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"Why Are You Here?": Troubling Legitimacy for Basic Writers and Their Instructors in the Community College

HISTORICAL TIES OF EDUCATION TO SELF-DETERMINATION GENERALLY present a young person's entrance into a four-year college as a turning-point of self-actualization. The mystique of arrival—and acceptance—surrounding such an event draws from cultural and historic fields that assume, and implicitly celebrate, the student's assent to the values proffered by the academy, including the worth of an education. Cultural scenarios of this sort hardly exist for the community college student, for whom entrance and arrival resonate more actively with the question of his or her legitimacy when compared with the experience of many four-year students for whom legitimation somehow happens prior to entrance and typically as the result of privilege.

We contend that it is a crisis of legitimation that constructs the community college classroom. To the extent that legitimation happens at the site of language (Street), our positions as teachers of English, and more specifically of pre-freshman or "basic" English, doubly embed our roles as our students' *de facto* legitimators. Even as we recognize the ambivalence of leading students toward or into discourse practices that may be alien or in some ways limiting, our influence is undeniable. In the classroom, we wield the assignments, standards, and assessments that see students through crucial, unavoidable junctions. *(It matters little whether they are practices of our own devising.)* Many colleges designate one or more courses, or course sequences, in English as prerequisite for other courses and special programs. In the case of those who have failed the institution's standard of writing prior to entering, proficiency in English is and must be the marker of their future non-provisional status.

When framed historically and politically (see Horner), the connections between English language learning and students' legitimacy flow apart from our personal and professional desire to help students attain written proficiency in standardized form. More than the transmission of writing skills is happening in such classrooms, for here the contact zone encompasses conflicts and tensions far beyond engaging diversities of students' lives and cultures (see Pratt). Competing agendas for educating students in English converge here as well.

The impetus in composition and rhetoric to struggle against conscriptive facets of students' education in English is not new. Much of the composition literature of the past fifteen years implicitly argues for revising, but first by fully recognizing, the leading roles we play in students' assimilation to college life (see Horner and Lu; Horner and Trimbur). The problem of student legitimacy, however, remains like a white elephant in the room, and the ways in which instructors themselves voice assimilativist rhetoric, often unintentionally, calls for greater critical reflection. That proficiency in standard written English ultimately benefits students is a belief that can and has been scrutinized (see Carter), while legitimacy *as a co-conscriptive project of the classroom* has not garnered the same attention. The legitimizing function permeating our roles as English instructors in the community college happens subtly and, it may seem, tangentially to the usual course structures and procedures more accessible to our critical awareness.

Until now, composition as a field has not fully theorized discursive power relations in terms of the questions instructors ask at the sidelines of larger course structures. Undertheorized, the questions we ask students informally, *Why are you here? What are your intentions for college, or for your degree?,* supposedly to validate students, stay under the radar of our intentions and effect. Yet such questions, by which we might have students introduce themselves, for example, in the course of orienting them to the class, are strangely similar to ones that resurface for students in moments of conflict, even stand-offs, between themselves and instructors, when expectations or assessments of students' work do not align and students feel challenged to clarify their purposes for attending college at all. Given the tenuous circumstances by which many community college students enter college, these questions are fraught (and perhaps are anticipated by students more than we realize).

At the same time, another irony pertains: that is, that so much basic writing, as with composition, is taught by contingent faculty, graduate students, and/or instructors newly placed in the classrooms before they have had time to build—through coursework and mentorship—a foundation in basic writing theory and pedagogy. In parallel but inverted relationship to students' conscripted path toward legitimacy, we find the problematic of *instructors'* legitimacy. Instructors who are new to teaching, new to basic writing, often mirror students' susceptibilities to the question, *Why are you here?* with their own set: *Why am I here? What is my role? What service am I rendering to students and the institution in terms of what I do? How I am seen? valued? used? rewarded?* Among millennials, new instructors may likely appreciate, and wish to build upon, students' "non-standard" use of English as a form of intellectual work. The "errors" of basic writers may greatly compel new instructors who, along with their students, take part in the currents of technology influencing our language today, leading them to resist students' blatant labeling. What *is* the instructor's role from this perspective?

Or, from the standpoint of an institutional authority who values "basic writing" for its complexity: *What really defines my teaching?* Marking the contradiction of basic writers writing well, instructors are apt again to experience the question of their own legitimacy.

