

A Tale of Two Generations: How We Were Taught, and What We Learned (Or Not)

Victor Villanueva and Zarah C. Moeggenberg

*ABSTRACT: For this essay, the authors provide an “introspective retrospective.” A senior scholar of basic writing provides his views on the development of basic writing as one who began graduate school in rhetoric and composition two years after Mina Shaughnessy’s 1977 *Errors and Expectations*. That perspective carries us through the discussions that took place during the 1980s and early 1990s. Of note are the ways in which a discussion that began with providing greater access to students who would not otherwise have entered the university eventually became racialized, given perceptions of orality versus literacy, with basic writers having been deemed as oral learners and thereby cognitively insufficient. That perception is then complicated by a junior scholar who came to basic writing in 2012, when basic writing studies was no longer offered within the graduate program in which she entered. She provides her own introspective on how she has experienced the learning about and the teaching of basic writing. Together, the authors speculate on the political implications of the current status of basic writing.*

KEYWORDS: basic writing history; graduate education; Great Cognitive Divide; orality vs. literacy; LGBTQ; racism

Victor’s Story

I began graduate school in 1979, just two years after the first publica-

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tion of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. Basic writing was on the mind of the profession, for better or worse. In 1981, I entered the doctoral program. On the one hand composition studies was still making claims that writing is a process. Our basic texts were Janet Emig's *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* (1971) or James Britton, et al.'s *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (1975). So too was Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), or Pulitzer Prize winner Donald Murray's telling us to "Teach Writing as a Process, Not a Product" (1971). Others were providing empirical evidence of writing as process, drawing impressive flowcharts, coming up with new methodologies. The research tendencies began, in terms of the changing presence of writing research, with Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer's 1963 *Research in Written Composition*, but I came into graduate school with Cooper and Odell's 1979 collection, *Research on Composing*, and I became an assistant professor at about the same time as Beach and Bridwell's *New Directions in Composition Research*. In terms of "impressive flowcharts," there was the work of John R. Hayes and Linda Flower, "Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes," contained in Gregg and Steinberg's 1980 *Cognitive Processes in Writing*. And there were others.

That said, there were no graduate courses on basic writing because it seemed as though basic writing was an integral part of the conversation within composition studies, explicitly so when Maxine Hairston, drawing an analogy to Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Revolutions*, credited Mina Shaughnessy's work as the greatest influence in changing the paradigm of teaching writing from one focused on written products to writing-as-process. But it was Sondra Perl who drew the empirical connections between writing processes and basic writers, influenced, she writes in "Composing a Pleasurable Life," mainly by her own work as faculty in Lehman College and by her participation in meetings of CUNY teachers of writing, meetings led by Mina Shaughnessy. Perl completed her dissertation on basic writers' processes in 1978. She then published "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers" in 1979, establishing that the basic writer was no different from any other student writer.

But let me back up a bit. In a very real sense "process" began with Jerome Bruner's "cognitive process" theories, the degree to which development was tied to language, and the degree to which writing required greater cognitive abilities than the spoken, insofar as the written is an abstraction of the oral (Babin and Harrison, 272). Both Janet Emig and James Britton grounded their theory of the writing process in Bruner. But in so doing, they inadvertently began a process in composition studies that would work to

the detriment of basic writers. Though Bruner disagreed with Piaget (or at least saw limitations in Piaget's context-free, universal theory), composition folks got caught up with developmental schemes—Bruner to Vygotsky to Piaget (see, for example, DiPardo and Freeman). Mina Shaughnessy would poke fun at the developmental with “Diving In,” marking the development of writing teachers in their attitudes toward basic writers, where they begin by “Guarding the Tower,” moving to “Converting the Natives,” then, finally simply knowing that the work just takes “Diving In.” And as Shaughnessy notes in that same essay, terms like “remedial” and “developmental” reflect more about teacher and administrative attitudes than the qualities or abilities of the students. Yet the terms continue to this day— nearly a half century after Shaughnessy's article.

On a not-side-note: As composition studies' relation to rhetoric grew (particularly with the attention given to invention that took shape in the 1980s, most notably through scholars like Karen Burke LeFevre), Erik Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, originally published in 1963, gains a resurgence with a new paperback edition in 1982. The likely impetus for the paperback reprint was Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, which came on the scene in 1982, Ong having been influenced by Havelock's work. But Havelock's was a particularly ethnocentric view of history, claiming that new cognitive abilities arose with the creation of alphabetic literacy (with special attention to the copulative verb, syntactically). This gave rise to what will become The Great Cognitive Divide.

