

# Reflecting on the Liberal Reflex: Rhetoric and the Politics of Acknowledgement in Basic Writing

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*ABSTRACT:* In the 1990s, leading rhetoric and composition scholars criticized basic writing programs for their “liberalism.” Basic writing had its defenders, however, and the ensuing debate exposed deep rifts in the field. This article argues that neither side in this formative debate nor the more recent alternative models of teaching basic writing manage to escape liberal hegemony. By combining political theory with rhetoric/composition scholarship, and relying on examples from recent changes to the basic writing program at Roosevelt University, I propose an approach to basic writing that combines rhetorical pedagogy with a new politics of acknowledgement in order to simultaneously concede and resist the university’s inevitable liberalism.

*KEY WORDS:* basic writing; liberalism; rhetoric; social justice

*“[Any] mode of government . . . both enables and constrains the possibilities for political action” (Cruikshank 2).*

Basic writing’s recent history tells a story of the long-running tension between the liberal tradition of equal treatment and democratic justice. This tension came to a head in the 1990s, and basic writing programs found themselves under attack from outsiders like journalists and legislators but also from compositionists within the field (Otte and Williams Mlynarczyk 11). Up to this point, many basic writing programs were influenced to some degree by Mina Shaughnessy’s influential work in 1977’s *Errors and Expectations*, in which Shaughnessy encouraged teachers to assume basic writers’ potential for success and to teach accordingly—a change heralded as a victory for pedagogical justice. Administratively, however, basic writing continued to operate nationally on a testing and tracking model, which the 1990s critics said prevented pedagogical change from truly making just the basic writing enterprise. Testing and tracking, from this perspective, represented a liberal system of exclusion and/or assimilation, regardless of pedagogical approach.

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Unable to reconcile such a fundamental tension, George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk tell us, basic writing then splintered into a mostly disconnected collection of programs occupied primarily with their own modest goals and local strategies, which they call the “generational shift” (12).

Critics of basic writing’s liberalism echoed a growing dissatisfaction with liberalism in political theory. Scholars in both fields agreed, in principle, that while liberalism’s supporters equate with justice its commitment to the equal treatment of all people, clear-eyed accounts tell us something different: that for many liberalism offers only the injustice of assimilation or exclusion. Some took this opportunity to call for the “abolition” of basic writing, while others vehemently defended it, insisting instead that to abolish basic writing would be dangerously liberal. Each side in this debate accused the other side of relying on liberal logic and practice, while claiming for itself the achievement of justice.

Relying on contemporary political theory, I will argue, however, that both sides in this conversation work within the liberal paradigm. As Patricia Mann notes of liberalism: “It required several hundred years for liberal economic and political structures to develop . . . and our notions of agency remain deeply embedded in their practices . . .” (qtd. in Grego and Thompson “Repositioning” 82). Mann’s description resonates with David Bartholomae’s characterization of liberalism as a *reflex*, paraphrased in my title. Liberalism is so entrenched, that is, it has become reflexive. We re-enact it in our opinions, arguments, and decisions, sometimes even without intending to. Since we enact liberalism reflexively, it would be more productive to think about the opportunities it creates in basic writing, as in my epigraph, rather than identifying the (inevitable) liberalism of our institutions as the rationale for doing away with them or defending them, as we saw in the 1990s crisis. Further, if basic writing sits at a crossroads in need of a new political vision, as Mike Rose has recently claimed, any such effort must come to terms with the 90s crisis and what has happened since.

This paper steps toward that goal in two ways. First, I create room for a renewed politics of basic writing with a political theory-driven critique of the accepted crisis narrative. Second, I describe the formation of a new basic writing program at Roosevelt University, known in Chicago and nationally for its social justice mission and history of welcoming into higher education those historically excluded from it. In the fall of 2009, when I was hired as part of a four-person composition faculty team, we were charged with the reconstruction of the basic writing program, among other curricular and administrative projects. When we began our work, we turned to the basic

writing literature for the most recent programmatic and pedagogical innovations, and we found a wealth of practices and strategies, many of which we adopted for a pilot program in 2011-2012 that matched a rhetorical pedagogy with a Stretch-style program.<sup>1</sup> Our work drew on basic writing research for both a program proposal and a pilot curriculum, which I describe in detail. Frankly, the program is too new to deem either a success or a failure. Yet, in writing about these experiences, I look back through the lens of political theory because I believe that this lens can help to interpret the work we did and the political possibilities it indicates. By moving between basic writing scholarship, political theory, and an account of our work at Roosevelt, I propose that a rhetorical teaching practice based on Patchen Markell's *politics of acknowledgement* can help us to politically re-imagine basic writing pedagogy, while also promising a new way to think about the administration of basic writing within our inevitably liberal colleges and universities.