Our goal for this article is to heighten awareness around the ways in which students and instructors frequently enact mutual dynamics of legitimation in the community college classroom. Instructors do so in how they represent themselves and their pedagogies, as in owning the questions of legitimacy, such as *Why are you here?* To this end, we take on the familiar discourse of teacher introductions and student goal-defining activity as prototype; we explore how, when performed uncritically, some portion of the academic rites of welcome and initiation may compound negative self-beliefs and assumptions by which community college students enter college; replicate and sustain asymmetrical power relations between instructor and student; and ultimately limit possibilities for both teacher and student self- and re-definition. As we'll see, putting such questions out there opens the door to hear similar questions resonating as to *instructors*' "backgrounds"; and purposes; or, in other words, opens the door for basic writing students and instructors to probe more consciously how instructors came to be "here" too.

"Why Are You Here?" A Unique Collaboration

To begin, we add one more layer to the multi-layered, mutually-determinitive narrative of legitimacy for basic writing students and their instructors. Aligning as co-authors,[1] Lara and I developed the insights for this article during a semester in which Lara began her teaching career in a basic writing classroom at Kingsborough Community College, a branch of the City University of New York, where I was a senior faculty member and offering a teaching practicum accredited by Lara's Ph.D. Program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center. That fall semester of 2009, Lara, at 22, enrolled. Not only was it Lara's first venture into teaching basic writing; it was also her first semester as an English graduate student. Only several months earlier, she had graduated with honors from SUNY Purchase, a four-year residential college of the State University of New York. While aware of her positional authority, parallels between herself and her students were never lost on her: within an institutional context, she was, like her students, "new"—new to teaching, new to the campus, new to a diverse, "basic" student population. So she would enact important formalities of "being new": attend course meetings; write a syllabus; keep records; and undergo a classroom observation (though not by me). In addition, and specifically for our practicum, she would ultimately write a reflective essay on her teaching experience as it was shaped by our many discussions and readings

1. Hope assumes the "I" of this narrative as a way to allow the greatest synchronicity/ies between Lara and the students to show through. All insights and writing are wholly collaborative between the co-authors.

in basic writing, composition, and critical pedagogy. In turn, she would lead her students in a similar kind of assignment: a reflective essay, as required for their endterm portfolio, in which they would describe their growth as writers, not only for their classroom teacher, but for another developmental English teacher who would read the entire portfolio anonymously as part of a cross-reading assessment procedure.

In a nutshell, this assignment meant for Lara probing students' understanding of the question, *Why are you here?* As Lara remarks in reflection: "At the time, it was the most benign and creatively existential prompt I could pose to my students, just the simple question, 'Why are you here?'" She also notes the personal correspondence: "Like any insecure graduate student, I evaded the question and my own confusion by projecting it onto my students." Yet as we both look back, it is unclear whether I, as her practicum teacher and mentor, framed the reflective essay in these terms and set out a definite legitimacy agenda; if I did, it is possible that a chain of initially uncritical question-posing started with me.

In my defense, I might say that I hoped to negotiate a perspective recognizing the paradoxes by which students and new teachers like Lara enter basic writing classrooms: *Why are you here?* captures a sub-current of academia's growing standards-oriented stance toward basic writers' right to belong, so determining their political and social location(s); likewise, the question speaks to students' intuitive grasp of their provisional status, while it offers a backdrop for new teachers, fired with idealism, to define their purposes for teaching as well. I saw my teaching of the practicum as a way of outlining such convergences. The question could accentuate the folly of distinctions such as "newness" which essentialize both our students and our field, and which beg to be refuted. At the same time, it could help us problematize notions of authority by which teachers—never "new," only more or less experienced—benevolently lead basic writers into strange, unchartered territory. In our practicum, "teacher" (Hope) and "student" (Lara) worked together to make sure we

> *never failed to account for the ways in which the "basic writer" was a deeply politicized identity—one which was anything but basic. In the midst of the many other adjuncts whom I had encountered who suffered from a kind of "adjunct ennui" (some as basic writing teachers), I gathered that part of my graduate program's intention in pairing me with Hope was to professionalize me under the guidance of someone well-versed and well-worn in the complex histories of basic writing and its subsidiary initiatives within the CUNY system. More often than not, the result was that the practicum raised and aligned my interests and concerns with those of my students rather than (as more typical) with other adjuncts.*

My effort then was one of doubly mediating—on behalf of Lara's students and Lara

too—as to suggest a full and dynamic range of possibility/ies for her own relationship to Basic Writing. Accordingly, the inset italicized quotes of this article hail from Lara's endterm reflective essay. They are our attempt to physically manifest the layers of legitimacy that constitute the community college, basic writing classroom, highlighting legitimacies' interplay within scenarios where instructors who are "new" to basic writing (but "new" only in some ways) engage students who are not always so "basic."

