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Structuring the Color Line through Composition

IN THE CHAPTER "OF THE DAWN OF FREEDOM" IN *THE SOULS OF Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois discusses the promises of Reconstruction as a massive and abrupt re-structuring of life in the South. Reconstruction ultimately failed to create lasting change, but as a response to racism it imparts a lasting lesson: racism is a structural problem, borne out in inequality and rooted in property and education. Reconstruction did not address racism as a matter of feeling; it sought to maintain martial law at polling places; to dream of a system of equal education; to guarantee forty acres and a mule, or self-sufficiency. That racism flared up because Reconstruction failed frames the ongoing problem of race in the U.S. as one of structure, especially of property and of education.

The civil rights gains of the 1950s and 1960s addressed some structural problems. Electoral disenfranchisement was made properly illegal, and the separate but unequal status quo in the education system was formally repealed. The forty-odd years since the Civil Rights Movement have seen various anti-racist interventions on the part of state and federal government (Affirmative Action, expansions of public funding for higher education), but a continued gap persists between whites and blacks in family wealth, household income, educational achievement, incarceration rates, and even life expectancy and infant mortality. The color line is being maintained, but how?

Background: The "Double-Consciousness" of the Community College

The community college is one attempted anti-racist intervention in higher education in the U.S. in the past forty years. It provides local, affordable access to a range of vocational training and to the first two years of an undergraduate curriculum. Its "open admissions" policy gives anyone with a high school diploma or GED an opportunity to enroll in college. Even at the state level, policy boards recognize the unique role a community college can play in the redistribution of wealth and opportunity, as in this statement by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB):

> Of all postsecondary sectors, community colleges enroll by far the highest proportion of low income youth, particularly from urban centers; the highest proportion of

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legal immigrants seeking to develop their skills and expand their opportunities; and the highest proportion of minority groups who are under represented both at middle- and upper-income levels and in good jobs with career opportunities. Heading off the spread of poverty among these groups and reversing the growing disparity of wealth and income are among the most important tasks facing our nation. Community colleges are one of the keys to meeting these challenges. ("ICCS Information and Facts")

M. Garrett Bauman would agree. In his essay "The Double-Consciousness of the Community College," he traces the thinking of both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in the mission of the community college and argues that the community college has real potential to address social inequalities. He describes the community college as an entry point to the social ladder: "Each day we help to that first rung a few who were supposed to fail" (14).

Bauman also notes that critics have argued that the real purpose of the community college is to perpetuate an American caste system. Community colleges lack prestige and are associated with "shunt[ing] [minority students] into low-status service jobs" and "dampen[ing] social dynamite" (14). This essay argues in the latter vein, though like Bauman, I ultimately believe that the community college can contribute to a more just society. A "double-consciousness" or competing ideals may be unavoidable, but colleges should detect and avoid contradictory practices, especially those practices that disadvantage minority students.

Contradictory practices are not new to Composition faculty at open-access institutions, who often face in an intimate way the tension between the college's competing ideals of access and rigor. The students' home language and the school's language may differ, presenting these students with a bewildering obstacle to success in college. What's more, the Basic Writing and First-Year Composition faculty who are most often charged with helping the most vulnerable students are themselves vulnerable, subject to low pay and contingent contracts. State governments' support of open-access higher education has declined in the past decade, even as enrollment has increased; as a result, colleges have hired more and more contingent faculty, putting at risk the quality of students' learning

In this essay, I examine the composition/writing requirement in the Illinois community college system to demonstrate the ways in which structural racism subverts an ostensibly anti-racist state apparatus. I have selected the Illinois system because I am most familiar with it; my conclusions, though, are applicable to policy discussions in any state. I discuss the Illinois system generally and focus specifically on one Illinois community college, which I will call County College, that serves a substantial percentage of students of color. I argue that by requiring and under-funding composition instruction for minority students in community colleges, the state maintains a color line.

Funding the Color Line

The Illinois community college system has limited its ability to serve as an open door to higher education. A disproportionately large percentage of minority students entering Illinois community colleges need remedial education, yet the state's community college funding formula provides fewer and fewer funds for remedial instruction.

