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THE TIDY HOUSE: BASIC WRITING IN THE AMERICAN CURRICULUM

ABSTRACT: I want to use this paper to think about basic writing as a way of naming (and producing) a curriculum, an area of study, a type of writing and writing practice—as a way of organizing (and producing) that version of the social world represented in our colleges and universities. Hence my two epigraphs: I would like, for the moment, to be a nominalist; as best as I can, I would like to think about the history of the term “basic writing” and the role of the intellectual (and the culture and its institutions) in its production.

The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage.

—Gayatri Spivak
“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Remember, in Foucault’s passage in his *History of Sexuality*: “One must be a nominalist.” *Power* is not this, *power* is not that. *Power* is the name one must lend to a complex structure of relationships. To that extent, the subaltern is

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the name of the place which is so displaced from what made me and the organized resister, that to have it speak is like Godot arriving on a bus. We want it to disappear as a name so that we can all speak.

—**Gayatri Spivak**, in an interview with
Howard Winant, “Gayatri Spivak on the
Politics of the Subaltern.”

1.

I found my career in basic writing. I got my start there and, to a degree, helped to construct and protect a way of speaking about the undergraduate curriculum that has made “basic writing” an important and necessary, even an inevitable, term. This is a story I love to tell.

I went to graduate school in 1969 under an NDEA fellowship (NDEA stands for National Defense Education Act). The country had been panicked by Sputnik; the Congress had voted funds to help America’s schools and children become more competitive. The money was directed toward math and science, but NCTE wisely got its foot in the door and saw that at least a token sum was directed toward the humanities, and English in particular, and so NDEA helped send me to Rutgers to graduate school. You could think of it this way—I went to graduate school to save the world from communism.

Because I was an NDEA fellow, I went to graduate school but I never had to teach, at least not until I was well into my dissertation. And so, in 1973, when the money ran out and in order to see what the job might be like, I asked my chair if I could teach a course. He agreed and I found myself teaching Freshman English for the first time.

I did what I was prepared to do. I taught a course where we asked students, all lumped into a single group, “Freshmen,” to read an essay by Jean Paul Sartre, and I gave them a question to prompt their writing: “If existence precedes essence, what is man.” This was my opening move. By some poor luck of the draw, about half of my students were students who we would now call “basic writers.” I knew from the first week that I was going to fail them; in fact, I knew that I was going to preside over a curriculum that spent 14 weeks slowly and inevitably demonstrating their failures. This is what I (and my school) were prepared (by “English”) to do. I want to cast this moment, in other words, as more than an isolated incident. I want it to be representative.

One student wrote the following essay (you can visualize the page—the handwriting is labored and there is much scratching

out). The writer's name is Quentin Pierce:

If existence precedes essence man is responsible for what he is.

This is what stinger is trying to explain to us that man is a bastard without conscience I don't believe in good or evil they or meaningless words or phrase. Survive is the words for today and survive is the essence of man.

To elaborate on the subject matter. the principle of existentialism is logic, but stupid in it self.

Then there is a string of scratched out sentences, and the words "stop" and "lose" written in caps.

Then there is this:

Let go back to survive, to survive it is necessary to kill or be kill, this what existentialism is all about.

Man will not survive, he is a asshole.

STOP

The stories in the books or meaningless stories and I will not elaborate on them This paper is meaningless, just like the book, But, I know the paper will not make it.

STOP.

Then there are crossed out sentences. At the end, in what now begins to look like a page from *Leaves of Grass* or *Howl*, there is this:

I don't care.

I don't care.

about man and good and evil I don't care about this shit fuck this shit, trash and should be put in the trash can with this shit

Thank you very much

I lose again.

I was not prepared for this paper. In a sense, I did not know how to read it. I could only ignore it. I didn't know what to write on it, how to bring it into the class I was teaching, although, in a sense, it was the only memorable paper I received from that class and I have kept it in my file drawer for 18 years, long after I've thrown away all my other papers from graduate school.

I knew enough to know that the paper was, in a sense, a very skillful performance in words. I knew that it was written for me; I

knew that it was probably wrong to read it as simply expressive (an expression of who Quentin Pierce “really was”); I think I knew that it was not sufficient to read the essay simply as evidence that I had made the man a loser—since the document was also a dramatic and skillful way of saying “Fuck you—I’m not the loser, you are.” I saw that the essay had an idea, “existentialism is logical but stupid,” and that the writer called forth the moves that could enable its elaboration: “To elaborate on the subject,” he said, “let’s go back to survive.”

