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What's In a Name?: *Basic Writing in America* and *Beyond Shaughnessy*

Greene, Nicole Pepinster and Patricia J. McAlexander Eds. *Basic Writing in America: The History of Nine College Programs.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008.

Ritter, Kelly. *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard*, 1920-1960. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2009.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE FIELD OF COMPOSITION HAS BEGUN TO explore the term "Basic Writing" as a discursive construct that creates specified subjectivities and reinforces social structures. For example, in "Discourses of Disability and Basic Writing," Amy Vidali shows the similarities between discourses about disability and the language of "deficit" that often surrounds Basic Writing, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly. Also, in his essay "Our Apartheid," Ira Shor points out composition's "menial status of curricular cop and sorting machine," making Basic Writing an "extra sorting-out gate" (92). Shor even questions whether BW truly provides a "sanctuary" for these writers that improves their academic success (96). As I read deeper into composition history, how academia defines different terms, such as BW, has come to the forefront of my mind, particularly as an ESL instructor at Miami University of Ohio—what many call a "public ivy." Even though the term "Basic Writing" may not be prominent within these communities, this discursive construct exists in relationship to other terms and narratives that are not always explicitly noted, particularly in local contexts such as my own. For example, how BW is defined in a particular context may influence how ESL (and even composition) is defined, showing the need for scholars to explore the entire range of discourse surrounding composition.

Composition history can play an important role in mapping out these discursive networks, providing critical insights to the institutions and subjectivities that not only surround the term BW, but other terms in relationship to BW. For example, exploring how BW and ESL may be mutually constitutive and how they might support dominant narratives requires deeper research into the discursive history of both composition and BW. The two books *Beyond Shaughnessy* by Kelly Ritter and *Basic Writing in America* edited by Nicole Pepinster Greene and Patricia J. McAlexander provide a foundation for these types of explorations by giving readers two different historical perspectives on the disciplinary mechanisms that have allowed BW to emerge within composition history and how such kinds of analysis might

inform further explorations in the field of relations inherent in this term.

In her introduction to *Beyond Shaughnessy*, Ritter grounds her exploration of Basic Writing in her own local experience, noting four different types of "basic writers" that she has encountered in three different universities and showing how the definition of BW relies on a number of discursive relationships. These variances lead her to ask the question: What does "Basic" really mean? She also connects this question to the curricular structure in each of the three universities, grounding the application of such a study in her own local experience. As both a scholar of composition history and a teacher, I have often asked myself these same questions:

> First, who *are* basic writers? Second, what role does the social history and mission of a college or university play in determining the answer to this question? Another way of asking these questions is to posit that, if there *is* a universal need, an agreed-upon societal and institutional demarcation for "basic" writers that diagnoses a lack of something specific and transferable from educational site to educational site, then why does the course vary so dramatically? (7)

All these variances have one element in common—the term functions as a sorting gate, rather than signifying any specific content. Though the compilation of essays, *Basic Writing in America*, examines multiple histories, Ritter's decision to go beyond open-access universities in her book and study BW in "elite" institutions like Harvard provides a new way of exploring this question, where sorting mechanisms can take on a variety of discursive forms. This form of composition history shifts the subject matter from specific categories of content or theory to the institutional and disciplinary mechanisms that carry with them social and ideological implications.

The editors of *Basic Writing in America* set up Ritter's book by exploring the emerging multiplicity of histories arising within the field of Basic Writing, where "each conversation will be historically informed by different regions of the country; different classes, ethnicities, or races of students; different education missions . . ." (qtd. in Greene and McAlexander 1). By comparing nine colleges, the editors hope each of the nine chapters, which use ethnographic methods like archival work and interviews, will "serve as pieces of the BW puzzle, together shedding light upon the overall history of the movement," while also showing directions that BW may be taking and identifying lessons already learned (3). By taking such a wide cross-section of histories, the editors of *Basic Writing in America* create an opening for expanding historical studies of BW to other "sorting gates" that may exist under other discursive terms both within ESL and within elite institutions like Miami University, enabling the asking of broader questions in how these terms function within a discursive field. If the nature of BW does not wholly revolve around the nature of errors, for example whether they

are made by native speakers or international speakers, then our ability to identify narratives and discursive forms that adhere to institutional norms and procedures can become more specifically articulated. As shown by both these books, the first step in this kind of analysis must be this exploration of multiple meanings inherent in terms like BW.