Statewide over the last five years, about 20% of students entering Illinois community colleges needed some kind of writing, reading, or math remediation, while at County College, the figure is more than 90%. What explains County's higher incidence of students needing developmental coursework?[1]

According to the ICCB, between 2003 and 2007, about 16% of Illinois community college students were African American, 17% Latino, and 59% white (Table I-4). At County, 56% of the students are African American, 9% are Latino, and 31% are white. County has, then, about twice as many African American and Latino students as community colleges statewide—65% vs. 33%—and about half as many white students. The degree of difference suggests that minority students need remediation at a higher rate than white students. This pattern was also observed in a 1997 ICCB report on developmental education:

> [M]inority students in all ethnic groups are overrepresented among remedial/developmental coursetakers... [A pattern] most pronounced for African American students who represented 13.3 percent of the total population and 23.6 percent of all remedial/developmental coursetakers in [FY] 1991, and 12.2 percent of all students and 21.2 percent of remedial/developmental coursetakers in [FY] 1996. (12)[2]

Thus, data show that the racial difference in student population accounts for at least some of the difference in the percentages of students requiring developmental coursework. Despite Patricia J. McAlexander and Nicole Pepinster Greene's recent statement that basic writing "programs across the nation [serve] an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population" (7), at County and in Illinois such programs serve students who are disproportionately African American. ("Diverse" may be true, but it so often obscures racial disproportions,

1. If County does not definitively have higher standards for its students than other community colleges statewide, its higher incidence of students who need developmental coursework might be because County's district high schools perform more poorly than those in other districts statewide. This line of inquiry lies outside the scope of this paper, though it is a familiar sort of argument: plenty of statewide data show how well particular high schools prepare their students for college. And it's true, for instance, that the high schools in County's district are more poorly funded and have more minority students, lower family incomes, and lower levels of family education than the state-wide averages. Even so, it does not necessarily follow that the community college fails to address structural racism; rather, its developmental education programs could be seen as merely addressing the negative outcomes of the primary and secondary education systems.

2. The 1997 report on developmental education is the most recent one available from ICCB.

as when a public city school is called "diverse" even when the student population is 99% African American. It's a meaningless word if taken literally, but as a code word meaning "including blacks and browns" it points up a crucial and common racial misrecognition.)

Pointing to these racial disproportions here is not meant to essentialize nor to suggest that there is something inherent in black students that makes them test into pre-college level courses; rather, it is to point out that tracking students according to skill—remediation—also results in racial segregation.

The effects of racial segregation in schooling are well-documented and scholars have offered various explanations for a so-called "achievement gap." Theresa Perry discusses "effort optimism" and its role in promoting African American achievement; she argues that teachers of African American students need to be aware that because African Americans have for so long been educationally disenfranchised, they are not optimistic that their efforts in school will be worthwhile. That African Americans would be disproportionately shunted into developmental coursework is evidence of an institutional practice that is not "intentionally organized to develop and sustain effort optimism" (Perry et al. 77)[3]. Indeed, in her discussion of John Ogbu's cultural theories, she notes that "African Americans' fight for equal educational opportunity has left them with a deep distrust for schools and school people" (61), a distrust that must only be exacerbated by being required to take non-credit remedial coursework. Who, after all, would feel optimistic about having to enroll in a course called "English 095: Fundamental English II"?

Taking developmental courses is often disheartening for students, but colleges prioritize transfer-level courses and neglect students enrolled in developmental courses, who so frequently fail. Contingent faculty teach a majority of credit hours across County College, but they typically teach all sections of the lowest level of remedial writing. And these faculty are the least supported institutionally, despite evidence that professional development and teacher training can make an enormous difference in the academic success of minority students.