The “Fuck You” paper was a written document of some considerable skill and force—more skill and force, for example, than I saw in many of the “normal” and acceptable papers I read: “In this fast-paced modern world, when one considers the problems facing mankind....” I know you know how to imagine and finish that essay. It has none of the surprises of the fuck you essay. It would still, I think, be used to classify its student as a “normal” writer; the other would identify a “basic” writer.

I could see features in the fuck you essay that spoke to me in my classroom. I did not, as I said earlier, know how to read it. I didn’t know how to make it part of the work of my class. I failed the “basic writers” in my Freshman English class and I went to my chairman, Dan Howard, a man whom I admired greatly, and I told him I would never do this again. I would never teach a course where I would meet a group of students, know that some would fail, watch those students work to the best of their ability and my preparation and then fail them. It was not the job for me. I would rather be a lawyer. (This is true, not just a joke; I took the law boards.)

He said, “Why don’t you set up a basic writing program” and gave me my first full-time job. A year later I went to Pitt, again to work with a basic writing program. The one decision I made was that I was not going to get rid of Jean Paul Sartre. I wanted to imagine a course where students worked with the materials valued in the college curriculum. I did not want to take those materials away from them. I wanted, rather, to think about ways of preparing unprepared students to work with the kinds of materials that I (and the profession) would say were ours, not theirs, materials that were inappropriate, too advanced. And so we set up a seminar, with readings and a subject or theme to study (so that basic writing students, we said, could work firsthand with the values and methods of the academy); we did this rather than teach a “skills” course that could lead, later, to “real” work.

I felt then, as I feel now, that the skills course, the course that

postponed “real” reading and writing, was a way of enforcing the very cultural divisions that stood as the defining markers of the problem education and its teachers, like me, had to address. In its later versions, and with my friend and colleague Tony Petrosky, the course became the course reported in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*. I am thrilled to see that there will be talk about this kind of course here at the conference today. There are versions of the course being taught in the most remarkable variety of settings—city schools, rural schools, Indian reservations, high schools, colleges for the deaf. The course is still being taught at Pitt, with wonderful revisions. The two features of the course that have remained constant are these: difficulty is confronted and negotiated, not erased (the Jean Paul Sartre slot remains); students’ work is turned into a book (the fuck you paper becomes an authored work, a text in the course).

Now—as I said, this is a story I love to tell. It is convenient. It is easy to understand. Like basic writing, it (the story) and I are produced by the grand narrative of liberal sympathy and liberal reform. The story is inscribed in a master narrative of outreach, of equal rights, of empowerment, of new alliances and new understandings, of the transformation of the social text, the American university, the English department. I would like, in the remainder of my talk, to read against the grain of that narrative—to think about how and why and where it might profitably be questioned. I am not, let me say quickly, interested in critique for the sake of critique; I think we have begun to rest too comfortably on terms that should make us nervous, terms like “basic writing.” Basic writing has begun to seem like something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum, in the stories we tell ourselves about English in America. It was once a provisional, contested term, marking an uneasy accommodation between the institution and its desires and a student body that did not or would not fit. I think it should continue to mark an area of contest, of struggle, including a struggle against its stability or inevitability.

Let me put this more strongly. I think basic writing programs have become expressions of our desire to produce basic writers, to maintain the course, the argument, and the slot in the university community; to maintain the distinction (basic/normal) we have learned to think through and by. The basic writing program, then, can be seen simultaneously as an attempt to bridge AND preserve cultural difference, to enable students to enter the “normal” curriculum but to insure, at the same time, that there are basic writers.

2.

Nothing has been more surprising to a liberal (to me) than the vehement (and convincing) critique of the discourse of liberalism, a discourse that, as I've said, shaped my sense of myself as a professional. I have been trying to think about how to think outside the terms of my own professional formation, outside of the story of Quentin Pierce and my work in basic writing. I am trying to think outside of the ways of thinking that have governed my understanding of basic writers, of their identity as it is produced by our work and within the college curriculum.

To do this counterintuitive thinking, the critique of liberalism has been useful to me. Let me provide two examples as a form of demonstration.