"Why Are You Here?" In a Sociolinguist Frame

For many English instructors in the community college, it might seem like a missed opportunity to not engage students in open, initiatory conversations about their goals and expectations for college. Teachers of English are known for making the most of such conversations, which seem all the more relevant in ELL courses; courses early in the sequence of offerings for basic writers (where sequenced programs exist); or wherever English students "right out of high school" fill the seats. As academia's "gateway," writing courses in English ascribe students, many who have quite varied academic literacy experiences (Blanton; Ferris; Harklau et al.), with "newness" categorically—despite the literacies they have acquired. Perhaps we assume that the discourse of goals and expectations offers anxious students a non-threatening starting-point: *"Hello and welcome! Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves and tell one another:* What are you hoping to get out of college?" "What will be your major?" "What are your aspirations?" "Why are you here?" What better way to welcome students than to positively mark this moment of transition with questions that may resonate the talk of goal-setting familiar to students from counseling sessions or other conversations leading up to college entrance?

More likely, instructors may understand on some level that to claim the discourse of beginnings as an institutional representative confers authority. In which case, an activity other-than, or not simply, questioning is taking place. Further, the co-constructive nature of teaching and learning (see Lave; Lave and Wenger; Hanks; Young and Miller) complicates the rhetorical context for engaging students when querying repeats conventional *initiation-response-and-evaluation (IRE)* patterns of classroom talk (Cazden). A common feature of "low stakes" writing classrooms in high school (Harklau et al.), IRE isolates classroom communication into instances, without flow or mutuality. In the rhythm of question and response, it is easy to read students' "participation" as any one of involvement, agreement, appreciation, or consent. Yet we misread these exchanges as fully active.

> *As I learned in my practicum meetings with Hope, the students were the subjects of institutional and state negotiations, but not exactly the benefactors or legislators of such negotiations—as Sarah Hoagland writes, "those who might be spoken about, but not spoken with."*

In her "postmodern pedagogy of imitation," Mary Minock's sense of the "active" encompasses a psycho-social interplay of language, desire, and assimilation. Minock follows Lacan to include teacher and student in a dynamic that draws together therapist and client, parent and child. Texts, broadly defined, are mediary in these relations as well, as are "any of [a] myriad [of] cultural artifacts," at the same time they assume an othering role. In this framework, the "Subject becomes highly susceptible to nuances of the other's language," desiring to reconcile his [sic] experience of "divided self." While the movement toward reconciliation is neither "simple, nor is it predictable or systematic" (7-8), language's "assimilation" of the Subject, is largely inevitable because it is unconscious. More, it involves both the subject and agent(s) of othering in mutually self- (and other-) defining acts.

The insight of Minock, as well as of other postmodern theorists of composition, is to read the influence of power relations in how students take up their subject positions in the classroom. Among these compositionists, practitioners of critical pedagogy account for power's othering influence in their effort to reconfigure authority for teaching and learning in terms of more equitably configured social relations among students and instructors. Still they remain acutely aware of how prevailing structures can and do impede the life of more participatory and democratic arrangements for learning. As John Paul Tassoni and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson point out, "Though we dream of the utopia and may even steal glimpses of it from time to time, we face the fact that as classroom teachers our ability to move script and counterscript into mutually transforming dialogue is painfully limited" (71). If the social and psychological pull toward assimilation and recognition of/by the Other is pervasive and diffuse (with language as both its driver and its medium), then every aspect of relationship between teacher and student is fit for scrutiny—not only assignments, course themes, and institutional structures, but, as we contend, conversation as well. This includes any sort of assimilationist questioning, especially in contexts that pitch such questions toward an instructor's evaluative response.