And it was the Great Cognitive Divide that began a problem in characterizing basic writers. When cognitive psychology met with a particular reading of classical rhetoric, the basic writer became the orally-dependent writer, on the wrong side of Great Cognitive Divide, under-developed. Mina Shaughnessy based her pedagogy on the assumption that students were locked in orality. But rather than the apolitical, essentialized view of language that is accorded to Shaughnessy (Min-Zhan Lu), Shaughnessy's politics were responses to the students' own perceptions, to the realities of the then underprepared teacher, to the realities of administrators and the realities of budget allocations. In the Introduction to *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy writes,

For the BW student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone. The spoken language, looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the language of hands and

Victor Villanueva and Zarah C. Moeggenberg

faces, of pitch and pauses, is generous and inviting. Next to this rich orchestration, writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws. (7)

Her awareness of orality versus literacy is not tied to cognitive abilities but to the pragmatics of institutional politics and political economies, that

there is the awareness of the teacher and administrator that remedial programs are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers, correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing. (9)

Although we can't know how familiar Shaughnessy might have been with the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL), published three years before *Errors*, her view does echo SRTOL, in which one can read that

Teachers should stress the difference between the spoken forms of American English and EAE [Edited American English] because a clear understanding will enable both teachers and students to focus their attention on essential items. EAE allows much less variety than the spoken forms, and departure from what are considered established norms is less tolerated. (14-15)

In short, for Shaughnessy, the students' orality was a simple fact, not tied to cognitive function nor the racism suggested in relegating New York City's students of color to the oral. But others, most notably Thomas J. Farrell, contended that inner-city students' dialects outside of the Standard English relegated them to the bottom of the heap, to suffer from lower IQs.

"IQ and Standard English" appeared in *College English* in 1983, the same year I began writing my dissertation. I was a product of the inner-city, Brooklyn, a dropout from one of the city's vocational-technical high schools, a speaker of non-Standard English (a dialect Ana Celia Zentella labeled "Puerto Rican Black English," a mix of African American Language and Spanglish). After years in the military, I arrived at a community college with a high school GED. According to Farrell, I was supposed to be suffering from a linguistically created cognitive dysfunction. But I was about to write a dissertation. So I was already clearly predisposed to argue the association between basic writing, culture, and cognitive development. Accordingly, I

aimed to challenge the oral-literate debate in my dissertation by comparing the discussions that take place among students of color in writing groups within a basic writing classroom and students of color who had placed into conventional first-year writing courses. What I discovered that was most important, I think, was that the overarching differences between the basic writers and the conventional first-year writing students, apart from matters of “correctness,” was understanding audience. Basic writing students had no conception of what readers needed to know, neither how much nor how little. And so the basic writing students would carry on about how to board a bus, for example, instead of advancing an argument. The difference was understanding the culture they had entered, assuming vast differences between their experiences and those of their teacher.

I enter the profession in 1985. I taught basic writing, headed a basic writing program, became an assistant professor, eventually headed another basic writing program, a bridge program (the English component of the Successful Transition and Academic Readiness—STAR—program), moved to another university as an associate professor, reinstated the basic writing program there, and created a graduate course in basic writing. Years passed; I found myself looking more broadly at racism, its connection to rhetoric (as a means of ideologically maintaining racism even when arguing against it), rhetoric’s connection to political economies, colonialism, and the like. It was the racism-writ-large that remained my obsession. Still, I continue to work with students and teachers on basic writing, lending advice when asked, working on developing curricula, trying to add to an understanding of the scholarship and research on basic writing. Among those students (who is also a teacher) was Zarah. She has taught some basic writing— with great success and with mixed results— but with no real formal training. And we discover in conversation (with follow-up) that basic writing returns to racialization, to matters of dialect rather than writing, as she’ll explain in what follows.