The nine historical studies in *Basic Writing in America* effectively show the "multiplicity of meanings" of BW in a way that allows Ritter to extend these explorations in her own book within a new context. Most of the nine histories refer to the work of Shaughnessy as a pivotal defining point in the field of BW. In fact, the first study is mostly a tribute to Shaughnessy, perhaps rightly so, as it is a history of BW at CUNY. Even so, as an ESL instructor at Miami University, I am looking for other historical frameworks that lie outside dominant national narratives that have historically shaped ESL, BW, and composition as a whole. As a reader, then, I was attracted to Nicole Pepinster Greene's study of open admissions in Southwest Louisiana, where there is a pivotal point that lies beyond Shaughnessy. Beginning her history earlier, Greene identifies what could qualify as BW classes geared toward Cajun French speakers in the early 20th century (72). Greene seems to be describing one of the earliest focuses on "World Englishes" later in the 20th century, where students were still encouraged to use their own dialect in journals (74). Moments like these in composition history can be a starting point for reimagining the linguistic ecology of the composition classroom, perhaps calling for more studies along these lines. Composition history should take into account more unique moments such as these that may provide a counter-narrative to the monolinguistic assumptions of the university. What kind of multiple histories have the dominant narratives of ESL, along with BW, tended to hide? For example, we could extend these explorations further by examining ESL composition in liminal spaces, such as the Philippines or Puerto Rico – not just within mainland borders.

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Greene's study most effectively shows what the editors describe as a "multiplicity" of BW definitions, focusing on the types of BW writers, rather than the subject matter or course descriptions. Other studies in this book also consider African American colleges, athletes,

ESL students, and graduate students, casting a wide net across the diverse population of these courses, potentially appealing to a diverse readership. Even so, this net is only cast over open-access universities that are generally considered a part of the "lower-class" university system. Though *Basic Writing in America* shows the discursive nature of the term "Basic Writing" by performing a "multiplicity of meanings" and examining types of basic writers within different geographies, this plurality is set within a specific political and historical context that connects most of the nine studies (4). In their introduction, Greene and McAlexander describe the historical backdrop that informs each of these histories, connecting them to the Civil Rights movement and the resulting struggle against a meritocratic university (4-6). The editors set up BW against the "elitist" university, creating four common themes within the individual essays of their book: the diversity within BW populations, the class conflict within university politics, the low priority for Basic Writing, and the current decline of these programs. This assumption that these basic writers exist in "lower," open-access institutions tends to be a common lens of interpretation throughout composition history, still relying on national narratives that could be implicitly supporting these inequalities by maintaining the binary between open-access and more "elite" institutions.

One important question comes to mind: Is BW limited to only open-access universities, particularly if this term is a discursive construct? Are there other ways that this discursive construct may be working at Miami University or even within ESL programs? In order to answer these questions, a change in reference is required, shifting from national narratives of equality that rely on the "liberalism vs. elite" binary. In *Beyond Shaughnessy*, Ritter effectively shifts this frame of reference by examining BW as a disciplinary mechanism in the universities that we usually consider elite. As Ritter's title suggests, she hopes to go "beyond Shaughnessy"—not beyond in the future, but beyond in the past. Basic writers did not suddenly appear after 1960. For Ritter, the "frontier" that Shaughnessy discovered was not so wild or untread upon as we are often led to believe in current composition history. Ritter believes the best way to show the discursive nature of BW and how it functions as an "institutional mechanism" is to look backward to a time before the term even existed, providing a basis for further research in areas where this term is not prominent, perhaps even extending it to ESL composition, "public ivies," and other unique localities.

