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On the Institutionalization of Basic Writing as Political Economy

> *Open Admissions began as a remedial wing to a few departments on traditional college campuses, but it is now transforming the colleges themselves, exposing far more than the deficiencies of the new students. By probing into the nature of those deficiencies and resisting those who have tried to isolate the phenomenon of disadvantage from the society that caused it, Open Admissions is forcing the real question—not how many people society is willing to salvage, but how much this society is willing to pay to salvage itself.*
>
> —Mina Shaughnessy, "Open Admissions and the Disadvantaged Teacher"

AS SHAUGHNESSY'S ARGUMENT MAKES EXPLICIT, BASIC WRITING HAS always been tied to the politics of open admissions and educational access. A particular kind of literacy politics formed within institutional settings of higher education, basic writing continues to be about social and economic justice as much as it is about pedagogy. And as the above excerpt suggests, the politics of literacy in crisis shape the politics of basic writing—both then and now. For even as Shaughnessy's case concerning the transformational effect of basic writing is both a valid and compelling one, her rhetorical positioning of basic writing during the initial years of open admissions has contributed to a discourse on basic writing that continues to profess crisis at its core. Certainly, basic writing is a site of antagonistic struggle. Yet such a rhetorical positioning of basic writing—namely a reading of basic writing as *always* in crisis—delimits a deeper understanding of the changing conditions that both give rise to and currently impact basic writing in its assorted and diverse manifestations. Yet such an understanding is necessary if we are to continue to strategically employ basic writing, as a pedagogy or a program.

Basic writing is at once a program, a classroom, a pedagogy, a practice, a certain kind of student—not to mention programs, classrooms, pedagogies, practices, and students. As Bruce Horner might aptly put it, basic writing is a keyword that embodies contradictions in construction and value as it gets produced and reproduced in academia[1] . Since basic writing

1. See Horner's *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique* for his analysis of keywords in composition studies.

is produced and circulated, both within institutions and as a discipline (at least), it acts as an economy. And because these various productions and uses—economies—of basic writing are both historically and politically situated, basic writing constitutes a political economy: a system formed out of power relations to meet the material needs of literacy instruction in academia[2] . Yet our readings of basic writing often tend to focus on one or the other, either the politics or the economics of basic writing. We tend to focus, that is, on a part rather than the whole in our analysis. One consequence of misreading the relations between these political and economic formations is that we tend to read basic writing ahistorically, contributing particularized effects of it to abstract functions—we read basic writing as only a gatekeeper of standards, for example, or more often as referenced in basic writing scholarship, as only a structure for maintaining institutional access for marginalized students.

As embodied even in Shaughnessy's legacy, basic writing represents contradictions: a critique of remediation, a critique that might read as both transformative and assimilationist; a politics of access as well as standards, both of which are institutionally defined; and an economy of literacy within and across institutions of higher education. While these competing definitions exist because of distinct and often contradictory ideological and material forces that shape basic writing as a literacy commodity, to date our scholarship on basic writing lacks such a comprehensive understanding of basic writing in these various formations. Rather, a selective narrative of basic writing has emerged, a narrative that over relies on Shaughnessy's place and time-specific vision: basic writing as a new pedagogy within a new open admissions policy at CUNY in the 1970s. Consequently, one predominate pattern that has emerged within basic writing scholarship, a pattern ensconced in crisis rhetoric, is a focus on the preservation of basic writing within predominately tier 1 and selective liberal arts institutions. Our scholarship, through both an emphasis on such institutional case studies and by omitting other institutional models, tends to focus on preserving basic writing within institutions where open admissions is either threatened or no longer in existence. This dominant narrative prevails while open admissions' institutions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century—namely regional two-

"a critique that might read as both transformative and assimilationist; a politics of access as well as standards"

2. I take this definition from Victor Villanueva: "the relations of power to systems for meeting material needs" ("Toward" 61).

and four-year campuses—admit basic writing students into basic writing programs at growing rates. While the rhetoric of crisis in basic writing scholarship has tended to dismiss the particulars of these institutions as homogeneous, given the changing demographics and policies across institutions of higher education in the last 30 years, we might do well to engage a more thorough analysis of these institutional economies.

The material conditions of basic writing's political and economic structures continue to alter, yet our scholarship on basic writing has yet to adequately assess and address these processes in part because of a reliance on the language of crisis to predominately frame and explain the material conditions of basic writing. This rhetorical frame of crisis tends to shape basic writing as *fixed*, a product as opposed to a process. Addressing and theorizing the complex and reciprocal relationship among political and economic formations of basic writing as a shifting terrain, therefore, becomes an important step toward more fully mapping basic writing as a social material process. For it is only in such a recognition of basic writing as changing and mutable, as history in the making, that we might take seriously, for better and for worse, the role of non-selective institutions in the enterprise of basic writing. Bruce Horner provides some precedent for this mapping in his reading of Shaughnessy's discourse on basic writing.