Zarah’s Story

I think what drew me to basic writing was the feeling of being an outsider. A lesbian in a Catholic college before going on to graduate work, there weren’t any representations of LGBTQ identity in my coursework. No one was “out.” Although I would not understand it until later, like so many basic writers, I was at some distance from the expectations of the institution in terms of identity, in terms of the conventions of academic writing, in terms of pursuing academia for my career.

When I began my MFA in the Midwest, I was the only openly out queer in the department— for two years— but I could begin to explore what it meant to be gay and even write about it. Challenging the for-the-page genre of poetry with spoken-word poetry, I seemed to make the other poets and writers uneasy in our weekly workshops. Sometimes, they were silent, or they returned my drafts without comment. My evangelical officemate also questioned the morality of my sexuality more than once. I found myself taking fewer risks in my poetry in terms of content during the first year-and-a-half of the program. I went to my office at 10:00 in the evening to compose and practice what I really wanted to do with my poetry. That was when I knew everyone would be out of the building. In a small, unused classroom that might have held ten students or so, next to a dusty chalkboard, surrounded by stiff chairs from the 1980s that were neatly tucked beneath the fake-wood tables— I could be loud. I would repeat long phrases to find the music through my body. I could feel my voice channel into my shoulders and knees. I would gasp for air and practice letting it go in different cadences, trying to find, out loud, each queer voice I had written into my poems. A woman from Chicago experiments with her gender expression: “She cut her hair to Mohawk because she says she likes her hair / to match her shoes. And she is through with dresses, and she finds / That her breasts bind best with ace bandage wrap— the inexpensive kind.” Another woman struggles with losing her wife and raising their daughter: “And I tell her you never left that you are in the grass and the air / even though sometimes I can’t feel you at all. And I am barefoot all the time now. / And so is she. And I’d ask you if all of this is alright.” But more than anything, I explored with my body out loud if my sexuality could survive, if the way I saw the world counted, if *I* was possible: “I wind my hands the way my dad didn’t. He said, / ‘You’re still beautiful,’ his head cocked to the side.”

I was an outsider. So were the students with me in the Fall of 2012, when I was assigned to my first basic writing course. A professor in our program had asked if I were interested in teaching basic writing. She told me that it would be challenging, but that she thought I would do a good job. Perhaps it was serendipitous that I met these students when I did, when I was on the cusp of saying “Fuck it” to my program and to the heteronormativity of academia, and when they were on the cusp of saying “Fuck it” to a higher education that didn’t seem to take them seriously as thinkers and writers.

Edward M. White and William DeGenaro call these “chance encounters” in “Basic Writing and Disciplinary Maturation: How Chance Conversations Continue to Shape the Field.” The pair look back at the last twenty years

of Basic Writing in order to celebrate “small moments,” collaborations, and mentoring. Their collaboration, they write, “was a chance conversation, a teacher and student” (11). DeGenaro complicates the narrative of growth in the Basic Writing subfield when he writes that even as we fortify and sustain ourselves as a discipline, “maybe one of the best things we can all do is be more attuned to the little, idiosyncratic moments, the serendipities that can prove productive” (18). How White and DeGenaro describe their relationship as mentor and mentee in Basic Writing through chance encounters is well reflected in my own experience.

The first basic writing course I taught was in the second year of my MFA. I was the first graduate student to teach it. The class was comprised of primarily working class students and students of color, as well as some “returning” students and veterans. I think the students in this class delighted in teaching me phrases like “CPT” (as in Color-People Time), how to use “low-key” before a very audible “secret,” and arguing over whether Chicago or Detroit was better. They were a lively group. And intimidating.

I had taught first-year writing before this course but knew little to nothing about Basic Writing. Many people told me to focus on grammar. My mentors told me to expect many of these students to fail. “It’s common,” they said to me. In that first semester teaching a course of basic writing in the Midwest, I wouldn’t say that I did a poor job, but I also wouldn’t say that I did a great job. Significant to what White and DeGenaro write, a chance encounter as a MFA student halfway through my program with the opportunity to teach Basic Writing completely changed my career path. The professor who said she thought I would do a good job sat me down and told me to ensure I assigned shorter essays and that I focused on grammar once a week. I knew nothing of code-meshing, code-switching, what SAE meant, or how class and race are implicated in assessment processes. However, I was fortunate that one professor who would later teach me composition theory and another mentor both shared a great deal of their materials. My composition theory professor gave me the corpus of her assignment sequence and explained how she structured her lessons. My other mentor counseled me during tough moments: “Some students are simply not ready to be here. That’s not your fault.” My Director of Composition observed me a few times to give me further advice on my day-to-day activities with students. Some of this advice included better using the gradual release of responsibility method, a kind of I do, We do, You do way of teaching— I still find this effective in any course. She’d repeat to me, “You need to spread this out more. Show them, practice it with them, and then let them do it in groups.” Mostly, she helped

me understand when I was rushing concepts, something I would continue to work on for the next five years. She'd say, "I think you're trying to do too much. Choose, at most, two activities instead of, say, three or four."