Here is Shelby Steele, in the preface to *The Content of Our Character*, talking about how he writes. I like to read this as an account of the composing process, the composing process NOT as an internal psychological drama (issue trees, short-term memory, problem-solving, satisficing) but as an accommodation of the discursive positions (the roles or identifications) that can produce a writer and writing. It is also a program for a liberal rhetoric, a way of writing designed to produce or enforce the ideology of liberalism (in this case, the argument that differences of race and class don't matter):

In the writing, I have had to both remember and forget that I am black. The forgetting was to see the human universals within the memory of the racial specifics. One of the least noted facts in this era when racial, ethnic, and gender differences are often embraced as sacred is that being black in no way spares one from being human. Whatever I do or think as a black can never be more than a variant of what all people do and think. Some of my life experiences may be different from those of other races, but there is nothing different or special in the psychological processes that drive my mind. So in this book I have tried to search out the human universals that explain the racial specifics. I suppose this was a sort of technique, though I was not conscious of it as I worked. Only in hindsight can I see that it protected me from being overwhelmed by the compelling specifics—and the politics—or racial difference. Now I know that if there was a secret to writing this book, it was simply to start from the painfully obvious premise that all races are composed of human beings. (xi)

It is a remarkable statement and enacts, in the paragraph, the link between an attitude (a recognition of common humanity, looking beneath surfaces) and the discursive trick, the “sleight of word,” to steal a phrase from Gayatri Spivak, the displacement this position requires/enables in the act of writing. The attitude that all men are equal produces a text where the overwhelming specifics—and the politics of racial difference—disappear. It is a figuration that enables a certain kind of writing. It is, I think, a writing we teach in basic writing (the control of the overwhelming details, the specifics; the erasure or oversight of the problems—personal, social, historic—that produce basic writing), just as it is a writing we perform, in a sense, in the administration of basic writing programs, making certain “overwhelming specifics” disappear.

When I first came upon this book, I knew that I was supposed to be critical of Steele (that he was a conservative, an old-fashioned humanist); I knew I was supposed to be critical before I could perform or feel the critique. Actually, I’ll confess, I loved his book and what it stood for. It evokes sympathies and identifications I have learned to mistrust.

Here is a different statement about writing, one that is harder to read (or it was for me), this time by Patricia Williams, from her remarkable book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. It is not, directly, a critique of Steele, but it speaks a version of writing and the writer that stands opposed to his. It is not, I should say quickly, what we would have once called a “Black power” statement on race and writing—that is, it does not simply reverse Steele’s position (Steele argues that he must forget he is Black) to argue that a writer must remember, discover her Blackness, to let race define who, as a writer, she essentially is. Williams’ argument is not produced by the same discourse.

Williams’ position is different; it sees subject positions as produced, not essential, and as strategic. Williams’ book thinks through what it is like to write, think, live, and practice law as a Black woman—that is, to occupy positions that are White and Black, male and female, all at once.

She recalls a time when, back to back, a White man and a Black woman wondered aloud if she “really identified as black.” She says:

I heard the same-different words addressed to me, a perceived white-male-socialized black woman, as a challenge to mutually exclusive categorization, as an overlapping of black and female and right and male and private and wrong

and white and public, and so on and so forth.

That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance. Law too often seeks to avoid this truth by making up its own breed of narrower, simpler, but hypnotically powerful rhetorical truths.

Acknowledging, challenging, playing with these as rhetorical gestures is, it seems to me, necessary for any conception of justice. Such acknowledgment complicates the supposed purity of gender, race, voice, boundary; it allows us to acknowledge the utility of such categorizations for certain purposes and the necessity of their breakdown on other occasions. It complicates definitions in its shift, in its expansion and contraction according to circumstance, in its room for the possibility of creatively mated taxonomies and their wildly unpredictable offspring. (10–11)

And over and over again in her book, she offers this as the figure of the writer:

But I haven't been able to straighten things out for them [her students] because I'm confused too. I have arrived at a point where everything I have ever learned is running around and around in my head; and little bits of law and pieces of everyday life fly out of my mouth in weird combinations. (14)

There is a double edge to this comparison. On the one hand, Williams represents the critique of liberalism and its easy assumptions, say, about the identify of African Americans and White Americans, or Workers and Owners, or Men and Women. It defines sympathy as something other than the easy understanding of someone else's position; it makes that sympathy, rather, a version of imperial occupation, the act of the taking possession of someone else's subjectivity. The pairing also represents how writing and the writer might be said to be figured differently when one reconfigures the relationship of the individual to convention, the writer to writing, including the conventions of order and control. Williams' writing is disunified; it mixes genres; it willfully forgets the distinction between formal and colloquial, public and private; it makes unseemly comparisons. In many ways, her prose has the features we associate with basic writing, although here those features mark her achievement as a writer, not her failure.