In "Discoursing Basic Writing," he argues that the dominant discourse of basic writing evolved in response to the larger public discourse debating higher education and open admissions, a discourse that "perpetuates the denial of the academy as part of the material, political, social, and historical worlds" (200). The rhetoric of open admissions, Horner reveals, put forth that it could preserve academic excellence as well as accommodate the new, presumably unacademic, students—" a different kind of student" (204). Shaughnessy and other CUNY basic writing teachers develop their defense of basic writing and basic writing students, those folks subsequently permitted to enter the university because of open admissions, through the same rhetorical positioning. This positioning "required that they contend, and shaped how they contended, with terms of the public discourse prevailing in debate on the educational rights and capacities of their students" (207). In other words, the rhetoric of basic writing pedagogy had to balance justifying the presence of these new students in the academy at the same time that it promised to preserve the hierarchy of academic standards. What resulted was an acculturative molding of basic writing students into the academy, a shaping that brought basic writers into the university but also simultaneously defined them as others within its walls[3] .

To illustrate this point, Horner charts how this discourse on basic writing evolves out

3. See Lu's "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence" for further discussion on this acculturative process.

of CUNY public editorials, institutional policy documents, English department memos, course surveys, etc. Through close discourse analysis, he shows how Shaughnessy's defense of basic writing strategically allowed, at least temporarily, access for basic writers into academia, but in so doing the evolving discourse of basic writing also developed a particular way of seeing and reading basic writers: "Basic Writing discourse accepted the identification of basic writers as 'outsiders,' it characterized them as nonthreatening, apolitical, as beginners or foreigners seeking and able to join the American mainstream" (207-208). Subsequently, we can see how Shaughnessy's construction of basic writing shaped not only a pedagogy, but also a curricular economy that impacted how basic writing students were represented in the university system.

One danger in these kinds of representations is that such rhetorical maneuvering results in particular givens about the basic writer. As Horner explains, "it thus 'naturalized' them both in a cognitive developmental and civic sense, locating them at a particular stage in a natural sequence of learning and attributing to them the aspiration to join with rather than disrupt mainstream American society" (208). Another observation might be made about this discourse more generally: while Shaughnessy's defense of basic writing during these early years was, of course, strategic, the discourse on basic writing that has emerged since has been predominately influenced by these representations, fixed representations that not only contribute to the iconic discourse that scholars such as Jeanne Gunner and Min-Zhan Lu critique[4] , but which also depict basic writing as concomitant with crisis.

Rhetorics of Crisis

A political economy of rhetoric, according to Victor Villanueva, provides an avenue for investigating the relationship between the rhetorical and the material in our lives, a way to both recognize and unveil potential gaps between what we know through discourse (the rhetorical, the ideological) and the realities of our day-to-day lives caught up in an economic web of existence. He writes, "the role of rhetoric, according to Burke, is the demystification of the ideological. The role of political economy is the demystification of relations tied to the economic. If we are to understand where we are and what is happening to us—and maybe even to affect it—we need the tools provided by both" (58). Such a view of economics does not reduce human existence to merely production, does not, in other words, return conversations concerning materialism to economic determinism, a simplification of the cause/effect relationship among the base and superstructure, in Marxist terms. What it does do, however,

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is recuperate conversations on the materiality of culture from the slippery slope of postmodernism, wherein materiality often becomes dehistoricized. That is, in arguing for a political economy of rhetoric, Villanueva recognizes the complexity of the cultural sphere, yet he also makes explicit the need to not divorce it from the specific material conditions that impact it.

Villanueva's theory of a political economy of rhetoric has important implications for how we attend to the institutionalization of basic writing. First, a political economy of basic writing rhetoric might allow for a more keen assessment of how a discourse of crisis has emerged within basic writing through demystification of the ideological. As with any scholarly literature, our scholarship on basic writing can't help but construct an ideological commonsense within our field. One effect of this commonsense discourse is that it produces a narrative on basic writing that portrays a field always in crisis. Such a homogeneous reading of basic writing is, in short,a rhetorically constructed myth that obscures the heterogeneous formations of basic writing. At the same time, this crisis rhetoric might also be traced back to a particular academic economy: the development of basic writing as a subfield within composition and rhetoric. That is to say, there is a relationship between the rise of basic writing pedagogies and programs that is tied to the rise of other basic writing structures, such as the field's journals, conferences, and professional organizations, a relationship that institutionalizes basic writing as it unfolds. We have yet to sufficiently unpack this relationship. Second, because the kind of demystification that Villanueva calls for necessitates a recovery of the relationship between the ideological and the material, it provides an avenue for further investigating various up-until-now underanalyzed basic writing economies, in particular the ongoing institutionalization and reconfiguration of basic writing in regional two-year and four-year colleges. For the most part, these institutions remain neglected in representations of basic writing programs within our field. This neglect, I'd suggest, contributes to a selective narrative on basic writing, a narrative wherein crisis is inevitable. In turning to an analysis of rhetorics of crisis below, I borrow from Robert Connors' "The Abolition Debate in Composition: A Short History," where he identifies "reformism" and "abolitionism" as "alternating periods" in the history of composition in the U.S. (280).