After that semester teaching basic writing for the first time, I wanted to better understand composition theory; more specifically, I wanted to understand Basic Writing. These desires weren't fully satisfied at first, but they were over time. As I was enrolled in our institution's MFA program and there was also an MA program, there were attractive courses I wanted to take that conflicted with required courses in my own program. For example, the composition theory course offered to MA pedagogy students was at the same time as my poetry techniques course for MA and MFA creative writing students. I was fortunate that the young assistant professor teaching the composition theory course I mentioned earlier would meet with me in her office for an hour or two each week. I was frustrated by the readings in Villanueva and Arola's *CrossTalk in Comp Theory* and even cried when my professor first discussed the readings with me in her office. I struggled with literacy, with simply extracting the main points of these texts. Reading texts like Ede and Lunsford's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked" and Flower and Hayes' "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing" were a foreign language to me. I read sentences over and over, trying desperately to make sense of them. There were even words I could not pronounce. Others would knot in my mouth. Over time I got better at unpacking the arguments within these canonical articles. And while I can't say I learned much about composition that semester, I did learn how to read. By the end of the year I could well understand the essays and had a firm grasp on what informed composition studies at large. But it was critical that my professor set aside that time to unpack the articles with me, and that she helped me trace, page by page, the arguments.

Encouraged by one of my basic writing mentors at the time, I applied for and was awarded a summer research grant before the third and last year of my MFA program. The grant allowed me to explore what it meant to queer a writing prompt. I had become increasingly interested in what queer identity could mean in the classroom beyond representation within course texts, something Stacey Waite has recently written about in *Teaching Queer*, a critical text that moves queer composition toward queer-as-method within our field. During this short grant period, I read about what it meant to be an out LGBTQ teacher in Kevin Jennings's *One Teacher in 10*. I read Heidi A. McKee's "'Always a Shadow of Hope': Heteronormative Binaries in an Online Discussion of Sexuality and Sexual Orientation," which helps us understand

that “even within discussions centered on binaries, greater understanding of and tolerance for (and even acceptance of) differences can occur” (334). I read Alexander and Wallace’s “The Queer Turn in Composition Studies,” who write that “queer perspectives and experiences can serve a critical role in multicultural approaches to composition that seek to make teachers and students mindful about how different cultural backgrounds and allegiances shape different literacy practices” (303). In reading these texts and more by Spurlin, Alexander and Wallace, and Alexander and Rhodes, I began to understand what a pivotal moment I was in as I was entering this field. Ultimately, this all led me to consider in my creative writing pedagogy how I could get students to embody LGBTQ identity in their writing assignments, rather than simply read texts that had LGBTQ characters. Beyond that summer of 2013 on the small research grant that paid my bills, I knew I had found my niche, and that it might be possible to connect some of the things I was reading in queer composition to Basic Writing. But I knew it meant getting another terminal degree.

The next academic year I found myself accepted to several doctoral programs: two in creative writing, one in developmental education, and three in composition. I quickly ruled out creative writing and visited the other four programs. I was looking for three features: a basic writing course to teach, a mentor who did queer theory, a mentor who did Basic Writing. I found that each of the programs I looked at tended to have only one of these components. They varied with their monetary offers, teaching opportunities, GA-ships in writing program administration, faculty specialties, and research opportunities.