Effective professional development for these faculty might focus on the relationships between race and remediation. Jay L. Robinson and others describe teaching practices that militate against illiteracy: "No one becomes literate who does not glimpse, and then come to feel, some possibility, no matter how tightly constrained, to shape the meanings that inevitably control one's life" (313). This understanding of literacy gestures towards socio-linguistic awareness, a practice and teaching goal that Robinson describes elsewhere in *Conversations on the Written Word* (especially chapter 6, "Talk as Text: Students on the Margins"). Lisa Delpit argues for teachers' socio-linguistic awareness, claiming that "liberal educational

3. Indeed, as ICCB retention data show, only about 64% of basic skills students earn a passing grade.

movements" serving "non-white, non-middle class" communities should be aware that "[t]here are codes or rules for participating in power," and that "[i]f you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier" (24-25). Asa G. Hilliard III has examined the correlations between the performance of low-income African American students and the teaching of mathematics to show that, though the so-called "achievement gap" is real, "the quality of instruction is the key element in success or failure" (Perry et al. 132), arguing that cultural-specific instruction is the most effective mode for teachers of African American students. All of these explanations point to a need for more careful handling of skills curricula and more explicit engagement with the social issues surrounding schooling—in short, careful work with both tenured and contingent basic writing faculty to apprise them of the social contexts of their instruction.

As Robinson points out, "[b]ecoming literate… crucially involves a glimpse of some future… some sense that one may find habitable space in that future as a self who can speak and act meaningfully" (7). The institutional shape of remedial education suggests, though, "ghettoizing" of the developmental student, a limitation on the horizons of African Americans, and a truncation of optimism. While the teaching practices in developmental courses could be (and sometimes are) progressive and aligned with the anti-racist practices described above, the structure of developmental education in the community college remains problematic, both within the college and the state.

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The state's funding for higher education has been decreasing in recent years, something of which anyone connected to higher education in Illinois is sharply aware. The community college system has not been immune to these problems; for instance, approximately one third of County's budget is supposed to be provided by the state (the other two thirds are supposed to come from local property taxes and tuition, in roughly equal proportion), but over the past nine years the state's share of the college's funding has decreased to less than 13% of the total. The state, of course, continues to boast of the good that community colleges do, as in the ICCB's claim quoted above. The state is also aware of the vital role that community colleges play in alleviating economic inequality for minorities. This tension between what the state says and does can only make observers more cynical about cuts in and freezes on funding for the community college system—law- and policy-makers should be aware of the regressive effects of these budgetary decisions.

Yet the problems of state funding for Illinois community colleges are more complicated than across-the-board funding. Colleges are paid by the state in part on a credit hour basis; for each credit hour a student is enrolled, the college receives a reimbursement from the state. This arrangement sounds simple enough, but not all credit hours are equal. For a credit hour in a health-related field in 2011, such as Nursing or Dental Hygiene, the college will receive $104.94. For a credit hour in a remedial course, the college will receive $9.51; a general education course would net the college $13.13 per credit hour ("FY11 Final Allocations" 3). The gap among these reimbursements has grown sharply, even between 2010-2011; in 2010, remedial courses were funded at $14.40 and health courses at $90.56 per credit hour by the state. In FY03, the rate for remedial courses was around $24 per credit hour.

Why such a big gap, and why has the reimbursement rate for remedial education been declining? The reimbursement rates are determined in large part by how much each type of credit hour costs the college. Since health tech courses are taught mostly by full-time faculty and involve large costs for supplies and learning environments, such courses are costly for the college; remedial and general education courses, in contrast, are taught mostly by part-time faculty and involve very small costs for supplies.[4] The colleges tell the state how much they spend in each area, and the state proportions its reimbursement funding accordingly.

One might imagine that this funding formula influences a college's structure and priorities. The formula does put a norming pressure on colleges, and rewards those that are able to do more with less, but the real problem the formula poses for colleges that serve minority students is that it does not recognize the added costs of helping minority students succeed both inside and beyond the classroom.[5] The state formula takes into account instructional costs—which is one kind of unfortunate feedback loop—but it does not take into account the extra counseling hours and academic support services that a student with "academic deficiencies" needs to make good use of those instructional costs, nor does the formula capture the extra hours that are required for faculty to do a decent job. Thus there is another aspect of the formula, more subtle and more destructive, which shapes the chances for success of minority students. The state pays the least for those courses which more minority students take first, and it does not recognize the greater cost of helping minority students succeed, reinforcing a structural disenfranchisement of African American students.