Here is a simple equation, but one that will sum up the thoughts this leads me to: to the degree to which the rhetoric of the Ameri-

can classroom has been dominated by the topic sentence, the controlling idea, gathering together ideas that fit while excluding, outlawing those that don't (the overwhelming, compelling specifics); to the degree that the American classroom has been a place where we *cannot* talk about race or class or the history of the American classroom, it has taught both the formal properties and the controlling ideas that produce, justify, and value the humanism of Shelby Steele, that produce Patricia Williams' text as confusing, unreadable (which, in a classroom sense, it is—our students are prepared to find her writing hard to read and his easy), and it produces basic writing as the necessary institutional response to the (again) overwhelming politics and specifics of difference. It is a way of preserving the terms of difference rooted in, justified by the liberal project, one that has learned to rest easy with the tidy distinction between basic and mainstream. In this sense, basic writers are produced by our desires to be liberals—to enforce a commonness among our students by making the differences superficial, surface-level, and by designing a curriculum to both insure them and erase them in 14 weeks.

In her recent work, Mary Louise Pratt has argued against the easy, utopian versions of community that have governed the ways we think about language and the classroom. In linguistics, for example:

The prototypical manifestation of language is generally taken to be the speech of individual adult native speakers face-to-face (as in Saussure's famous diagram) in monolingual, even monodialectal situations—in short, the most homogeneous case linguistically and socially. The same goes for written communication. Now one could certainly imagine a theory that assumed different things—that argued, for instance, that the most revealing speech situation for understanding language was one involving a gathering of people each of whom spoke two languages and understood a third and held only one language in common with any of the others. It depends on what working of language you want to see or want to see first, on what you choose to define as normative. (38)

If you want to eliminate difference, there are programs available to think this through. In the classroom, similarly, she argues, teachers are prepared to feel most successful when they have eliminated “unsolicited oppositional discourse”—that is, the writing they are not prepared to read—along with parody, resistance, and critique, when they have unified the social world in the image

of community offered by the professions. Who wins when we do that, she asks? and who loses? Or, to put it another way, if our programs produce a top and bottom that reproduces the top and bottom in the social text, insiders and outsiders, haves and have nots, who wins and who loses?

This is not abstract politics, not in the classroom. Pratt acknowledges this. In place of a utopian figure of community, she poses what she calls the “contact zone.” I use this term, she says,

to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (34)

She extends this term to classrooms and proposes a list of both the compositional and pedagogical arts of the contact zone. Imagine, in other words, a curricular program designed not to hide differences (by sorting bodies) but to highlight them, to make them not only the subject of the writing curriculum, but the source of its goals and values (at least one of the versions of writing one can learn at the university). Pratt lists the various arts of the contact zone. These are wonderful lists to hear as lists, since they make surprising sense and come out of no order we have been prepared to imagine or, for that matter, value.

These are, according to Pratt, some of the literate arts of the contact zone: autoethnography (representing one’s identity and experience in the terms of a dominant other, with the purpose of engaging the other), transculturation (the selection of and improvisation on the materials derived from the dominant culture), critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression. (Imagine these as the stated goals of a course.) And these are some of the pedagogical arts: exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories); ways to move *into and out of* rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of *cultural mediation*. (Imagine these as exercises.)

Now—the voice of common sense says, basic writers aren’t

ready for this, they can't handle it, they need a place to begin. But this sense makes sense only under the sway of a developmental view of language use and language growth (and "developmentalism"—cherishing and preserving an interested version of the "child" and the "adult"—this, too, is inscribed in the discourse of liberalism). Thinking of development allows one to reproduce existing hierarchies but as evidence of natural patterns—basic writers are just like other writers, but not quite so mature. One could imagine that oppositional discourse, parody, unseemly comparisons, if defined as "skills," are the equal possession of students in *both* basic writing and mainstream composition courses. In fact, one could argue that "basic writers" are better prepared to produce and think through unseemly comparisons than their counterparts in the "mainstream" class. Pratt rejects the utopian notion of a classroom where everyone speaks the same language to the same ends; she imagines, rather, a classroom where difference is both the subject and the environment. She gives us a way of seeing existing programs as designed to hide or suppress "contact" between cultural groups rather than to organize and highlight that contact.