On the visit to the first school, in the Southwest, I found myself in an education program that specializes in developmental writing. While overwhelmed by the passion their graduate students had for “developmental” learners and while the program actually offered nearly everything I could want—both financially and support-wise—it lacked a rhetoric program that would help situate me theoretically. I would be so immersed in qualitative and quantitative methodologies, that I feared I would lose sight of what had really moved me to come to Basic Writing in the first place—the *how* of queering composition to make room for students otherwise excluded by the university. I knew, even without much exposure to scholarship, that if I were going to invest four to five years of my life getting a PhD, I had to situate myself in the history of our field, in a program foregrounded in rhetorical theory. And, I needed a program that was going to give real attention to

Basic Writing— its history, its rich possibilities, and its culture. I knew that chance encounters there would be slim.

The second and third schools— both rhet/comp programs— also didn't seem to have the right fit. The one in the Pacific Northwest— which I ended up choosing— didn't seem to offer me a lot of support at first. Victor was unavailable that day to meet; Wendy Olson was at a distant campus; and Basic Writing seemed to have disappeared from the program. The other program in the Midwest would mean I would have to travel to teach and research Basic Writing and there was no queer theorist for me to work with, nor someone who really specialized in Basic Writing anymore.

On the visit to the fourth school, I was exhausted and dissatisfied with my visits to all of the schools to which I had received acceptance. Nothing seemed to be the right fit for me. Queer theory and basic writing are hard to combine, I realized. A full professor was the last person I was going to see before meeting up with my mother for a late lunch. Sitting in an old armchair in an office full of neatly organized clutter and plants, this professor smiled as I melted into the other armchair nearer the door. As I let out a long breath, she asked me, “So, what do you think?”

“I'm not sure,” I replied, feeling oddly comfortable and relaxed.

“What are your options?” she asked, tilting her head.

I told them to her at length, in great detail, and she listened intently.

She sighed, but didn't break eye contact. “You must go to Victor in Washington. You have to. It's a must.”

I laughed. “Really?”

She nodded.

“He wasn't there when I visited.”

“They'd kill me if they knew I was saying this,” she nodded at the door and continued, bringing her voice to a whisper, “but you have to go work with *him*.”

And so I did.

My chance encounter with the professor at the fourth school is likely *the* reason why I am still invested in Basic Writing. As White and DeGenaro write, small moments matter a great deal (16). This was a moment of mentoring that had nothing to do with institutional affiliation. It had everything to do with recognizing how to really support a young scholar within the larger work of supporting our subfield.

My training in composition at large has been good in my PhD. My Director of Composition at Washington State University stressed theory as

part of her training of graduate students in ways my previous program had not. Much of what I read during my MFA was covered during my PhD in ways that helped me to understand and develop my pedagogical approach more fully. I recognized the ways in which expressivist theory influenced my previous institution and how process theory and classical rhetoric influenced this one. The DoC at WSU, like my last, also fully supported my use of queer texts on transgender issues in my composition classroom. She helped me ground this work in current scholarship on queer composition and multimodality, as well as in previous scholarship in process pedagogy. At the beginning, she talked through with me how to integrate queer texts and make them integral to students' rhetorical analyses and synthesis papers. I learned to use these texts more unapologetically and without preface. I think some of this came from our casual conversations in the hallway about them, but those conversations were critical to me becoming more confident as a teacher. Later, these conversations helped me to consider how I might still integrate queer texts and help students build toward portfolio requirements while still composing in queer ways. For example, the Digital Scholarship Workspace assignment I discuss in my chapter in Laura Gray-Rosendale's *Getting Personal* is an assignment that asks students to build a website and unpack some of their research in a nonlinear structure. The assignment is largely informed by J. Jack Halberstam's notion of *play* and Alexander and Rhodes's discussion of queer rhetoric and its interruption of the normal in their "Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive." This move from discussing queer texts in my classroom to engaging students in queer composing was something I needed to anchor myself as a queer compositionist. This simple support from my DoC, mostly short conversations and quick check-ins, was instrumental to grounding queer theory in my pedagogy.

My mentoring in Basic Writing— and, really, graduate education in it— began when I met Victor midway into the first semester of my doctoral program. I knew what Victor looked like from pictures on our university website. In The Writing Program half-way across campus, rather than in the English Department building, he was illusive to me. I spent considerable amounts of time near his office for a couple of classes, but there always seemed to be somebody sitting and talking to him. I would write an email to him, rewrite it, and then delete it. I was terribly excited at the possibility of working through Basic Writing scholarship with him, but I felt like a total imposter.