4. At County, the highest paid adjunct faculty make about $650 per credit hour with no benefits, while the lowest-paid full-time faculty make the equivalent of $1,350 per credit hour, not including benefits. The highest paid full-time faculty can make around the equivalent of $3,350 per credit hour, not including benefits.

5. Regina Deil-Amin and James E. Rosenbaum have written extensively about the kinds of academic support that most help minority students. See, for instance, their work with Ann E. Person, *After Admission: From College Access to College Success.*

These are not the same kinds of funding inequalities commonly discussed in U.S. primary and secondary education, whether focused on inequalities between states' wealth or on those resulting from property tax funding within states. In the case of this formula, instruction benefiting minority students, especially African Americans, receives less funding than instruction benefiting the population more generally, and support for that kind of instruction—tutoring, academic advising, counseling—is not factored in at all. Indeed, that this structural inequality occurs within schools suggests that what George Lipsitz calls our "possessive investment in whiteness" sustains racism *within* an anti-racist apparatus, "increas[ing] the absolute value of being white" (or talking white, or writing white) by under-funding courses "required" of African Americans (16). These funding discrepancies undermine the good that faculty can accomplish within classrooms. I can teach towards anti-racism in my own classroom and encourage others to do the same, but the structures of racism have affected and will affect my students more profoundly and more permanently than in the sixteen or thirty-two weeks I will see them. One such structure is the composition requirement itself.

What, to the State, Is Composition?

To colleges and the state, Composition is a foundational skill for college and the working world. This is not framed as political (or, importantly to this essay, as anti-racist) by either colleges or the state, but the definitions often offered recognize and misrecognize links between the educational and economic systems. The recognitions are limited in scope; the misrecognitions make invisible the color line but point to its structured-ness.

In terms of higher education in Illinois, it seems that no justification for the Composition requirement is needed, for none is offered on the web sites of the ICCB, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), or generally on the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). Were it not for individual college catalogs, students might be under the impression that requirements (and, really, higher education) are just a matter of checking boxes (in the case of transfer worksheets) or tallying up credits. In the case of the County Catalog:

> The purpose of courses in writing and speaking is to foster the ability to communicate effectively with others, whether in speech or writing. The complexities of the modern world require the ability to think independently and express ideas clearly. Because these courses provide such important foundation skills, students should complete them early in the degree program so what they learn can improve their performance in other courses.

While this justification provides a general sense of the importance of writing, there is no reference to specific instances of how writing will be useful in or beyond college. The final sentence points to how writing courses provide "foundation skills" that students need for

other courses, a skill-set that will make students—and people navigating the "modern world"—more successful.

Writing in the "modern world"—imagined as a place that's meritocratic and individualized—springs from what James A. Berlin would call the "current-traditional" and "transactional" rhetorics, terms which many Composition scholars use to describe approaches to teaching composition that treat writing as a set of discrete skills. To "express ideas clearly," for instance, implies that there is something like a clear idea separate from language (Berlin 8), while "communicating effectively *with* others" (emphasis mine) implies that rhetoric is "a social construct involving the interaction of interlocutor and audience" (Berlin 15). To restate the justification, County students are being hailed into a world in which they will be expected both to "think independently," as autonomous individuals, and "to communicate effectively with others," as social beings navigating "the complexities of the modern world." (Why not the postmodern world?)

Such a justification posits an individual and thus misrecognizes the role(s) of communication in class and race structures. As Berlin points out, every rhetoric "embod[ies] the ideology of a powerful group or class" (5); when the college misrecognizes, or does not recognize, the ideologies in its understanding of communication, it obscures the relationships between groups and power. Positing an individual hides group power structures in language and deprives the college of an analytic for anti-racism.