Now of course education needs to be staged, and of course tracking makes strategic sense; of course one needs a place to begin and a place to end or to mark beginnings and endings, but it is not impossible to think beyond our current sense of beginnings and endings (of basic writing and the courses that follow), beyond placement exams that measure the ability to produce or recognize the conventionally correct and unified text.

There is caricature here, I know, but one could imagine the current proportion of students in basic writing courses and mainstream courses redistributed by an exam that looked for willingness to work, for a commitment to language and its uses, for an ability to produce a text that commands notice, or (in Pratt's terms) for the ability to produce opposition, parody, unseemly comparisons, to work outside of the rhetoric of authenticity, to produce the autoethnographic text. Or we could imagine not tracking students at all. We could offer classes with a variety of supports for those who need them. These might be composition courses where the differences in students' writing becomes the subject of the course. The differences would be what the course investigates. We would have, then, a course in "multiculturalism" that worked with the various cultures represented in the practice of its students. There would be no need to buy an anthology to find evidence of the cultural mix in America, no need to import "multiple

cultures.” They are there, in the classroom, once the institution becomes willing to pay that kind of attention to student writing.

There is caricature here, but so is there caricature in our current accounts of *the* basic writer and his or her essential characteristics. There is a great danger in losing a sense of our names as names—in Patricia Williams’ terms, as rhetorical gestures, useful for certain purposes but also necessarily breaking down at the very moment that we need them.

Or—to put it another way. Basic writers may be ready for a different curriculum, for the contact zone and the writing it will produce, but the institution is not. And it is not, I would argue, because of those of us who work in basic writing, who preserve rather than question the existing order of things.

3.

Developmentalism. Certainly the most influential conduit for this discourse in American composition is James Britton. He has been given the kind of saintly status given Mina Shaughnessy. He seems to represent (in his sympathy for the other, for children, for diversity, for growth and empowerment) a position beyond positions. This is, of course, a sleight of hand, and a problem, one we share in producing when we read Britton generously. (And let me be quick to say, I understand all the good reasons why we might read him generously.)

As a way of thinking outside of Britton, both about writing and about children, but also about professional work and about the consequences of such thinking, I want to turn to a comparatively unknown book, *The Tidy House*, one that could be thought of as a countertext to *The Development of Writing Abilities*. It is written in a similar time and place, in the late 60s and early 70s in Britain. It looks at the same subject: writing and schooling.

In Steedman’s words, this is what *The Tidy House* is about:

In the summer of 1976, three working-class eight-year-old girls, Melissa, Carla and Lindie, wrote a story about romantic love, marriage and sexual relations, the desire of mothers for children and their resentment of them, and the means by which those children are brought up to inhabit a social world.

This book, which takes its title from the children’s narrative, offers an account of their story, and suggests what interpretations we, as adults, can make of it. Their story, which is structured around two opposing views of child-care held by their two central female characters, served the

children as an investigation of the ideas and beliefs by which they themselves were being brought up, and their text can serve us too in this way. (1)

I'll confess that I have been very much taken by this book. It is beautifully written, sensible, evocative, surprising. And it powerfully suggests the roads not taken by composition studies and its professionals.

The book begins with the girls' story, called "The Tidy House." It is written all in dialogue. Here, for example, is the children's account of what adults say to each other in bed at night when they are making babies:

What time is it?

Eleven o'clock at night.

Oh no! Let's get to bed.

Ok.

'Night, sweetheart, See you in the morning.

Turn the light off, Mark.

I'm going to.

Sorry.

All right.

I want to get asleep.

Don't worry, you'll get to sleep in time.

Don't let us, really, this time of the night.

Shall I wait till the morning?

Oh stop it.

Morning.

Don't speak.

No, you.

No. Why don't you?

Look, it's all over.

Thank you, Mark.