## **ON LIBERALISM**

Even though the term “liberal” popularly connotes progressiveness in American political culture, liberal political philosophy represents the opposite of what many people would think of as progressive. Hardly radical, it provides the bedrock of the American political landscape, the enduring *doxa* of our political life. As we all know, one of the earliest and most familiar liberal principles is the separation of church and state. In his formative account of religious toleration, John Locke separates the private sphere, a metaphorical space symbolized by one's home in which people conduct the vast majority of their lives as they see fit, from the public sphere, the narrow space left for matters to be governmentally adjudicated. Over time, American courts and our legislative bodies have solidified our reliance on neutral procedures to determine what belongs to each sphere and the management of the public. By “neutral procedures,” I mean the state's governance of public life according to laws and values that stand independent of any group's particular view of the world, religious or otherwise. Who you are and what you believe, in traditional liberalism, are not supposed to matter when it comes to the rule of law, which derives its neutrality from the fact that its most important work occurs behind a “veil of ignorance.” John Rawls, in his contemporary re-articulation of procedural liberalism, devises this metaphor to emphasize the irrelevance of any one person's cultural affiliations regarding the proper operation of liberalism. Only “what” you are, in the thinnest sense, matters: a citizen of the liberal state (or not). Famously capturing the individualist

spirit of American liberalism, Thomas Jefferson colloquially noted, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods or no God; it neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” The history of American liberalism represents the evolution of a once-controversial method for governing ideologically diverse populations into a contemporary article of common sense: that the equal treatment of every *one* means justice for *all*.

While these foundational liberal principles have become so accepted in everyday discourses as to be nearly invisible, and self-evident when visible, they have nonetheless drawn a good deal of critique in political philosophy. Though the particular critiques of liberalism would not crescendo until the 1980s and 1990s, Chaim Perelman in 1967’s *Justice* questions liberalism on grounds that anticipate arguments in both political philosophy and basic writing in the 1990s. Opposing Rawls by name, Perelman claims that the equal treatment of “non-identical beings,” the beating heart of liberalism, is fundamentally unjust (21-22). In his words, “equity is sometimes opposed to the uniform and mechanical application of a given rule . . .” (26). By inserting our non-identical natures into the liberal political calculus, Perelman calls into question what I described above as the very bedrock of American politics, the justice of equal treatment. Furthermore, he proceeds to re-introduce practical reason into the philosophical pursuit of equality, fairness, and justice, and in so doing, also raises the concerns of deliberative rhetorics, the importance of what we do and say in the presence of others amidst the particulars of everyday life. Thus, Perelman anticipated an important shift in political theory in which political philosophers would begin to think about the particulars of individual identity and their sources in cultural affiliations.

In the 1980s and ‘90s, we find prominent political philosophers, including Stanley Hauerwas, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Iris Marion Young, intensifying the criticism of liberalism along the same lines. This group, among others, cast doubt on value-neutral procedures, in principle and in practice. Once this ground becomes unsteady, liberalism begins to look less like a fair system that favors no single group over any other, and more like a subtle force reflective of one dominant group. In “The Politics of Recognition,” Taylor insists that because identity is dialogically formed, individuals, qua individuals who are simultaneously members of identifiable social groups,<sup>2</sup> can “suffer real damage” at the hands of this subtle force—damage that he dubs “misrecognition” (25). In this account, even as most people describe, think of, and resort to liberalism for its neutral fairness, in practice it operationalizes a pressure that is at once assimilatory,

regulatory, and disciplinary. Taylor concludes that liberal institutions must account for difference in substantive ways, an approach he calls the “politics of recognition.”