It may seem strange, of all things, to pose incidental, well-meaning how-are-you's (essentially and of a sort) as problematic. Still linguists who consider institutional discourse know to study even the narrowest of margins that surround larger structures where discourse performs on both macro and micro levels. Sociolinguistics tell us that the discursive dynamics constructing roles and relationships in structured settings are multiply-determined, encompassing a range of context cues, simultaneous signalings, and behavioral norms and values. As a power-enabling nexus, these and other "features of language, discourse, and social perception coalesce to create the phenomenon of interactional power" (Damico 64). While such dynamics will enter into linguistic interactions anywhere, power differentials and effects are more pronounced in institutional settings where conversational participants are

more likely to consciously speculate outcomes (see Waterman, Blades, and Spencer). Depending on one's status or position, a Subject may both hear and read another/ Other's questions in several registers: *What is being asked of me, and why? To what purpose? To what effect?*

Teun van Dijk, a linguist of institutional discourse, studies conversational turn-taking, noting: "even [in] institutional contexts in which there is no formal prescription governing" the features of language that convey power, conversations are characterized by an "asymmetrical distribution of questions and answers among participants" (102). What linguists identify as the potential of all Subjects to structurally and effectively modify discursive power differentials is framed by how the Subject construes the intentions or projected effect of the conversation. Van Dijk contends:

> This suggests that the question-answer structure of talk is an emergent property of the local management by participants. . . .the task of analysis is to specify how it is locally managed, in ways that display the participants' orientations to what they should properly be doing in a setting. (102)

Again, keeping to their institutional positionality, instructors are apt to "display. . . [their] orientations to what they should properly be doing," that is, confirming a measure of authority (while stressing for students all kinds of links between presence and *purpose*). Similarly, the tenuous status of many community college students is sufficient for them to "construe outcomes" as to questions that probe their legitimacy. Feminist philosopher Sarah Hoagland draws out the dilemma of speakers engaging frames of meaning wherein "the inquiry itself makes sense" but for which the audience "[is] not normally used to hearing or acknowledging the sorts of things they have to say" (1). "Re-valuing testimony" of the marginalized in political or institutional contexts, she cites the respondent's turn as performance (2). "What the audience is familiar with and has skill thinking about will affect whether simply pointing to the information of the testimony will be possible" (2). Indeed, students have much to both lose and gain in these early informal and "active" exchanges with their instructor; they know to speculate outcomes. While "new" to college, "new" to English, students may well intuit that the performative engendering of academic merit begins now as they ponder: against what standards will their answers be measured? How will they, and do they now, "stack up"? What impression are they creating?

Given the pressures of the students' endterm reflection, Lara worried as to

> "How will they, and do they now, 'stack up'? What impression are they creating?"

whether her students would indeed "be themselves" or rather perform a self which, "contrived, boring, or expected 'validates the curriculum producing the subjects that the curriculum envisions'" (Scott 26). In her words:

> *how, and how much, would students reveal themselves and how would they rhetorically anticipate their readers' assessments of their own private experiences? How much would they predetermine of themselves as writers for said reading stranger? Would they tell these teachers what they wanted to hear much as they've told teachers like them in the past? Or imagine the fictitious gatekeeper (not me) differently, reading and judging whether or not they'd made it as real writers and thinkers—as legitimate? How would they position themselves within these conversations, as well as among the authors they read and the content of the course?*

It takes little for one who is positioned at the institutional margins to interpret questions posed centrally as challenges. In such scenarios, students' agency of response is already partially written: perceiving their own tenuous positionality—and seeking to manage it, as van Dijk might hold—students may respond in the affirmative so as to verify love of learning, personal goals, turning-points, and the like. Or resisting, they may fashion some unconventional response—silence, indifference, humor—which effectively risks their legitimacy but perhaps obtains for them another sort of recognition or status.

To our view, these complexities establish the question of basic writing students' legitimacy as an essentializing fact (or fallacy) about them. In our practicum, we reflected on these concerns at length, often referring to the literature and histories of the CUNY system, its open-admissions policies, and the emerging policies' relationship to race, class, education, and affirmative action legislation. In order to appreciate the conflicts our students negotiated at present, we felt compelled to consider how historically students have colored the classroom, and how the larger academic institution has also tried (successfully? unsuccessfully?) to put in place faculty who could speak back to that color, and whether it was enough. We questioned, in Lara's words, "how would the interaction between 'What I want to be' and 'What I am' be stylistically rendered, i.e. 'shap[ed] at the point of utterance'" (Britton, qtd. Mutnick 99)? And how would such utterances reflect the many dimensions of legitimizing activity implicit in students' self-presentations, including but not exclusive to their actual writing? That is, we marked the fraught rhetorical diversity students were encountering, a rhetorical diversity that the institution, maybe in error, anticipated students would be culturally equipped to mediate—as a result of being New Yorkers perhaps, and in spite of their own status in needing (re)mediation.