Mark kissed Jo, Jo kissed Mark. (43-44)

Steedman's work on this story leads her to women's accounts of their lives in the working-class neighborhood of the girls, to Henry Mayhew and the words of girls from the streets of London in the 19th century, to domestic education and the historical uses

of children's writing. And, in Steedman's career, it has led to interests in history and autobiography, in the production of "the child" in England.

Steedman saw in the student's story a history of social practices, practices that not only argue about educability and appropriateness but about how girls become women and what it means to live within one's class. Teachers are not prepared, she argues, to see history and culture in the classroom or in the work of its children.

It is almost impossible for a teacher to look at a room full of children and not see them in some way as being stretched out along some curve of ability, some measuring up to and exceeding the average, some falling behind. This is the historical inheritance we operate with, whether we do so consciously or not, and it has been a matter of "common sense" and common observation rather than a matter of theory to know as a teacher that children of class IV and V parents are going to perform relatively badly compared with children of higher socioeconomic groups. (5)

And, "What teachers know as a result of this history, and as a matter of 'common sense,' is that, in general, ability groupings turn out in practice to make rough and comprehensible matches with social class divisions."

For Steedman, as both a teacher and a social historian, the fundamental question is how these young writers, given their positions as girls and as working-class girls, can negotiate, understand, and critically confront those versions of themselves that are written into the social text. An uncritical schooling, an education in language divorced from its social and political contexts, would effectively preserve the narratives of class and gender within which these children find themselves (within which they write "their" story). For Steedman, the writing done in school gives both the professional and the student access to a history and attitudes and feelings shaping their particular moment. Writing is the way history, class, and culture become manifest in the classroom, in an environment that pretends to stand outside of time.

What Steedman suggests is not just a direction for research but a different version of professional responsibility, where as professionals who manage writing in institutional settings we might see that writing as material for an ongoing study of American life and culture. It is a telling irony that on my campus, where young working-class women write, scholars go to archives to "discover" working-class writing by women.

To learn to read her students' story, Steedman went to a record of children's voices from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. To learn to read her students' stories, Mina Shaughnessy went to her heart—to the remarkable sympathy which would allow her to understand the work of students distinctly different from her in culture and sensibility. Shaughnessy's text, in a sense, is the quintessential liberal reflex; it demonstrates that beneath the surface we are all the same person; it writes her students' lives, needs, desires into a master text that she commands. Basic writing, as an extension of that moment, preserves that project: fitting students into a version of who they are as writers that we tend to take for granted, that seems to stand beyond our powers of revision and inquiry, because it is an expression of our founding desires to find, know, and help (to construct, theorize, and preserve) basic writers.

4.

So what in the world have I done here. I find myself characterizing basic writing as a reiteration of the liberal project of the late 60s early 70s, where in the name of sympathy and empowerment, we have once again produced the "other" who is the incomplete version of ourselves, confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow, way back then in the 1970s.

We have constructed a course to teach and enact a rhetoric of exclusion and made it the center of a curriculum designed to hide or erase cultural difference, all the while carving out and preserving an "area" in English within which we can do our work. Goodness.

Now, at the end of my talk, it seems important to ask, "Do I believe what I have said?" If this has been an exercise in reading against the grain of the discourse that has produced basic writing (and, I said, my work as a professional), do I believe this negative, unyielding rereading?

The answer is yes and no, and sometimes yes and no at the same moment. Let me conclude, then, with a series of second thoughts (or "third thoughts" as the case may be).

If you look back over the issues of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (or at programs and courses), there is a record of good and careful work. I couldn't begin to turn my back on all that or to dismiss it as inconsequential. We can all think immediately of the students who have been helped, of college careers that have begun with a basic writing course. Good work has been done under the name of basic writing by both students and professionals. I cannot get

over, however, my sense of the arbitrariness, the surrealism, of the choices represented by the sorting of students in actual basic and mainstream classes. Looking at the faces, working with the writing—the division never makes anything but institutional sense. There are cases to prove that the idea is a good one. There are cases to prove that the idea is all wrong.