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Reformist efforts in composition, Connors reminds us, are abundant—and in basic

writing we see no exception to this pattern. According to Connors, reformist periods in composition function "as the thin red line protecting the very life of literacy" (280). As a pedagogy, Shaughnessy's discourse on basic writing served as a "thin red line" of literacy: it promised to provide students previously perceived as inadmissible with the skills they would need to survive in the university while simultaneously quieting protests against educational inequality. That is, the premise of Shaughnessy's reformist rhetoric relied upon her new pedagogy as an acculturative process, making sure that the new students rose to the level of academic literacy as it was defined by the university. At the same time, the institutional standards and assumptions that spoke what constituted academy literacy by the university were never actually challenged within this discourse. Shaughnessy's work and legacy are, therefore, distinctly reformist in that they argue for the improvement of basic writing as a necessary literacy threshold, a trope found throughout much basic writing literature post-Shaughnessy.

While reformist rhetoric has changed and adapted over the years, most significantly in response to the social turn in composition, its underlying argument for the necessity and usefulness of basic writing remains little changed. In the years following the founding of *Journal of Basic Writing (JBW)*, many if not most of the articles in the journal have relied upon and expanded the reformist rhetoric that Shaughnessy and others employed during open admissions in the early 1970s. For example, articles published in *JBW* throughout the eighties focused most heavily on the study of error and basic writing pedagogy. While the approaches to error and pedagogy during this period vary drastically in some cases, what all of the approaches have in common is an ethical appeal that furthers the legitimacy of basic writing as an academic field, and, in many cases, an underlying assumption that little questioned its acculturative stance.

Perhaps the most representative example of contemporary reformism in basic writing comes from the work of Laura Gray-Rosendale. Gray-Rosendale's scholarship has significantly impacted the field in the last decade or so. Her reformist efforts illustrate what Connors calls "status-quo or modern reform": critiques of basic writing are offered followed by suggestions for rethinking the field. The reasoning behind such rhetoric critically assesses *how* such work gets done within the institution yet often the underlying assumptions of the arguments themselves work to sanction the necessity of basic writing and, consequently, one effect is the preservation of the structural status quo of basic writing.

Gray-Rosendale is disillusioned by what she sees as an overemphasis on identity politics in basic writing scholarship. She defines identity politics, a dominant theme in basic writing throughout much of the 1990s, as a tendency toward describing and categorizing basic writers rather than a move toward figuring out what basic writers do. In her critique, she

argues that while identity categories such as class, race, and gender are important, "examining them to the exclusion of other factors has also at times limited our understanding of Basic Writers" (13). Instead, she proposes that basic writing scholarship turn to an analytical model that "discloses the local, social construction of Basic Writers' identities and knowledge productions in their everyday talk within our classrooms" (15). Such a model, certainly, provides important groundwork for attending to the local conditions of basic writers and the texts they produce. Yet at the same time, we can see how this model for re-seeing basic writers might inadvertently elide the impact that material structures of basic writing within institutional settings have on the contexts and locations that basic writers find themselves negotiating outside of the classroom, for instance the realities of racism, sexism, and classism, not to mention placement structures and programmatic funding and support. While always context-specific, the construction of basic writers is not limited to a particular basic writing classroom or a particular basic writing pedagogy. Nor is it limited, I'd argue, to only the local conditions of individual campuses. The conditions that mark the particulars of basic writing locally are always tied to broader economic and political constraints, such as the likes of state budgets, literacy campaigns, and inter-institutional policies on remediation, to name a few. These constraints impact how basic writing is supported or not within individual classroom settings.

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Of note, the most politically charged crisis rhetoric to date is likely the discussion that preceded the closing of open admissions at CUNY. In 2001 CUNY reneged on its 30-year-old open admissions policy by stopping open admissions at four of its colleges. In the years working up to this monumental policy change, debates surrounding the state of basic writing flourished in JBW. In a controversial article titled "Our Apartheid: Writing and Inequality," Ira Shor calls for the end of basic writing. A CUNY insider, he questions the means by which basic writing instruction acculturates and assimilates. Rather than reading basic writing as the educational equalizer Shaughnessy imagined it to be—an enterprise "to remedy the failure(s)" of educational institutions and society (Shaughnessy 107)—Shor argues that it has grown into an extended system of language control. Once the "egalitarian 1960s," had passed, he writes, "BW emerged soon after as a new 'identity,' a new field of control to manage the time, thought, aspirations, composing, and credentials of the millions of non-elite students

marching through the gates of academe" (93). He questions the ways in which basic writing functions to sort and contain students within the university. Positing that basic writing enables rather than confronts educational and economic status quo, Shor maintains that it acts as a gatekeeper within higher education. Consequently, he argues for its abolishment.