As an example of the knot in which liberalism ties minority groups, Kwame Appiah points, in the *Ethics of Identity*, to Canada’s universal motorcycle helmet law. When this law was passed, Canadian Sikhs, who wear *pagri* (turbans), protested that requiring helmet use meant something different for them than for others. That is, any Sikh who wanted to ride a motorcycle, a right of all properly licensed Canadians, would have to make a difficult religious choice, one that amounted to either assimilation or self-exclusion. Furthermore, not all Canadian motorcyclists were forced to make the same choice. Sikhs argued that such a law disproportionately affected them, and further that the law amounted to their exclusion from equal citizenship (Appiah 94-95, 160). The point here is that laws, regardless of universalizing logic or language, impact people of different cultures differently. Canada eventually began to make exceptions in such cases, referred to as “reasonable accommodations”—an example of Taylor’s politics of recognition in action. Canadians recognized Sikhs’ freedom as being disproportionately impeded upon by the helmet law, and they did something about it. This accommodation required recognizing that equality does not necessarily equal fairness, the essence of Perelman’s position. This argument has come to be known as the communitarian critique (“communitarian” because it recovers the identity/community connection so long ignored by liberalism), and it grew into an entire subfield of liberal political philosophy, including work such as James Tully’s *Strange Multiplicity* and Will Kymlicka’s *Multicultural Citizenship*. Clearly, liberal philosophers have struggled over the tension between liberal individualism and cultural affiliation; this struggle, in very similar form, sparked the basic writing crisis.

## **BASIC WRITING’S LIBERAL CRISIS**

Within a few years of each other, both David Bartholomae and Sharon Crowley identified the problem of basic writing as its fundamentally liberal nature. Bartholomae writes that basic writing marginalizes students by placing them according to their “skill” and only allowing them to advance in accordance with their ability to demonstrate increased merit. As a communitarian might argue that a helmet law excludes or assimilates a Sikh motorcyclist, Bartholomae worries that universal composition requirements

exclude and/or assimilate an increasingly diverse student population within a narrow and supposedly neutral account of what constitutes good writing, hence his claim that basic writing is produced by the “grand narrative of . . . liberal reform” (18). Bartholomae eventually identifies what he calls the “liberal reflex”: programs that implicitly insist, “that beneath the surface we are all the same person . . .” (18). He elaborates:

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. . . . (18)

Bartholomae echoes the communitarian critique: that one-size-fits-all writing instruction reflects the hegemonic group and the remedial mechanism unjustly assimilates, disciplines, and regulates everyone else. It might be more just, he concludes, since basic writing is so thoroughly liberal, to do away with it altogether.

In her more radical assessment, Sharon Crowley agrees with Bartholomae’s characterization but goes one step further, arguing that not just basic writing but the first-year writing requirement altogether must be abolished (241). Crowley especially attacks writing programs’ mobilization of “the language of democracy and freedom” insofar as they “subject students to a battery of standardized tests, which, in the name of individualization, simply placed them on one or another predefined rung of the educational ladder” (186). Further, Crowley’s following zinger resonates with the account of liberalism as a my-way-or-the-highway system that parades as neutral procedure: “It takes considerable rhetorical chutzpah to tout a universal requirement as a liberatory practice” (186). To put it in communitarian terms, this would be like saying that forcing a Sikh to remove his turban for a helmet makes him freer. Crowley’s comment here resonates with Taylor’s characterization of liberalism, that it is equipped only to advocate for the purported universal good, which really only benefits the historically dominant group. Basic writing, that is, has continually mistaken its *equal* procedures, like the universal requirement and placement testing, for *fair* procedures and, based on

that mistake, forces thousands of increasingly diverse students to assimilate to normative language standards or be relegated to a kind of purgatory in higher education. Social justice for Crowley and Bartholomae demands the de-liberalization of basic writing or its abolition.

Predictably, many practitioners of basic writing resisted these attacks, especially defending it as substantively empowering and hence equating it with social justice rather than liberalism. In particular, Karen Greenberg and Ed White stand out among basic writing's defenders in the 1990s. Greenberg argues that tracking enables student success in higher education, rather than marginalizing or assimilating them. She scoffs at the accusation of oppression, insisting rather that basic writing elevates the "right to succeed" over the "right to fail" (70). To abolish basic writing would secure students only the "right to fail," she says, suggesting that the absence of basic writing amounts to the real danger. Struggling writers would have no recourse, no aid; they would be left to sink or swim, like marginalized citizens in a free market economy without socioeconomic safety nets. Greenberg echoes both the communitarian rejection of procedural "justice" and the hope for something more substantive, in the sense that her "right to succeed" rationale interprets tracking as a form of recognition. Basic writing, that is, recognizes the need for extra instruction and provides it. As such, she takes the abolition position and inverts it. Ed White makes a similar argument in his defense of basic writing. Like Greenberg, he uses the same binary of the critics (justice versus liberal oppression). And like Greenberg, White relies on "rights rhetoric" to achieve the inversion, stating that, "American education is subject to two contrasting underlying motifs: egalitarianism, the argument that everyone should have opportunities for success, and elitism, the restriction of opportunities to the most 'deserving'—which often means to those from a relatively privileged home" (75). For White, the abolition argument signifies a rising elitism, a willingness to abandon the university's new diversity and to deny minority students all the privilege higher education can bring. The critique *and* the defense of basic writing work in the same rhetorical mode; they uncover the buried liberalism of the others' position. And here's the kicker: from where I'm looking, both sides are right.