Why Are You Here? Shared Space Within Territories

By now, it is evident that we are locating teachers and students in a linguistic-political field distinguishing authorized knower and Subject of knowing. Even as we know identity to be a co-constructive activity, teachers and students interact with one another as if across pre-occupied territories. Related, many basic writing and composition scholars have used territorial metaphors to conceptualize the teaching of basic writing as an act of crossing or of bridging (for the purpose of later eliding) borders. To help counter a tradition that constructs new and basic writers as deficient, Mike Rose encourages us: "we need to define our work as transitional or as initiatory, orienting, or socializing" (543). Scholars such as Rose, David Bartholomae, and Patricia Bizzell have helped alter the way we talk about what students need—not fixes for linguistic deficits but instead support for students' success in new academic environments. And still, we are talking about getting students from "there" to "here." By contrast, it is our academic biases against students' actual, already-there, participation in language that define the "here" we mean, such that we can even ask, "Well, what brings you here?"

As much as our field has come to recognize and integrate students' varied, extracurricular literacies (see Carter), its metaphors of initiation and new beginnings can still misrepresent students as new to literacy, new to meaning making—new to "here," which is no longer "there." As their teachers, we know on some level that basic writers own an exceptionally authentic understanding of English as a living, mutable language. As Bruce Horner and John Trimbur discuss, it was the academy's perceived need to fill the great vacated space left by Greek and Latin at the universities that afforded modern languages the opportunity to assume new, disciplinary territories, and from here the study of English as a written language followed suit. Meanwhile in the university, students' many extra-literary "dexterities" of rhetoric are consigned only pre-literate, pre-legitimate status. In addition, such conceptions of English language learning as initiation or socialization underscore certain "myths of literacy." These include literacy's constancy of value, as in "once literate always literate"; and literacy's autonomous and completely transportable nature (Carter 56-59). Not least, when framed as a "new beginning," literacy assumes ultimate desirability, at least by anyone with any sense, and so educators weight this time with even greater import. There is no room for ambivalence about the brand of literacy being offered or what the endeavor will entail, both gains and losses, once that first "decisive" step toward academic literacy has been taken.

And yet for many community college students, the notion of a fresh start applies fairly narrowly to their lives. Community college students typically do not overturn their lives as sons, daughters, caretakers, mates, neighbors, workers, drivers, bus riders, volunteers, and bill payers when they sit for the first time in a college classroom. What we term *real life* does not now exist apart from their traversing the college campus.

At Kingsborough Community College, it is never easy to identify authentically first-time students. Students may enter basic writing and ESL classrooms as transfers from summer and winter immersion programs that have already oriented them to a variety of college reading and writing practices. Students come from across campus, having completed a full-day, five-day-a-week writing Institute, affiliated with Continuing Education. Or they come as returning students whose most recent pre-admission writing test was several years ago. As older students, they may have accumulated credits before our current policy of taking remediation in the first semester went into effect. Or they may be seniors from the My Turn Program who have decided to fully matriculate, or transfer students from one of the non-CUNY, private colleges in the borough. This semester in teaching freshman composition, I learned that some of my students were taking classes as part of AHRC, now with an office on our campus, which provides students of the program with a meaningful college "experience." (Should these students do well and enroll, most likely a portion of them will "start again" in developmental English.) At our community college, "new" is certainly a relative term.

Even when a new basic writing instructor is unaware of such student populations, she may still find herself critically suspicious of the "basic" category. As a scholarship student and recent graduate who had once struggled to decide between a career in literature or musical performance, Lara saw the *Why* question as an occasion to probe the presumption of "basic."

> *I had few to no frames of reference for how to pedagogically inject spontaneity into marking students' competence—let alone how to do it productively. At the time, I felt that spontaneity was the most efficient way to assess whether these students were in fact basic—basic as in bad writer—or just rhetorically non-conformative. (Obviously, as a writer and student, I identified with, and secretly wished for, the latter.) In order to assess how basic is basic, I felt I needed a straight-forward prompt to act as a deterrent for any writing that could prove overly fashioned, stylized, contrived. So that day I left a mere fifteen minutes at the end of class to address this prompt, Why are you here? Not nearly enough time, but I wanted to see what would happen with limited time. I didn't want them to "please me," to produce writing that had anything to do with me. I wanted something real, something already in-excess of my solicitations as the instructor.*

A desire like Lara's for writing beyond basic may reference other moments in which instructors look to test out the category they are charged to deal with. If so, we might acknowledge that some of the writing we assign students, as well as other efforts, reflects our own wish to trouble that category. And if we are so engaged, one effect would be to reflect upon the matter of our legitimacy too. What if even some of our students aren't basic, and rather are, in Lara's terms, "rhetorically non-conformative"? What does that mean for the self-reflective basic writing teacher?