The concerns Shor raises about basic writing in this 1997 article are some of the same concerns made by others in the broader field of composition and rhetoric during the early 1990s. Citing a slew of problems associated with first-year composition as a required course—an inconsistent curriculum, unethical working conditions, its gatekeeping position within the university, a "remedial" categorization within English departments, to name a few—Sharon Crowley argues to abolish the course as a universal requirement (169-170). Crowley's argument, coined "New Abolitionism," picks up supporters across composition camps, such as Robert Connors, Charles Schuster, and Lil Brannon. Her arguments' influence on the field of basic writing, I believe, cannot be underestimated. Though he does not reference Crowley per se, David Bartholomae's 1993 *JBW* article, "The Tidy House: Writing in the American Curriculum" questions basic writing as a curriculum within the institutional structure of the university just two years later, posing questions about the subfield's legitimacy that, in many ways, echo some of Crowley's central concerns about first-year composition.

Comparable to Crowley's argument against the universal requirement of composition, Bartholomae worries that the institutionalization of basic writing does not necessarily offer the best solution to how writing instruction should be engaged in higher education. While Bartholomae does not call for the wholesale abolition of basic writing—indeed, he explicitly states that he does not advocate for the elimination of basic writing courses—his article does pose many questions about the formation of the field. Reflecting on the state of basic writing in academia, he writes:

> Basic writing has begun to seem like something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum, in the stories we tell ourselves about English in America. It was once a provisional, contested term, marking an uneasy accommodation between the institution and its desires and a student body that did not or would not fit. I think it should continue to mark an area of contest, of struggle, including a struggle against its stability and inevitability. (8)

A problem for Bartholomae is the way in which basic writing has come to function rhetorically in the field of composition, "naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum." Further, he questions "the desire to preserve 'basic writing' as a key term simply because it is the one we have learned to think with or because it has allowed us our jobs or professional identities" (20). In critiquing these rhetorical and economic manifestation of basic writing, Bartholomae's analysis points to a political economy: the interrelations

between basic writing as a subfield requiring specialists and the rhetoric that persuades toward its preservation as a curriculum. In his discussion, Bartholomae reminds us that basic writing courses are historical and institutional constructs that have not always existed in the university. This rhetorical move, as Connors notes, is a recurring strategy in abolitionist debates. A consistent move within critiques of composition over the last 100-plus years is a reminder that composition began as a provisional solution to the problem of literacy until secondary education improved (281). Though not an abolitionist, Bartholomae uses a similar logic when he questions the "stability and inevitability" of basic writing at this historical moment. Less than five years later, Shor looks to the institutionalization that Bartholomae questions and names it academic apartheid.

Shor's controversial article drew heated debate from basic writing reformist camps. Former *JBW* editor, Karen Greenburg, perhaps best represents this reformist period in her response to Shor. Greenburg contends with Shor's call for the abolition of basic writing in the next *JBW* issue, chiding Shor for his generalizing and "demonizing" of basic writing programs (90). Speculating on how Shaughnessy might respond to Shor's argument, Greenburg's critique of Shor calls on Shaugnessy's rhetoric to defend basic writing. In her praise of Shaughnessy and basic writing, she exposes what she reads as myths of basic writers and basic writing, in turn arguing for the uniqueness of basic writing programs and the dedication and pedagogical flexibility of basic writing teachers.

As Greenburg's response demonstrates, rhetorics of reform often operate to maintain basic writing as a unique pedagogy for academically marginalized students within higher education. These rhetorics argue the need for a space for such students in higher education. At the same time, in arguing for a particular kind of pedagogy for a particular kind of student, rhetorics of reform can also inadvertently contribute to and maintain certain commonsense assumptions about student identities, abilities, and place. These rhetorics can unwittingly create contradictions between how basic writers are theorized and the actual material conditions of basic writing as an institutional economy, contradictions that aren't easily or often resolved. For example, while basic writers are often caricatured as "at-risk students," academic outsiders in need of the safe haven curriculum, the changing demographics of students across institutions might call this representation into question.

Other basic writing scholars also responded to Shor, including Terrence Collins and Deborah Mutnick. Acknowledging that the history of basic writing is rooted in issues of racism, classism, and exclusion, Mutnick argues that because of these realities, teachers must also negotiate the very material conditions that circumscribe students' work with discourse and error. "To defend basic writing at present," Mutnick writes in a 2000 *JBW* article, "means contending both with the conservatives who condemn us for allowing underprepared stu-

dents through the doors of higher education in the first place and those in our own discipline who want to abolish remedial instruction because it stereotypes students and segregates them from the mainstream" (71). Mutnick rightly observes the contradictory betwixt and between state that envelops basic writing; yet, in an attempt to resolve this contradiction, her rhetoric ends up positing basic writing as an either/or state of existence—a class/program/pedagogy at a particular location, that is, rather than recognizing it as a social material process in a state of constant reconfiguration within and across institutions of higher education.