First-year composition (and basic writing by extension) has always been liberal; it would perhaps be absurd to expect it to be anything else. In fact, it seems ironic that while liberal-style procedures have always been the university's response to recurrent literacy "crises" over the last one hundred plus years, it was liberalism itself that caused the crisis about which I write. Many histories of composition have told the much-chronicled story

of Harvard's composition course, the response made by late 19th Century faculty to what they saw as inadequate writing by unprepared students (Russell 7; Crowley 4). Built into the very fiber of composition, and its *raison d'être*, is the notion of remedial normalization as crisis response. Said one student, "In an endeavor (and a not very successful one) to conform to certain rules, I have lost all originality,—everything has a sort of labored rehashing, which makes whatever I have to say, dull and uninteresting" (qtd. in Crowley 75). Though this sentiment might have been expressed by a student in a basic writing class in the years 2007, 1993, or 1979, it was in fact expressed by a Harvard student in 1901. Composition courses have been assimilating students for a very long time indeed. The explosion of diversity in higher education did not create a new situation so much as make an old situation more visible and less comfortable. As critics noted, basic writing exerts a liberal pressure on the minority group to conform to normative language standards, but no one has yet observed that the abolition of this requirement amounts to a rough version of liberalism too, in the sense that one-size-fits-all writing instruction invokes the commonsense equivalence of equal treatment with justice.

Neither side in the 90s debate escapes the liberal paradigm; the abolition option activates one-size-fits-all liberalism, while remediation activates assimilatory mechanisms. As long as scholars and practitioners share the assumption that social justice requires the absence of liberalism, basic writing will remain in a political holding pattern, whether or not the field has seen a generational shift. At this point, I believe ceding liberalism's reflexiveness affords the greatest potential for political change. To ground these issues, I turn to the circumstances at Roosevelt University, an urban university with a social justice mission and a significant basic writing population, which I hope will illuminate how complexly the logics and rhetorics of liberalism and social justice can intermingle.

### **PROBLEMS FOR BASIC WRITING AT ROOSEVELT, 2009-2011**

Neither an historically black institution nor a women's college, Roosevelt University (RU) nonetheless commits itself to those who have been traditionally excluded from higher education. In 1945, Edward Sparling, then-president of Chicago's YMCA College, feared that his board of trustees would require an accounting of the school's demographics so as to institute quotas on racial minorities, women, and immigrants. Even though such policies were common for the time, Sparling envisioned a more inclusive

institution. Rather than comply with the board's request, he resigned, taking sixty-eight faculty members with him to form what became Thomas Jefferson College, later re-named for the recently deceased Franklin D. Roosevelt ("Our History"). For sixty-five years and counting, RU has remained committed to redressing the historical exclusivity of American higher education with progressive admission policies and curricula, a spirit that informs the school's mission for social justice.

Sparling's story echoes in the halls of Roosevelt. Tenured faculty tell it to new faculty; student orientation leaders tell it to prospective students and their parents; the university president tells some version of it in most of his convocation and commencement addresses. *Roosevelt exists because Sparling rejected injustices common to his time; we must continue to resist those of ours.* This commonplace constitutes a significant element of what we might call the discursive fabric of RU, a self-reflective account of ethos. It says, "This is who we are," in a way that both represents the past and shapes the present and future. This story also lines the halls of Roosevelt, literally. Hanging on almost every floor, photos of early Roosevelt students, young women and men of color, constantly remind present-day students, faculty, and staff of RU's commitment to social justice. Today, this commitment manifests in a variety of ways, foremost perhaps in the many student organizations dedicated to identity groups and social justice issues, from the group for Roosevelt's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer students and their allies, *RU Proud*, to a chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants. RU's current president, Charles Middleton, was the first publicly gay man to head a university, and he participates in a small national consortium of gay and lesbian university presidents. This ethos informs volunteer service days, which pepper the calendar all year long, as well as the influential Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and Transformation, which organizes both service learning courses and programming for the university and the public. Roosevelt's curriculum even requires for graduation a third writing class, a rarity in higher education, focused on writing about social justice issues.