In sensitivity to this relationship, we can understand the co-constructive activity of the basic writing classroom to involve the instructor as much as the students. That same pressure to sustain the category, to protect borders, may well force its own release, yielding transparency. Lara grappled with the matter of students' legitimacy all semester:

And what soon became apparent was that all my students shared a sense of urgency strongly connected to moving out of the derogatory classifications of "basic," writer and otherwise—this they would do by passing as literate, passing the class. But as the semester headed to a close, I felt the impending crush of being a kind of trafficker of industry, my students being potentially unhappy customers, not just seekers of wisdom. When they failed themselves, I felt I had failed them. Particularly as I was now in graduate school, enjoying the privilege of my scholarship, my upstate New York upbringing, I knew I was not doomed to fail. I was not at all like my students.

Lara realized that the relationship between herself and her students was both political and personal. Indeed she consciously worked to create "a fine line between being a professor and actually being myself, probably more of a peer than a professor: a frustrated 22-year old with hardly more to give my students than 'the real' empathy that despite all that I had accomplished, I often feared to be a failure too." One day especially revealed the correspondences, the day of the course midterm, when Lara had brought the wrong set of papers to class. "I told them and they all sighed; they were already 'in the zone,' ready to write. I had totally messed up, something I'm not used to doing. I felt in need of guidance, but there was no one to hold me accountable," Lara recalls, "no one except my students." That exception spoke volumes of the mutuality of basic writing student and instructor as per legitimacy, as one of the women of the class sought to allay Lara's distress:

"So we'll take it tomorrow. Don't be so hard on yourself, Miss."

Why Are You Here? Relocating the Question

Basic writing instructors might each write their own list of such moments in which students and instructors change roles, one helpfully leading the other. The challenge is to draw from them, and incite more of them, to transform the classroom, to keep them from being mere blips on the social screen. Teaching within the contradictions of legitimacy might rather pull us in to join our students in a shared, creative space, as Lara found in mirroring students' uncertainty. While still interested in the *Why* question, she began asking it somewhat differently, effectively changing the *Why to a How and a What of it:*

Alright, you're here. Discuss.

Now it became more of a cue than a question, enabling a more genuine sort of turn-taking as van Dijk might view it, a turn providing a much broader responsive space. So cued,

it was left for students to decide the next move, be it toward "[w]hat the audience is familiar with and has skill [to think] about" (see Hoagland), that is, toward information, or toward re-locating the question farther beyond reach of the traditional IRE classroom dynamic. Lara discovered it was possible to jolt the institutional framework for evaluating response; like-wise, the big "I" of IRE (initiation) could function performatively: *Alright, you're here, and that's something, isn't it? That you are sitting here now, that you continue to do as you have and need to do; that you are designated as a basic writer, that you failed writing, that you write poorly according to some, that you write well. It IS something this semester that you are here and hopeful-ly intend to be back tomorrow.* Effectively re-voicing the question in these terms drew an open circle around students' lives, including the problem of their legitimacy, whereby once they entered, they could choose to stand at any number of points defining that space—center, edge, or somewhere in between.

With the *Why* question reconfigured, students were freer to make more of the "here" dimension, to consider their social and political locations, *here* and beyond the classroom. For Melanie (student names are pseudonyms), the turn of the question proved just such an invitation. She openly expressed the anxiety that perhaps her white Eastern European her-itage did not qualify her to participate in the frequent discussions of othered and racially-contested experience. In her reflective essay, she responded to Lara's admittedly "Hispanic notions of taste and flamboyance," which Lara had often drawn upon to emphasize greater possibilities for the students' writing:

> Professor always kept telling us we have to add more spice to our writings, that some-times the writing was boring. Every time she would say that I would look at her and wonder, how am I supposed to add spice to writing? Im white I know nothing about spices. It always seemed funny to me, how I would wonder off with my thoughts about writing.