Recognizing basic writing as social material process would mean unpacking the contradiction that while basic writing might not exist as an official institutional program within the university, basic writers, at least as we define them in our scholarship, nevertheless certainly would still exist, whether these students are absorbed into traditional FYC classrooms at the university or shifted to regional two-year institutions. Without this more fluid understanding of the making and remaking of basic writing as both hegemony and counter-hegemony in process, the materiality of basic writing is obscured while the rhetorical implication is that basic writing once again stands as the thin red line protecting both literacy and equality in U.S. literacy practices. Such a position perpetuates a reading of basic writing as narrowly tied to crisis and necessarily to be maintained within the specific location of the university. This dominant narrative belies the actual existence of many if not most basic writing programs in the United States, programs located on the campuses of regional colleges.

In arguing for basic writing's uniqueness, rhetorics of reform make it difficult to see beyond the university in thinking about how to engage and resolve basic writing issues and concerns. That is, rhetorics of reform often focus on alternative—and even innovative—pedagogical and programmatic changes in basic writing within an institution. There is little serious discussion in rhetorics of reform, however, as to how basic writing concerns spill over, both ideologically and materially, both politically and economically, from one institution to another, across two-year and four-year colleges, between main campuses and urban campuses, as to how basic writing is tied, outside of academia, to economies of knowledge and the rise of mass literacy in a new capitalist and global world order. Yet, these are the kind of changing cultural and material conditions we ought to be concerned about in future discussions of basic writing.

Recent abolitionist arguments from within composition and basic writing diverge significantly from previous abolition movements in composition history. Historically, most abolitionist arguments are based on the assertion that basic skills instruction is not the responsibility of the university, that students should acquire these skills before admittance to the university (Connors 287). The above arguments concerning basic writing differ distinctly from this claim. Shor and other abolitionists are not university elitists concerned with

maintaining the institutional status quo. The reasoning behind their arguments, instead, actually questions the status quo of literacy instruction. Their major concern is that the institutionalization and stratification of basic writing perhaps does more harm than good for students required to take such courses. Their purpose in arguing for the abolition of basic writing is to advance education toward what it strives to be: a democratic reality. Yet at the same time, like the reformist rhetoric discussed above, this abolitionist rhetoric not only reframes basic writing as crisis, but also in some cases undertheorizes the relationship between functions and effects of basic writing. As Horner notes in a critique of Shor, though some basic writing programs do have the effect of excluding students, to assume that such exclusion is the function of basic writing is to misread an unintended consequence as intended (*Terms* 123). So while certainly an important step in revealing the materiality of basic writing, such orthodox Marxist readings, wherein basic writing is constructed as only a direct cause or effect of institutional economies (such as language control) or political ideologies (such as conservative backlash), can tend to obscure basic writing's formation as a complex social material process.

Notably, reformist and abolitionist positions in basic writing are not as ideologically distant from one another as their rhetorics might suggest. Both camps agree that the problem of basic writing hinges on what basic writing students need and deserve from a literacy education at the college and university level. Indeed, both camps have students' best interests in mind. At the same time, both narratives rest on the foundational metaphor of crisis. Where they primarily differ is in their ideological constructions of basic writing: rhetorics of reform vary, but the underlying element of crisis centers on the consequences for students if basic writing programs are eliminated within the university. As for rhetorics of abolition, the element of crisis rests on the consequences of a gate-keeping function if basic writing programs continue. Yet both rhetorical positions contribute to a selective narrative on basic writing. If basic writing is to truly assist its students in the academic enterprise, its theoretical and pedagogical emphases need to move beyond an either/or model that takes crisis as its foundation. And in doing so, we might be better positioned to excavate alternative basic writing narratives at other kinds of institutions.

The Institutional Sites of Basic Writing

Since the closing of open admissions at CUNY and other university campuses, more recent basic writing scholarship often moves to describe and address the local, context-specific realities of basic writing. In many cases, these representations focus on programs restructuring in the face of threats or actual elimination of funding for remediation. In a 1999 article, William B. Lalicker identifies five basic writing structures identified through a survey sent to

writing program administrators through the Writing Program Administrators listserv: the prerequisite model, the stretch model, the studio model, the direct-self placement model, the intensive model, and the mainstreaming model. As described by Lalicker, the prerequisite model is the baseline and "current-traditional" model (par. 4). Placed into this type of course, students are required to complete the course before completing first-year composition. This basic model carries no credit toward the degree or general education requirements. Lalicker goes on to describe the four remaining models as alternatives to this approach.