In contrast to *Basic Writing in America*, Ritter builds on previous scholarship to show that Shaughnessy does not have to necessarily be considered the point of origin for Basic Writing. According to Ritter, there is a "deeper chronological history" of BW (31). What Shaughnessy represents is merely a shift from viewing basic writers as deficient to underprepared; the sorting mechanisms are still the same (29). Instead of focusing on specific identities of BW writers, Ritter wants to focus on the "institutional mechanism" of stratifica-

tion (what Shor calls a "sorting machine"), "the highly subjective classification and division of students' abilities as they align," which does not require a specific term like BW (41). What creates the category of Basic Writing is not so much specific content matter, types of errors, or specific identities, but the normalization of the student, which can be different depending on the locality. The "basic writers" at Ivy Leagues may have been elite, but they were not the norm (42). For Ritter, BW is more influenced by locality than universal standards, showing how the analysis of BW must be set within a field of relations that includes the local, not just historical or ideological narratives.

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This is not necessarily in contradiction to the work done in *Basic Writing in America*, though Ritter attempts to broaden the localities of BW. For example, in *Basic Writing in America*, Linda Stine makes similar claims in her study of Lincoln College in the early 20th century, in order to include what could be considered BW classes within a graduate program. Stine provides a similar theoretical basis to Ritter's by claiming that "all Basic Writing is, like politics, local in the sense that a course is 'remedial' only in relation to the next step it prepares students to take" (224). Stine's Lincoln College is still considered a "lower" open-access college, where even graduate students are likely to be from the lower social strata, but in a way, she opens the door to further work like Ritter's.

In order to reconstruct the discursive field around BW in individual Ivy League schools, Ritter uses "archival documents to reconstruct the curricular history of a program" and the "institution's overall view or attitude toward that program" (72). Ritter shows how histories are based on texts and that texts can have a multiplicity of meanings, depending on what history one is constructing, requiring her to contextualize her observations within the scholarship of composition history and discourse about Basic Writing, much of which is implied in *Basic Writing in America*. Ritter excels in this respect, using several chapters to contextualize her archival work. For example, in her second chapter on locality, she examines her attempt to fill a gap in this scholarship by discussing the three primary texts on "locating" composition: *The Politics of Remediation* by Mary Soliday, *Situating Composition* by Lisa Ede, and *Basic Writing as a Political Act* by Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington. Throughout the book, Ritter also relies on prominent composition histories by James

Berlin, Susan Miller, Robert Connors, John Bereton, and many others. She clearly shows how the field has created the illusion of exhaustive research about Harvard and Yale and perhaps an illusionary split between "regular" composition and BW.

Within this framework, Ritter shows how the same mechanisms that are at work in "lower," open-access universities, as shown in *Basic Writing in America*, are the same mechanisms at work in more "elite" universities like Harvard and Yale. The most compelling and detailed look into these mechanisms occurs in her fifth chapter on Harvard, "Beyond English A." In her description of archival materials, Ritter points out the "mechanisms of power" or "stratification." For example, she describes a simple disciplinary mechanism developed by Harvard's Committee on the Use of English by Students, where the committee sent out cards to all professors, asking them to identify and categorize students in need of remedial help. The executive officer, then, would periodically inspect the writing of these students and recommend different kinds of remedial work (105). The resemblance to Foucault's Panopticon and carceral system is quite striking. Ritter goes on to explain how these mechanisms functioned within the local context of Harvard and the values held by the administration:

> In other words, while remedial writers at Harvard during the first half of the twentieth century were down, they were clearly not *out*. Rather, the Committee, as a historical public entity, served as a source of refinement, for some a site of individual "finishing," fulfilling a higher social and communal purpose that most faculty and students agreed was vital, if sometimes inconvenient, for Harvard men to endure." (117; emphasis in original)

Ritter ends this chapter with examples of student resistance, perhaps a kind of counter-discourse, opening doors to similar kinds of explorations across composition history, including BW. A similar "bottom up" approach could also provide insights into these disciplinary mechanisms in universities like Miami University or even in ESL composition. For example, what would such archival work reveal about ESL at Miami University and how it functions differently in open-access institutions or even Miami's own regional campuses? What kind of student writing has not yet made its way into composition history? Could student published texts like Miami's *College Composition at Miami* provide similar kinds of counter-history?