One morning, I came out of a queer theory class to head to another. As I rounded the corner, I observed a man staring up at the numbers above the elevator, watching them move from right to left. I watched his eyes trace each number as it lit up a dull yellow. He was pacing slowly with his hands in his pockets. I hesitated about whether I should just head to my other class or take this moment where Victor wasn't in his office advising one of his graduate students or junior faculty. I found my hand raising by itself and heard my voice croak, "Hi, I'm Zarah. We haven't met yet."

He seemed a bit taken aback, but he smiled and shook my hand. "Ah, yes. Send me an email. Let's chat."

And that was when my mentoring in Basic Writing began.

There isn't a graduate course here at WSU that teaches Basic Writing theory or pedagogy. I think there is some version of it that morphed into something else— in fact, I know there is— but the truth is there isn't anything much at all now. During coursework, I took Composition Theory 1 and 2. The second course was more useful for understanding the history of composition, the different eras and movements, how composition latched itself to rhetoric, its relationship to literature, etc.. However, it didn't help me understand Basic Writing's position in the academy. This was where Victor filled in.

By the time Victor and I started working together he was much more invested in political economy and racism than he was in Basic Writing, although the subfield was what his career has been built from. For him, working with me one-on-one may have been a comfortable return. For me, it was a new fire.

We met weekly for over a year— we still do— and during that time we worked through Shaughnessy, Gray-Rosendale, Villanueva, Bartholomae, Bartholomae and Petrosky, and many others. But, really, we began with *Bootstraps*. He said to me one day, "If you really want to understand Basic Writing, if you really want to understand how I come to it, you have to read it." It was evident why this was important for us to move forward, but the following lines seem to sum up the ways in which mentoring/study of Basic Writing come together for me. Undoubtedly, they do for Victor:

In short, basic writers can be encouraged to develop and to trust their oral and their literate ways while continuing to communicate the struggles entailed in being other-cultural and outside the middle class. . . . (Villanueva 115)

A Tale of Two Generations

Like Victor reflects in *Bootstraps*, I could identify well with many of the students who have been placed into my basic writing courses. The struggle with being “other-cultural” and from “outside the middle class” made it challenging to trust my own voice as powerful.

Victor struggles with the doctoral dissertation: not trusting in his Latino-literate, ostensibly oral ways, trying to maintain the voice of distance, of objectivity, of the researcher, without race, without a person. He believes he can. (Villanueva 115)

For me, where Victor and I are similar, him an academic of color, me a queer academic and woman, is not just to do with the ways in which we are othered within and outside of our field, but in how we do rhetoric. Victor found that oral discourse should be encouraged in Basic Writing pedagogy, encouraged to be *trusted*; yet it took him a long time to realize this for his own ways with rhetoric. Similarly, it took me a long time to trust that my body may be critical to my own ways with rhetoric, especially while I pursued my MFA. And now, as I theorize a queer composition, I struggle with how embodied practices and the body may become more meaningful for basic writing students as they continue to navigate the structures and movement of power within and outside of language.

Three years of one-on-one mentoring and my own independent study are how I came to understand Basic Writing.

And that’s a problem.

My year-long learning of Basic Writing theory and scholarship ran the stretch of my second year of coursework, the second semester of which I taught basic writing for the first (and last) time at Washington State. In short, it came too late again. In fact, it felt as though the entire time I was playing catch up. By the time I taught the course there I certainly understood how the Cognitive Divide informed some of the content I had been encouraged to teach in the Midwest. And while the foundation Victor and I were laying was necessary, even essential, it would have been wonderful, for example, to have read Kati Ahern’s notions of “invisible writing,” what Christopher Minnix writes of the literacy narrative as a way to open up public writing curricula in basic writing (32), or Kendra N. Bryant’s work on seeing “computer technologies as tools for embodied community building” (67). In other words, I was still stuck in literature that wasn’t discussing yet the possibility of multimedia and multimodal composing in basic writing pedagogy. I wasn’t giving my students assignments that may have helped

them excel and engage rhetorical strategies with which they take pride. Minnix's and Bryant's insights would have completely changed my approach to Introduction to Composition that year. I think of one student in particular, upper body slumped over his desk when I would walk in, arm extended, his thumb scrolling bottom to top on his smartphone. I think of how I could have engaged digital spaces and literacies so much more in that room.