Following the same curricular structure as the baseline model, the self-directed placement model makes basic writing optional rather than required. The stretch model, most well known through its association with Arizona State University, expands the first-year composition general education requirement over two terms rather than one. In contrast to the prerequisite model, students receive university (and sometimes general education) credit for the additional class. Of emphasis within the stretch model is that the curriculum across the two terms focuses on the same core, college-level composition objectives. The studio model attaches a required one-credit group tutorial to the standard first-year composition course for students demonstrating the need for supplemental writing support. A variation on the studio model, the intensive model might be described as an expanded first-year writing course. Students are required to take more writing credits than traditionally required for first-year general education, but they do so within one term, taking, for example, a five-credit English 101 course rather than a three-credit English 101 course. Finally, within the mainstreaming model, basic writers are simply included in standard composition courses with no prerequisite or additional writing requirements required. Of course, as Lalicker points out, in some cases, depending upon admissions requirements, mainstreaming might eliminate basic writers as well.

Though these alternative basic writing models exist across the spectrum of higher education institutions, three models in particular—the mainstreaming, stretch, and studio models—have historically been associated with university programs in our scholarly literature[5] . This association might be contributed to a confluence of factors. For example, the decline of open admissions within universities occurred alongside the rise of university-wide writing programs. At the same time, the legitimatization of basic writing as a subfield cannot be separated from the earlier growth of composition as a recognized academic field of study within the university, a growth that has steadily contributed to an increase in rhetoric and composition specialists over the last few decades. At the university level at least, these spe-

5. As Lalicker notes even in 1999,"one might expect research universities, comprehensive state universities, liberal arts colleges and community colleges to favor particular models according to institutional type, but such seemed not to be the case" (par. 2).

cialists are required to produce not only as teachers, but also as scholars. And since many basic writing specialists also serve as writing program administrators at their respective institutions, it follows that their scholarship often focuses on their own programs. Let me clarify: these observations are not to suggest that basic writing exists in the university simply as a function to preserve basic writing scholarship. On the contrary, the relationship between basic writing as a curriculum and basic writing as a subdiscipline is much more complex. This observation does, however, suggest that there is a political economy of basic writing at work here, one in which the material needs of students, teachers, scholars, and institutions contribute to the formation and reformation of attending power relations within the enterprise of basic writing.

Mainstreaming's association with CUNY provides a useful example for exploring this university-based association. Mainstreaming debates surface in *JBW* around the same time that CUNY announced the end of open admissions in the late 1990s. In a foundational 1997 article, "From Remediation to Enrichment: Evaluating a Mainstreaming Project," Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason describe and assess a mainstreaming project that they were able to pilot at CUNY with support from a FIPSE grant. As described in this article and other subsequent mainstreaming accounts, mainstreaming functions to eliminate basic writing programs at the institutional level, but it does so hesitantly, strategically maintaining a commitment to basic writing principles yet doing so under the auspices of a traditional FYC space.

Rhetorically, mainstreaming disappears basic writing programs, most notably within institutions no longer allowing remediation per se. At the same time it attempts to preserve basic writing pedagogy and basic writing students within a shrunken curricular space. In effect, I'd suggest, mainstreaming becomes the site wherein reformist and abolitionist rhetorics of basic writing are ideologically reconciled with one another. The placement/requirement apparatus that allows for basic writing to exist as a gatekeeper is removed, yet in theory mainstreaming allows for the continuation of a basic writing pedagogical approach. Though the program designs vary, both studio and stretch models of basic writing might have similar effects. While such programs are to be applauded for their attempts to continue support for basic writers under volatile institutional conditions, it must also be noted that this reconciliation furthers the dominant basic writing narrative wherein the crisis of basic writing

"furthers the dominant basic writing narrative wherein the crisis of basic writing is seemingly managed and resolved"

is seemingly managed and resolved, even if only tentatively, within the context of local institutional conditions. And since these localized narratives are based, by and large, on university programs, this reconciliation implies that, once again, basic writing is barely preserved within the university. Further, the institutionally specific approach of such narratives, such as Soliday and Gleason's focus on mainstreaming through their CUNY pilot, Greg Glau's depiction of ASU's stretch program, and Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson's portrayal of the studio approach allows for a commonsense that rejects grand narratives on basic writing.

On the one hand, attention to such context-specific details of programs allow for more discussion of particular material realities of each program. On the other hand, because these detailed stories collectively form a narrative wherein non-university programs are not represented, they reinscribe a discourse that suggests basic writing programs exist only at universities. Because of the differing missions, resources, and student populations at non-selective four-year institutions or even non-traditional university campuses, such as branch and urban campuses, the structure and function of basic writing programs might vary widely from campus to campus. At my own urban campus, for example, the basic writing program adopts the model being employed at the main campus, a combination of the studio and stretch model. However, due to significant differences in resources, enrollments, and student numbers, our program enacts this model very differently when it comes to staffing, course offerings, and administrative oversight. It is not the exact same program. John Paul Tassoni, too, describes how the politics between the main campus and his branch campus at Miami University have impacted the formation of the basic writing program at his campus[6] . The relationships between these campus specifics need to be exploited rather than disregarded. When only a part is represented as the whole, as demonstrated in our scholarship, the effect is mystification of the kind Villanueva suggests: the material realities of basic writing programs at other kinds of campuses are made invisible. Instead, we ought to strive for an analysis of the whole (the multifaceted institutionalization of basic writing) in order to make sense of the parts (dominant and alternative formations of basic writing).

