, namely, that in order to successfully deploy the critical gesture consistently and use it as a vehicle for self-betterment in higher education, one must first inevitably accept the authority of the "inside" to determine value and meaning? Amber had no problem, in her initial paper, mimicking the critical posture I prompted from her, but it did not change her evaluation of the institution of paper writing in general, which remained skeptical and detached (as suggested by her final act of pla-

gicism). While her writing evidenced a well-contextualized critical sensibility, her ultimate submission to academic standards of value—and to the academy's right to determine value for her—remained an open question. And thus Amber, as discerningly critical as the day is long, still chose to push herself away from the invitation to academic authority I thought I was offering her.

What if I had incorporated assignments that encouraged Amber to address her concerns to those who might actually be able to change her reality? Could I in a small way have better affirmed her right, not just to raise critical questions on the page, but to question those in authority (both within my classroom and beyond it) about the value of the education she was receiving? Amber came to college as a young adult and first-generation college student, already economically disadvantaged in comparison to many entering first-year students and worried about her future. As Ira Shor notes: "Knowing the unfavorable economic context in which I teach and in which students take the . . . class helps me avoid blaming them for 'lack of motivation' and for career anxiety which limits their interests in humanities and experimental learning" (37). Likewise, taking more seriously the practical pressures placed on Amber throughout her first semester of college, I might have done more to make writing a tool that helped her cope with them. Recognizing that a student like Amber would have to either submit to those academic values or reject them entirely unless I allowed them to be put into a real dialogue with her own needs and expectations, I might have used my transitory authority over that classroom to make the subject of the course respond more directly to students' immediate needs.

Or maybe that is just another teacherly posture that will be revealed to me eventually as naïve. The important point that my own missteps have revealed to me is that the critical gesture cannot deliver on its promise to empower basic writing students, or any students, if the teaching of it becomes just another way to ignore student voice in the classroom and pretend that any sense of conflict between student experience as "outsiders" and their new "insider" life in the academy can or should be erased. In "Conflict and Struggle," Min-Zhan Lu cautions against the long-standing acculturation mission of basic writing, which tends to view student alienation or cultural clash in the university as a kind of "psychic woe" (48) to be overcome as quickly as possible. I would only add that critical pedagogy seeking to "reposition" the student can perform this same function of masking conflict, if approached too unthinkingly. A key presumption of so much teach-

ing of basic writing—that we really can and should dictate where these students need to “go,” both in their writing and in their transition to higher education in general, and then proceed to take them there—has to be tempered by at least some willingness to share power with those students in any given moment. If that does not happen, students like Amber are likely to recognize (as I think she did, though I can never know for sure) the same one-sided authoritarian dialogue of their previous schooling in play—in which objections may be briefly entertained but nothing that truly matters is ever really up for debate.

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