My experience feeling inexperienced is well-reflected in the BW workshop at CCCC's in Portland in 2017: there we discussed moving toward multimodality and multimedia, a conversation our field has been having for twenty-some years. Because we do not have graduate coursework or substantial mentoring in Basic Writing at either the MA or PhD levels, because basic writing is so often taught by under-supervised, inexperienced, and under-supported graduate students and adjuncts, and because English and writing programs provide little educational support and professional development with which to help ourselves and even other disciplines in our institutions to understand the distinct needs of Basic Writing students, "chance encounters" are nearly impossible. As the only graduate student teaching Basic Writing, without chance encounters with other Basic Writing instructors, without any community to bounce ideas or concerns off of, I struggled with my teaching. And I failed to build a community in my classroom. I laugh out loud now, finding myself nodding when Bryant remarks in her essay that an increasing online participation contributes to the "silent spaces" we enter. She describes these spaces as "where students are not discussing the latest reading, reviewing last night's homework, or even gossiping about the latest reality television program, but are sitting there, 'alone'—distracted and reaching for a sense of belonging via texts, tweets, selfies and Facebook updates" (55). When I taught Basic Writing during my PhD, I repeatedly failed to interrupt that silence, even after students' cell phones were put away. I was underprepared to build the embodied writing classroom Bryant says is crucial to supporting basic writing students.

We need to rely less on chance encounters and put more energy into constructed ones. While my mentoring with Victor may have been sparked by a couple of chance encounters, it sustained itself by proactively making more encounters possible and accessible in spaces that do not necessarily sustain conversations pertaining to basic writing politics and pedagogies.

During my last year of my PhD, our interim Assistant Director of Composition worked hard to form a basic writing subcommittee to not only support the few of us who currently taught or had taught it, but to also draft goals and outcomes—because there hadn't been any for years. At our last

A Tale of Two Generations

basic writing subcommittee meeting before the 2017 holiday break, I ask the other PhD student in our small group what she will teach the next semester.

A 400-level technical and professional writing course. Her favorite, I know.

I ask whether she thinks teaching Introduction to College Composition had steered interests for her PhD.

She says something like, “I love to study public writing, and I just don’t see how that could fit.”

I tell her I had just read Christopher Minnix’s “Basic Writers in Composition’s Public Turn,” that he is interested in literacy narratives, like her, too.

I want more moments like these. Yet I am sure she won’t teach the course again here.

At the basic writing workshop at the 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication, we discussed the real need for graduate coursework in basic writing. This has been a need for decades. I shouldn’t have had to work so hard to understand basic writing as a graduate student—through one-on-one meetings and independent study— but this appears to be the current nature of the field. When we better prioritize graduate education in basic writing, we are more prepared to serve and empower students who may otherwise continue to be excluded within higher education.

The changes we see taking place are too strikingly commensurate with changing needs within the current hegemony. The changes can be turned into counter-hegemonic advantage, however. Changing demographics make for classrooms filled with children of color, those whose common sense likely differs from the white middle class. The current changes in the dominant’s needs also make for a greater entry into the universities of those who have been traditionally excluded...The traditionally excluded might better see the contradictions in the current hegemony. (Villanueva 137)

As our field looks forward, I believe educating graduate students on basic writing is a crucial step in order to continue to support composition programs that are increasingly invested in multimodality, multimedia, technologies, and technical writing. Graduate coursework, especially a course dedicated to basic writing in our graduate programs, is critical to developing any “counter-hegemonic advantage” as we see, across the nation, increases in enrollment for students “traditionally excluded.” As Victor writes that traditionally marginalized students have likely very different common

sense within the current hegemony, coursework dedicated to basic writing supports graduate students' understanding of the roles they might play in supporting the counter-hegemonic rhetorical strategies of marginalized students. Such coursework may include the following: what basic writing is; the purpose of basic writing across various types of institutions; its historical influence on composition as a field, on state legislation, and on national political trends in education; and, its current direction and conversations.