In parallel reflection, Lara notes that this student "is keen to observe that what I was trying to draw out, and which I certainly produced, was in fact a very limited notion of color, ethnicity, and diversity." No less, the student, in Lara's view, finds her way: "She ends not in fact focused on me, the instructor, but in her own discursive, internal, vagrant space." Lara's outreach, her coming forward to bring her own traditions to writing, showed her again join-ing students in the widened circle of question and response, sharing a unique space, periph-ery or center, that also allowed them theirs. Moreover, Melanie finds herself somewhere meaning-filled and productive, not vacant. This is the space of "wonder[ing] off" that leads Melanie to explore her ethnic and social positioning.

Another student, Jeff, pulls at the question like a string which, like Melanie, he uses to find and assess his particular social positioning. A young African-American from Brooklyn,

Jeff met the implicit challenge of the question straight away, the first time that Lara asked it early in the semester. He wrote, "After failing the placement exam, I was put into [this course] in order to fix my skills in reading and writing." And as a thoughtful and confident writer, he is unwilling to have these circumstances define him. He writes that there is more to move him than such an institutional determination: specifically, the death of his older brother from "hanging," or gang violence. Still he does not accredit this death, or the chance to redeem it, as the reason he has come to college. He does not suggest, nor must we assume, the connection.

What is clear, however, is that through the semester, Jeff struggles to find a place of proximity to, with, and for his brother. On each of his papers, he inserts his brother's name, Cl---, into his own, a kind of a.k.a. between his first and last names. His later decision to remove this detail from his name as written on his endterm reflective essay suggests his personal consideration of political and social location—where he is—now mindful of writing for public, evaluative purposes. He finds a proximity to journalist and former gang member, Nathan McCall:

> Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* is a book about the life of a young black man in America during the 1960's and how Nathan dealt with violence, drug use, and racist problems in his life. With this book I was able to relate it to many of my own experiences even though the events in this book took place way before my time and by relating myself to McCall it also helped me to change some of my ways in order to better myself. By using prompts and having open readings in class, Professor helped me to insert myself in Nathan's shoes. The prompts allow me to voice my opinion and to hear the many different opinion's of my classmates. We also wrote a paper about the word "hanging" and it's effect on African-American men. With those methods, it help me to express myself on paper and connect myself to Nathan McCall.

Jeff does not bring up the explicit gang violence connection between himself and McCall perhaps because he doesn't need to. "By inserting himself" into the identity of another, he recognizes that the act of finding proximity is significant. For him, this is true whether it is done in reading for college or in writing his name. In addition, as we've noted, he ties the personal to the political. "Hanging," or street violence, is not McCall's or Jeff's problem, but rather the problem of African-American men. Enlarging the concerns of violence of which he knows something personally locates Jeff in an even wider realm of community and identity from which answers may emerge. Questions that allow students that space to range within and across the borders that define them make finding proximity possible. As if following his own impulse, with Lara's support, he readily shifts the question of *Why are you here?* to *Where is here for me?* Whom do I stand behind? Who accompanies me? Or as Black cultural theorist

Awad El Karim M. Ibrahim might ask, *among whom and where do I see myself mirrored?* These are all full and sufficient questions to answer, *Why are you here?*

We have claimed that the questions imploring students to articulate why they have come to college encompass great complexities of identity and social positioning, urging a "revaluing" of students' "testimony" (Hoagland) in these instances. Cultural presumptions of basic writers' newness to college hide countless ambiguities, including our students' past forays into academic literacy and their many simultaneous competencies and affiliations. Asymmetries of power are the driving mechanism; charged socially and linguistically, they make the asking of such questions seem legitimate at the same time they affect the possibility of authentic, productive answers.

As well, we have marked how easy it is to engage a rhetoric of welcome that circumvents the same need to legitimize the new teacher of basic writing. The linking of welcome and legitimacy opens larger questions of *by what standards and toward what purposes legitimate*, for both students and their instructors. We acknowledge the institutional and political spaces that students and instructors mutually occupy and the importance of opportunities for new basic writing teachers to see their positionality reflected by their students.

In our graduate-level practicum on the teaching of writing, a new basic writing teacher and a veteran one gained a fuller picture of the contingencies of basic writing students' and their instructors' experience, wherein key markers of academic beginnings are questioned. We better understand that institutional entry points to college are troubled ground and need further contestation. We hope to evolve this process to freshly encounter our students, joining them in their reach for legitimacy and in the revelations of its troubling.

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