The basic writing classes, however, present a more complicated picture. While basic writing must be examined closely at all institutions, especially those with significant populations of minority students (who tend to be overrepresented in basic writing), Roosevelt's foundational commitment to social justice demands an even closer look. More specifically, while the discourse within and about RU suggests an enlightened politics, RU basic writing policy and its consequences on the ground suggest a much more

typical institutional culture. At the same time, the social justice mission and Roosevelt's culture provide perhaps greater potential for change.

I would characterize basic writing in the 2000s at RU as exemplifying a collision between its social justice ethos and typically liberal basic writing policies, such as placement testing, remedial tracking, and a focus on normative error correction. While this collision happens at other institutions, it might not be going too far to say that RU's very identity is at stake in its management of basic writers. Basic writing at Roosevelt, until 2010-2011, consisted only of English 100, a remedial, skills-based writing class. Because the department employed only one full-time writing faculty member/administrator, virtually no composition *program* existed. What documentation was once provided for the many adjuncts teaching English 100 took the form of a long expository text articulating an account of basic writing very much in the style of Shaughnessy; it encouraged focus on writers' potential for success, not their errors. Even though the program expressed its commitment to writing as a process, the pass/fail class culminated in a timed essay written in response to an article and prompt. Students, therefore, received a profoundly mixed message. Their classes were exercises in process pedagogy, but they were assessed with a method that valued product only.

In the view of Bartholomae and Crowley, furthermore, RU's tracking policy remained its most significant fact. English 100 represented liberal management, leaving many students to struggle to assimilate to normative language standards or to remain in English 100 forever. The strict liberalism of testing and tracking, however, did not entirely define basic writing administration at Roosevelt. RU offered a free re-take of English 100 for any student who failed the class. This policy represented an impressive financial commitment to students who very often could barely afford to take English 100 the first time, but it could be argued that RU created the need for such compensation in the first place.

Another complicated situation arose involving transfer students. Transfers who tested into English 100 were lumped together with first-year students, whether or not they had completed their writing requirements at their prior school. This would be hardly worth mentioning but for the fact that Roosevelt participated in the Illinois Articulation Initiative. This agreement stipulated that Roosevelt would not require incoming transfers to take courses whose requirements they already had fulfilled at their prior institution, a decision often described on campus as one that illustrated our respect for students' credentials and the quality of higher education across the state. In this particular instance, Roosevelt claimed to honor transfers'

prior work, but then reverted to the liberal management of their writing with a one-size-fits-all placement test, general basic writing class, and timed final exam. To put it bluntly, RU's basic writing policies strained its commitment to social justice.

If all this weren't complicated enough, it became clear in 2009 that retention and persistence to graduation numbers indicated troubling trends at Roosevelt, especially when it came to basic writers. For example, of all first-time RU students in the fall of 2008, only 51.9% returned in the fall of 2009.<sup>3</sup> The scene was worse for students of color, as it so often is. We discovered that students of color at Roosevelt, mostly African-Americans and Latinos, simply were not making it to graduation in six years or less. Only 34% of Latino students in the Fall 2003 cohort had graduated by 2009 and only 19% of African-American students had done so. When we dug into the retention numbers regarding basic writers, it turned out that for the cohorts from 2006-2009, that percentage dipped significantly below 50% in three out of four years, meaning basic writers came back the following fall at even lower rates than our already unacceptable fall-to-fall numbers for the whole student population.<sup>4</sup> Something needed to be done.

### **RECOGNITION MEETS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: AND (MORE) JUSTICE FOR ALL**

The new composition faculty and program director took as our first project the re-construction of basic writing. We turned, of course, to the large body of scholarship on basic writing for strategies and models, and we found that much like Canada's reasonable accommodations for cultural diversity in a liberal framework, basic writing scholars and teachers have looked for creative work-arounds to the issues raised in the 1990s crisis. Like Taylor's politics of recognition, these alternatives turn away from one-size-fits-all answers.