Further, as Lalicker rightly observes, at times the material effects of mainstreaming in particular mean that actual basic writers disappear along with basic writing programs. In many cases, the students who are disappeared from the university end up in non-selective institutions. However, our scholarship engages little of the institutionalization of basic writing in these settings—beyond the familiar rhetoric of crisis, that is. Our representations of two-year colleges are a case in point. As Jon Lovas notes, we have a "blind spot" when it comes to composition in the two-year college (274), tending to either ignore or inadequately engage the vast work being done in the teaching of writing at such institutions. When such

6. See his discussion in "Retelling Basic Writing at a Regional Campus."

institutions are addressed, the representations are selective at best. Take, for example, Scott Stevens account of community colleges in California. In "Nowhere to Go: Basic Writing and the Scapegoating of Civic Failure," Stevens chastises his California university for abandoning its commitment to serve folks labeled as basic writers. Stevens critiques the way in which a rhetoric of democracy is evoked to justify moving remediation out of the university and into the community colleges. As he sees it, the university re-instates elitism by declaring community colleges as the site where remediation of basic writers should occur because of its open access mission. Stevens' depiction of what goes on at the community college is an image we are familiar with: unqualified instructors are hired at piecemeal rates, all the while provided no basic writing training (12). Under-funded and under-valued, community colleges are certainly contested sites where basic writing instructors are likely to suffer institutional exploitation. Yet, as Lovas points out, we might make a similar observation of the use of TAs to staff first-year composition in universities (278). A political economy reading might better sort through these contradictions between access and elitism, between remediation and exploitation, in order to provide a fuller explanation of what is happening.

Another familiar critique of two-year colleges is the "cooling out" function. As a literacy gatekeeper, basic writing—or rather remediation as it is more often referred to within the community college setting—is considerably implicated in such a process. Here's Lovas' summation of this community college function, which he traces most recently within our discipline to Shor, then back to sociologist Jerome Karabel and Steven Zwerling during the 1960s and 1970s:

> more minority and low income students entered two-year colleges than other institutions of higher education, but the rate at which they reach upper division was much lower than the rate at which those who entered the universities reached upper division. In this construction, the two-year college was a device of a corporate system intended to dampen the aspirations of minority and poor students. (274)

Here, Lovas identifies the working assumption behind this theory, that two-year colleges were designed for such a function. And indeed, in his critique of the stratified state of higher education, Shor asks us to consider the following: "why would a society dominated by white, male, and corporate supremacy build 1,200 new community colleges to disturb its old hierarchies of race, gender, and class?" (135). Though Shor's question is decidedly a rhetorical one, we might reframe it to ask "how?" rather than "why?" That is, in asking *how* one effect of community colleges has been a cooling out function, we must look to the historical conditions that gave rise to it. Such work might constitute a political economy of basic writing and remediation within two-year colleges, an unpacking that demands that we look to how community colleges have historically evolved to meet specific and often contradictory

educational outcomes—one of which has been remediation—within limited material means, and always among a confluence of power relations, not the least of which includes relations between community colleges and universities. Mapping such contradictions historically provides not only a better understanding of basic writing as a key term, but also the opportunity for finding counter-hegemonic potential within the hegemonic. Seeing, for example, that while basic writing in two-year colleges might very well contribute to a cooling out, since this is an effect and not its designated function, there is also the possibility for counter-hegemonic resistance in community college work.

In *Terms of Work for Composition*, Horner offers a cultural materialist critique of composition, a critique that redefines and resituates the work of composition in light of its often elusive and dematerialized representation in our scholarship. "I argue for redefining [composition] sites," he writes, " in ways that confront their materiality, acknowledging both the power of existing material conditions to shape the work we do in composition and the history of those conditions—that is their susceptibility to changing consciousness and action" (xvi). In other words, Horner calls for a recognition of the ways in which composition's materiality, because it is process and activity always in the making, affords "counterhegemonic potential" (xvi) within the hegemonic structures of academic writing instruction, structures such as basic writing. Such work is only possible when we acknowledge economies as both materiality and culturally (that is, ideologically) realized.

By limiting and potentially misreading the reciprocal relationship between cultural and material formations of basic writing, we miss opportunities to enact change. A political economy of basic writing attends to the social material processes that have given rise to basic writing, including the historical, economic, political, and cultural processes currently shaping and contributing to basic writing as a contested and contradictory formation. Political economy provides a comprehensive analysis of basic writing because it allows for a more fully realized material analysis. At the same time, in order to fully explore the politics of basic writing as an economic structure, such an analysis must also engage in historical materialism. If, as Polanyi argues, economy is "embedded" among "politics, religion, and social relations" (xxiv)—a premise that informs this examination—our analyses of basic writing, while mapping the local and site-specific conditions of institutional constructions of basic writing, must also recuperate historical narratives that inform our understanding of the interrelations among basic writing constructions. An important part of this work means that we must read basic writing within the historicity of remediation, acknowledging basic writing as both hegemony and counterhegemony in process, not either one or the other. Such work requires that we turn our attention to the ways in which basic writing and remediation are constructed and reconfigured not only within but also across a variety of institutional settings.