Ritter brings up many other intriguing questions by doing an in-depth rhetorical analysis of memos and reports that show basic writers coming from Harvard's own pool of targeted population, not necessarily from those new pools of recruits required to maintain the proper quota and budget for the school, thus showing that basic writers exist in all strata of society within the university system. Ritter's in-depth analysis of both Yale and Harvard calls into question the driving assumption noted throughout *Basic Writing in American*—that

BW represents a specific kind of class conflict between liberalism and elitism that originates within the Civil Rights movement and continues within BW programs of open-access universities. Several of the nine studies in *Basic Writing in America* imply that if we were to lose the BW course, we would lose the space on campus where liberalism can effectively negotiate or work against what seems to be new forms of elitism arising within the university. Though these types of sorting mechanisms certainly can be used to promote or deny different kinds of elitism, such categories are not necessarily tied to specific types of universities, social classes, or even terms like Basic Writing. Exploring how these sorting mechanisms work in specific institutional settings throughout the history of composition will help map out the discursive relationships inherent in national narratives and ideologies—not just the liberalism vs. elite binary. For example, in the past, ESL has revolved around narratives of immigration and empire, creating liminal spaces within and without the nation that can be more thoroughly studied by composition scholars. A more "multicultural" approach to ESL can also be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement, showing a close relationship to many of the same narratives surrounding BW.

In her final chapter, Ritter finally proposes that the term BW be merged with our ideas of "standard composition," which will imply a degree of "unpreparedness" to all incoming freshmen:

> Viewing *all* first-year writing as preparatory in the local context of the *individual college or* university—rather than based on generalized perceptions or standards of preparedness across institutions—does away with the temptation to eliminate access to some and all students who are not ready for the standard course. (140)

By having a specific space separate from "standard composition" that we call BW, we may be reinforcing the sorting mechanisms that will allow a complete elimination of access by universities, or at least "higher" selective admissions universities, a potential that has already been noted throughout *Basic Writing in America*.

Using Harvard and Yale as prime examples, Ritter has effectively argued that "basic writers have been variously defined but uniformly stigmatized over the past eighty years" (143). Though *Basic Writing in America* sets up a nice ground work for research like Ritter's, the contributors tend to restrict their histories to open-access colleges as sites where liberalism and elitism come into conflict. However, if such terms are relative to local contexts, then this gives researchers an opportunity to explore BW in other contexts. Ritter proposes that we focus on locality by making composition classes "contentless," based on a Utopian model called Writing 1-2-3, where each course makes no claims on student labels or preparedness, and students can take these courses for credit without any kind of stigma (144). The 1-2-3 refers simply to a sequence that all students follow. Though this proposed solution may seem

a bit vague or abstract, the content of such courses can only be defined on a local basis, according to Ritter. This is not far off from Shor's own proposal that teachers and administrators should "examine their local conditions and decide what strategies work best at the places where we work" (100). Composition history, then, becomes a way for us to explore our localities more specifically, creating dialogue between our specific situations and broader movements in the field.

As a graduate student who is now teaching ESL at a "public ivy," I see similar discursive mechanisms at work on a day-to-day basis. Questions about how to evaluate and "place" international students are intertwined with similar questions about BW and the discursive frames that build, support, and maintain national narratives and ideologies. To more critically examine our institutional, historical, and cultural localities, scholars in composition history will need to continue mapping these discursive networks, not just of BW, but of other terms that may be implicitly defined by BW, including ESL, and perhaps even composition itself. In the end, can we really eliminate stratification and stigmatization simply by eliminating the term? Perhaps not. But in order to be more critically aware of how such processes take place, histories of terms like BW must go beyond the term itself and into the discursive networks it implies. As the field of composition continues to write its own history, and that of Basic Writing, both these books are critical in examining practical implications of the discursive construct we call BW.

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