The Illinois secondary education system recognizes more clearly than County the relationships between communication and power. Reading the state standards, though, it quickly becomes clear that misrecognition is only one structuring factor of systemic inequality; an explicit articulation of the alleged relationship between language competence and employment possibilities is no less indicative of the "foundational" relationship between the educational and economic systems. Goal 3 of Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts emphasizes a purpose for literacy in obvious terms:

> Clear writing is critical to employment and production in today's world. Individuals must be capable of writing for a variety of audiences in differing styles, including standard rhetoric themes, business letters and reports, financial proposals and technical and professional communications. Students should be able to use word processors and computers to enhance their writing proficiency and improve their career opportunities…
>
> [Students will w]rite for real or potentially real situations in academic, professional and civic contexts (e.g., applications, job applications, business letters, resume, petitions). ("State Goal 3")

This document guides the state's high school curricula and clearly upholds the

notion that schools prepare workers; the schools appear eager to reproduce capitalist social formations. Louis Althusser would call this emphasis on writing "know-how," but he would not miss the ways in which the very forms that deliver the emphasis (both bureaucratic and pedagogical) also interpellate subjects into the dominant social formation: "the school… teaches 'know-how,' but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (133). That is, the forms of writing such as those in the last cited paragraph of Goal 3 constitute "know-how"—the means of production in the so-called "service economy" of late capitalism.

This know-how is taught in a process heavily influenced by capitalism, noted below in four ways:

1. The Goal is given to schools and teachers by a state agency, suggesting Fordist capital formations. David Harvey discusses how "state interventionism… rested on notions of a mass economic democracy welded together through a balance of special-interest forces" (*Postmodernism* 136), in this case the schools, the state, and the corporation.
2. It expressly ties the students' learning to the students' eventual incorporation into the economy as workers.
3. It is broken down into a tiered system of expectations, "rationalized," as Lukács and others would point out, "a break with the organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product" (88), and itself is part of a rationalized, systematic, and bureaucratic approach to building effective subject-worker-graduates.
4. The subtle plural "career opportunities" suggests a prescient awareness of what Harvey describes as the rise of "flexible specialization," which "emphasizes personal responsibility" and subjects workers further to transnational movements/flights of capital. (*Neoliberalism* 76)

The only gesture towards the place of writing outside business are the words "academic," "civic," and "petitions," though this last is ambiguous and students might wonder if "academic" means anything other than preparation for the workforce. If County's justification misrecognizes the structural character of communication, its students may have already been shaped by a rationale far more blatant.

The Common Core State Standards do not make any clearer the social implications of learning how to write. The Common Core State Standards Initiative proclaims in its website banner that it is "Preparing America's Students for College & Career." The phrase "college and career," or variations of it, appears repeatedly throughout the Common Core materials, and its repetition reveals the lack of imagination generally in current conversations about

the meaning of education. The Common Core offers neither democratic nor humanistic reasons for teaching students to write; a "career" is presented as an end-in-itself, not as a vital aspect of community life nor as a contributor to happiness. The Common Core also frames learning as if students must simply accede to the demands of college and the workplace, as if writing in college and the workplace were uncontestable and fixed. The Common Core tells students "This is how it's going to be someday," but it has no component that helps students see "But this isn't how it has to be" or even "This is why it's this way now."

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Composition scholarship can offer helpful vocabulary to explain the perniciousness of these misrecognitions or misapplications and to connect writing instruction to social equality. Robinson is helpful in critiquing both County's misrecognition and Goal 3:

> [R]estrictive definitions of literacy, fascination with the codes and forms of written communication, and failure to see reading and writing as interactive processes involving individuals and texts in context have all led to educational practices that have disadvantaged many students and left many ill-equipped as users of written language in academic and workaday settings. (137)

Robinson uses some language that suggests the job-directedness of Goal 3—"workaday settings," "texts in context," "interactive processes"—and the notion of disadvantaging students is implicit in Goal 3 and in County's justification. In the context of Robinson's argument, though, he emphasizes the social and group power dynamics involved in literacy: "fully functional literacy… correlates with economic and social success in our culture.… [T]he terms *literate* and *illiterate* are reflective of how our society views and values people and how people in our society value themselves" (137, emphasis in original). Literacy might correspond with success in either the County Catalog or Goal 3, but Robinson's language allows for the contingency wherein lies power. That is, literacy "reflects" our society's values, which points to a factor structurally constitutive of power. Robinson's verbiage admits that the social value of literacy is part of a larger and contingent social structure. When schools limit and misrecognize the anti-racist possibilities of Composition, they serve to maintain the pernicious status quo connecting the educational and economic systems.