As I worked through my dissertation, I kept waiting for basic writing to surface as a major component of a chapter. In my dissertation, I looked at how dominant ideologies like racism, sexism, and heterosexism depend upon reproducing norms through the submission of our corporeal bodies. I theorized what I call *repronormativity* and I explored how norms are reproduced to maintain a white, male, cisgender, linear, and written discourse. While some scholars have established *repronormativity* as referring to the privileging of sexual acts that lead to reproduction (Edelman 13, 21; Downing 1142; Franke 183, 185; Weissman 279-280), I am interested in how *repronormativity* extends beyond the sexual into the everyday dominant ideologies that structure our lives. It was the repetition in the activities in Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, the stress on grammar in Shaughnessy, and the rhetoric of normal within basic writing studies that led me to wonder what the relationship was between repetitive written discourse, ideology, and this notion of *repronormativity* I had read about in queer theory. Could queer theory and its contentions with heteronormativity, sexism, and binaries come to mean more in composition studies, especially with its orientation toward correctness, that "highly measurable feature of acceptable writing" (Shaughnessy 9)? However, when I got into my last chapter of the dissertation, having fully intended to reach a discussion of basic writing as it pertains to queer composition and the body, I realized basic writing wouldn't become a part of my dissertation explicitly. It simply wasn't what my theory had led me to unpack. It wasn't that the one-on-one meetings with Victor weren't helpful over the three years we met weekly. The relationships between basic writing and normativity in queer theory were issues I began to think about while we were reading some of the first texts ever published in basic writing scholarship. However, that queer theory was a major component of our meetings as well, a full 6 months dedicated to it, helped us see both basic writing and queer theory through each other's eyes. In completing my graduate work, I am not disappointed in my education. Small conversations, one-on-ones with Victor, a few mistakes, and a lot of failure— this education built me into a queer scholar.

And, although not explicit, basic writing is written all over my dissertation. I know that making counter-hegemonic strategies more visible to others is critical, even to basic writing, and this is what I did. Victor writes that “The traditionally excluded might better see the contradictions in the current hegemony” (137). I believe that when we foster environments for graduate students to synthesize the scholarship they are already vested in with basic writing, we set up rich possibilities for our field.

Victor, A Post-Script

I am taken by the irony that Zarah was drawn to basic writing because of her emerging orality, that “the problem” of orality when I was a graduate student became the very thing that Zarah was asking students to embrace. But I’m most taken by what she sees as the possibility of basic writing’s demise, at least as what she calls a “subfield,” that a legitimate subject for graduate programs seems forgotten. So many decades later, the solution to teaching basic writing remains the teaching of prescriptive grammar, even as we know that teaching grammar is not teaching writing, though I’m not one of Martha Kolln’s alchemists. I see too many graduate students in English who do not know the conventions, and lacking the conventions, they do lack a certain rhetorical power.

So I want to make a case that was made by Patrick Hartwell (and many others) long ago: better writers enjoy greater metalinguistic awareness. But I think I would ask that we engage in a greater awareness of the ideological implications that rhetoric can carry, that we try to engage (and have students engage) in a more critical, politicized metalinguistic awareness. I bring this up because I seem to be watching the wheel being reinvented. As Keith Gilyard so clearly points out in his critique of translanguaging, the current discussions of translanguaging risk taking us back to the days that Mina Shaughnessy had to contend with, when language was abstracted, removed from the real political contexts at play, the real power differentials. I do understand the point of translanguaging, that we are all of us given to different languages and different ways with language. That is, of course, true—from cultural differences to idiolects. But what do we do with that in the classroom, especially the basic writing classroom? We walk into the classroom and try to figure out how to hold on to our politics, the politics before us, without hurting our students. And while I understand the distinctions Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y’Shanda Young-River, and Kim Brian Lovejoy make in distinguishing

code-meshing from code-switching— all of it requires doing what we can to have students be aware of language-as-language, language-as-language in real political contexts, with clearly understood power dynamics. While we continue to speak of language in abstract terms, our students are keenly aware of the power. So let's acknowledge it. The terms are there, have been for a while: code, register, dialect, language— and consciousness, especially as a Portuguese term, though the term has fallen out of our discourse on basic writing: *conscientização*. I like to joke that I could “hear” Mina Shaughnessy speaking in a New York working class dialect: “This here is your basic writing.” We can come up with new terms: “mesh,” “trans,” and the like. But let's stick to, in that old New York dialect, your basic writing: the conscious use of language, conscious of powers always at play.

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A Tale of Two Generations

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