Toward a Political Economy

A precedent for doing the kind of critical work I suggest is needed exists within our field. Alongside the dominant narrative of crisis that I outline above, scholars have and continue to call attention to the material and economic conditions of basic writing, doing so in ways that forefront historical contingencies. In addition to the contributions of Horner, Shor, and Villanueva, a number of basic writing scholars, such as Jeanne Gunner and Joseph Harris[7] , have suggested that one consequence of Shaughnessy's legacy is that it has distanced basic writing from its remedial roots. Horner and Lu's collection, *Representing the 'Other': Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*, examines basic writing from a cultural materialist lens. In their analysis, which they describe as concerning "discursive practices in basic writing, foregrounding the specific sociopolitical and intellectual contexts of both the production and reception of a discourse dominating the field" (xi), the authors emphasize how particular material and historical conditions contribute to the construct of basic writing as we know it today. That is, they attempt to deconstruct assumptions of basic writing and basic writers as "natural" by mapping the ways in which various discourses emerge historically to create basic writing as a particular field and basic writers as a particular kind of student. Such critique is important because it points to the constructed nature of basic writing, opening up a space for a political economy of basic writing to recuperate other basic writing histories.

Horner and Lu identify five assumptions that undergird their cultural materialist readings of basic writing: the view of discourse as material practice, a theory of multiple subjecthood, the assertion of education as a political and socio-economic structure and construction, the notion of hegemony as a transformational possibility, and a belief that human agency is always limited by material constraints (xiii-xiv). These assumptions provide a theoretical baseline for examining the ideological construction of basic writing and its relationship to economic and material realities. By revealing the institutional pressures that contributed to the formation of basic writing at CUNY, Horner and Lu make vital connections between how basic writing policies and pedagogies are complexly yet directly related to civil society and therefore necessarily not value-free. By reading the enterprise of basic writing and its effects on basic writers through this cultural studies lens, Horner and Lu succeed in "relocate[ing] writing and the teaching of writing in society and history" (xiv). One important consequence implied by their collective work, therefore, is the recuperation of an institutionalized legacy of basic writing prior to Shaughnessy, a legacy mired in the social and the political. From here, a political economy of basic writing might further reach to include an

7. See, for example, Harris' *A Teaching Subject* and Gunner's "Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy."

analysis of wider cultural, historical, political, and economic processes that have impacted basic writing in critical ways.

Furthermore, Soliday's recent book, *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional Needs in Higher Education*, is also an important contribution to political economies of basic writing. In resituating basic writing's history, she argues that the history of writing remediation, the beginning of which she traces to over 100 years ago, must be read in light of the institutional needs it performs within the academy. Similar to Shor, she critiques basic writing's use as an "economic base" (7) in academia. She argues that this use perpetuates a reliance on remediation through traditional, commonsense notions that assume that "remediation exists only because students need to be remediated" (22). Soliday critiques this ahistorical assumption, an assumption which presumes that while students' skill levels might ebb and flow across decades and demographics, a certain universal standard exists to be met by students while the institutional conditions and expectations remain the same.

Her historical analysis of remediation within educational institutions provides a lens for reading the inherent biases in such an *a priori* assumption, also revealing how literacy standards within academia are historically and politically constructed within particular institutions to meet particular needs at particular historical moments. While Horner and Lu interrogate the presumed "naturalness" of basic writing and basic writers, then, Soliday extends this conversation to investigate the "always-new remedial student" (10) alongside a history of remedial programs that adapt to a variety of institutional needs across time, such as enrollment increases and decreases, more often than to actual student needs.

Each of these approaches offers a particular perspective on the relationship between the material and the ideological within the enterprise of basic writing. What is needed, in addition, is a broader understanding of how the institutional and cross-institutionalization of basic writing creates a political economy. To do such work requires a comprehensive mapping of basic writing formation, a mapping that addresses specific local conditions, broader systems of power, and the interrelations among them. It requires an understanding of hegemony as complex processes: an understanding of hegemony as rhetorical, an understanding of hegemony as it intersects with the material, an understanding of how hegemony as a process embodies the dialectic among the rhetorical and the material in the making of history. In short, as Villanueva advises, we must recognize how "rhetoric is tied to political economy, if the work of rhetoric is the demystification of the ideological" (64). A foundation for this kind of critical work exists within our field. Our future work is to further it. In rehistoricizing the field of basic writing, we must work to uncover histories and practices of basic writing and remediation across as well as within academic institutions; most pressingly, we need to examine basic writing at contemporary open admissions institutions, the kinds of institu-

tions that are often invisible in the majority of basic writing scholarship, yet the kinds of institutions where the preponderance of basic writing instruction occurs.

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