And there are problems of error—of controlling the features of a written text—that stand outside of any theorizing about basic writing as a form of resistance. It seems to me finally stupid to say that every nonstandard feature of a student's prose is a sign of opposition, can stand as "unsolicited oppositional discourse." If I think back to Quentin Peirce's essay, some of the "errors" could be read as oppositional, but not all of them and not all of them for the same reasons. At the same time, the profession has not been able to think beyond an either/or formulation—either academic discourse or the discourse of the community; either argument or narrative; either imitation or expression. Part of the failure, I think, is rooted in our inability to imagine protocols for revision, for example, that would negotiate rather than preserve the differing interests of students and the academy. We do not, for example, read "basic writing" the way we read Patricia Williams' prose, where the surprising texture of the prose stands as evidence of an attempt to negotiate the problems of language. I want to be clear about this. Williams is a skillful, well-educated writer. The unconventional nature of her prose can be spoken of as an achievement. She is trying to do something that can't be conventionally done. To say that our basic writers are less intentional, less skilled, is to say the obvious. But we would say the same thing of the "mainstream" writers whose prose approximates that of Shelby Steele. Their prose, too, is less skilled, less intentional than his. It is possible, it seems to me, to develop a theory of error that makes the contact between conventional and unconventional discourses the most interesting and productive moment for a writer or for a writing course. It is possible to use the Steele/Williams pair to argue that when we define Williams-like student writing as less developed or less finished than Steele-like student writing, we are letting metaphors of development or process hide value-laden assumptions about thought, form, the writer, and the social world.

Let me think back to Quentin Pierce. Do I believe in the course represented in *Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts*—do I believe it is a reasonable way to manage his work as a reader and writer? Yes. I believe deeply in that course. At my school, it changes every time it is taught—with different readings, better writing assignments.

But in principle, I believe in the course. Someone else will have to produce its critique. I can't. At the same time, I should add that a similar course is being taught at a variety of levels of our curriculum at the University of Pittsburgh. It is also the mainstream composition course and an introductory course for majors. There are differences that could be called differences of "level" (for the students more accustomed to reading and writing, we choose assigned readings differently; the course moves at a different pace; sentence level error is treated differently). It is, however, the same course. And the students who are well-prepared could easily be said to need extra time and guidance in learning to see the limits of the procedures, protocols, and formats they take for granted—the topic sentence, reading for gist, the authority of the conclusion. The point is that while I believe in the course, I am not sure I believe in its institutional position as a course that is necessarily prior to or lesser than the mainstream course. Do I believe Quentin is served by being called a basic writer and positioned in the curriculum in these terms. I'm not sure I do.

I don't think we can ignore the role of the introductory writing course in preparing students to negotiate the full range of expectations in the university (as it reproduces the expectations of the dominant culture), including linguistic convention, correction, etc. Does this mean a separate course? No. Does it mean we identify and sort students in useful, even thoughtful ways? No.

There was much talk at the Maryland conference about abolishing basic writing and folding its students into the mainstream curriculum, providing other forms of support (tutorials, additional time, a different form of final evaluation). Karen Greenberg and I argued this point at the open session. I am suspicious, as I said then, of the desire to preserve "basic writing" as a key term simply because it is the one we have learned to think with or because it has allowed us our jobs or professional identities. I think it would be useful, if only as an exercise, to imagine a way of talking that called the term "basic writing" into question (even, as an exercise, to treat it as suspect). Would I advocate the elimination of courses titled "basic writing" for all postsecondary curricula beginning next fall? No. I fear what would happen to the students who are protected, served in its name. I don't, in other words, trust the institution to take this as an intellectual exercise, a challenge to rethink old ways. I know that the institution would be equally quick to rely upon an established and corrupt discourse (of "boneheads," of "true college material," of "remediation"); it would allow the return of a way of speaking that was made suspect by the

hard work and diligence of those associated with basic writing. As Shaughnessy told us, the first thing we would need to do to change the curriculum would be to change the way the profession talked about the students who didn't fit. Will I begin to formally question the status of basic writing at my own institution? Yes. In a sense, this was already begun several years ago by graduate students in our department, and by my colleague, Joe Harris.

I suppose what concerns me most is the degree to which a provisional position has become fixed, naturalized. "Basic writing," the term, once served a strategic function. It was part of an attempt to change the way we talked about students and the curriculum. We have lost our sense of its strategic value. "Basic writing," it seems to me, can best name a contested area in the university community, a contact zone, a place of competing positions and interests. I don't want to stand in support of a course designed to make those differences disappear or to hide contestation or to enforce divisions between high and low. It seems to me that the introductory curriculum can profitably be a place where professionals and students think through their differences in productive ways. I'm not sure more talk about basic writing will make that happen.

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