The Spirit of 1866

If the problem of the twentieth century was the color line, it appears that the twenty-first offers more of the same, unless we intervene structurally and intentionally in a sustained way. First, advocates for basic education—students, faculty, administrators, and policy-makers who believe in open access to higher education and in the student support that makes open access possible—should be aware of how public funding works in their state, how scarce resources are distributed, and how that scarcity influences teaching and learning. This awareness should be coupled with conversation and action: explaining to one's colleagues and fellow citizens why funding matters and how it should be structured will help to sharpen advocates' rhetoric and lead to more effective action. I have offered here a model for inquiring into state funding and urge readers to familiarize themselves with funding mechanisms in their own states. Dependence on property tax funding is one well-known source of educational inequality and should remain under scrutiny, but how are other types of revenue distributed, and who benefits from the distribution?

Second, I would suggest that advocates look at how remediation affects minority groups. The language of "racism" and "anti-racism" can be powerful and, if used carefully, can create allies. While no one wants to be called "racist," being "anti-racist" is positive and sounds progressive, automatically carving out space for solidarity. Likewise, the language of "structural racism" works to create allies rather than opponents. In my assessment of the structural racism in funding mechanisms in Illinois higher education, I don't suggest that any person or group is particularly guilty; if there were a particular person or group to blame, fixing the problem would be much easier.

Rather, the problems are diffuse. There is the conflict between the ICCB's desire to allocate state resources adequately and fairly and community colleges' desires to help students reach academic standards. There are the standards themselves, with their class and racial histories. Employment practices in community colleges put part-time faculty—many of whom are excellent teachers, but severely underpaid—in charge of the students with the greatest academic needs. A host of factors determine the K-12 system's preparation of students for college. And then there are the politics of financial aid, child care, and health care—all so critical for so many community college students' academic success and persistence.

It's complicated, and one path to simplify the complication truthfully and forcefully is through the language of structural racism or structural anti-racism. Education, even and especially higher education, is the great hope for meritocratic capitalist democracy, and focusing on structures will help us achieve our dreams of equality.

Reading an earlier draft of this essay, Gerald Graff thought that my argument might "fatalistically [imply] that there's nothing teachers can do to counteract inequality until the

structures of inequality are first changed." Of course both teaching and systemic structures matter, and it oughtn't be hard to say so; yet, pointing to structural problems sounds to neoliberal ears like making excuses for bad teachers or poor children. It's tempting, in response, to overreact and argue that to fix our Big Educational Problems we should focus only on fixing the structures of inequality, as if our teachers are just fine for the most part. It's much more interesting to show, as I try to do here, how the bigger picture of inequality makes too many of our schools into places that devalue teachers and foster inhumane approaches to learning. As I discuss here, community colleges rely on underpaid, overworked contingent faculty to teach the most vulnerable students, so trying to improve teaching practices—or, as the Teach for America model would have it in K-12 education, to look for ambitious young new teachers to replace the old ones—can be to look for ways to make these underpaid, overworked teachers better without paying them more. We can and should have both better teaching practices and better pay. We shouldn't be reluctant to argue for more resources nor should we overlook the importance of pedagogy.

Third, and related to our dreams for equality, I encourage advocates to sharpen their understandings of how basic education contributes to our national public health, both political and economic. The Common Core goals do not offer compelling rationales for learning, but they do present an opportunity to engage in national conversation about the purposes and content of our education. Advocates for basic education can carefully co-opt the language of preparation for college and the workplace and argue that open-access higher education offers a dynamic site for realizing our national hopes. In the midst of our reaching for higher college completion rates and better economic competitiveness, we would do well to recall that earlier attempt at changing a social landscape, Reconstruction, and gird ourselves this time for a sustained national effort towards our cherished national goals.

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