Innovation since the 1990s has come in many forms, both programmatic and pedagogical (which is not to say that there is always a tidy division between the two). Most new models have shared a powerful refusal to abolish basic writing coupled with an effort to blunt liberalism's sharp edge. At their most successful, these models represent smart and inventive options that address the worst aspects of liberalism's influence on the administration of basic writing; collectively, they strive to set new paths around the earth scorched by the heated debate of the crisis years. Given the above arguments, it is no wonder that the 90s crisis created a generational shift in which the

field turned to local contexts, needs, and solutions. Indeed, this shift in basic writing and the communitarian critique in political theory share a similar direction, a turn toward practical reason away from universalizing solutions. Hewing to Roosevelt's history and mission, we too were looking for ways to teach basic writing that neither marginalize students nor ignore their needs, while developing a program that we faculty felt equally comfortable describing and defending to students and administrators (what I have come to think of as a social justice litmus test).

### **Administrative Alternatives**

William Lalicker has described the most important post-crisis models for administering basic writing, which he calls the "alternative models." Of these, we eventually adopted Gregory Glau's popular "Stretch" model. Stretch replaces remedial instruction (often ungraded and without college credit) with a "stretched" college-level course. Students take a two-semester version of "regular" English 101, with 150% of the work and the same faculty and peers both semesters, on the theory that what they need is more time to do college-level work, not remedial instruction. Both semesters are graded and credit-bearing, and this two-semester system offers time to build community among a population that tends to be an institution's most vulnerable by various measures (Glau "The 'Stretch Program'"). While we settled on Stretch, all five alternative models provide more nuanced procedural alternatives to the mainstreaming/segregation binary of the basic writing crisis in the sense that they seek variously articulated middle spaces between mainstreaming and marginalizing.

To call these models alternatives, however, is to imply that they are alternatives to the liberal programs attacked in the crisis. For that to be accurate, however, they would have to depart from the mainstreaming/tracking binary, and, to put it simply, they do not. Stretch, for example, still segregates writers from the larger population. Studio and Enrichment models, conversely, try to mainstream and segregate at the same time by requiring basic writers to attend both a "regular" writing class and a separate basic writing lab. One can also make the opposite claim, that Stretch mainstreams insofar as it relies on the same curriculum as "regular" 101, and the Studio and Enrichment models still track in the sense that only part of the population is required to attend Studio. In other words, these models make liberalism less visible or re-locate it. Directed self-placement, in which programs recommend a writing placement but students make the final decision, offers a

more complicated example, in that it recognizes student choice over liberal management of their writing track. I would still suggest, however, that it mobilizes liberalism in the sense described by Barbara Cruikshank, in *The Will to Empower*, when she argues that empowerment discourses often rely on self-regulation along liberalism's lines, what Foucault described as the "conduct of conduct," or the "conduct of the self." In the case of directed self-placement this would look like the student who, through exposure to liberal education policies, has come to self-identify as a remedial writer and chooses the basic writing class regardless of placement, arguing that she "needs it" in a replication of the liberal logic of normalization. While the alternative models, like recognition, revise traditional liberalism, they are still liberal. The era of the alternative models, then, does not offer alternatives to liberalism, no matter what we call them, as much as a temporary truce in the unresolved hostilities of the 90s.

### **Pedagogical Alternatives**

Similarly, in some of the writing pedagogies devised since the crisis we see other connections with the politics of recognition. Basic writing scholars and practitioners responded to the 90s crisis perhaps even more ardently with pedagogical models (Pepinster Greene and McAlexander 12). Some of these pedagogical innovations seem, to me, very much to mirror the politics of recognition. Min-Zhan Lu, Matthew McCurrie, and Angelique Davi, for example, have offered sophisticated new models of basic writing pedagogy, all of which I would identify as mobilizing a politics of recognition. As one of the earliest to take basic writing in this direction, Lu seeks to avoid the problem of assimilation, insisting that one of basic writing's foundational goals must be "to conceive and practice teaching methods which invite a multicultural approach to style" (442). Interpreting students' writing differences as styles rather than deficiencies offers a form of recognition. Likewise, Matthew McCurrie, in the context of summer bridge programs, encourages teachers and administrators to engage students' "demographics" as a way to fight the assimilation model of traditional liberalism (31-32). Similarly, Angelique Davi's insistence on the relevance of race, class, and gender to higher education and "intellectual growth" recognizes students (73). Davi echoes Taylor's claim that misrecognition not only disempowers but causes real damage when she writes: "for students who have been perceived as weak writers and thinkers and, in many cases, have internalized these perceptions, the service-learning component allow[s] them to occupy a new and

empowering position” (91). Lu, McCurrie, and Davi all very much manifest the spirit of the politics of recognition when they resist assimilatory educational models.

### **The Problem with Recognition**

And yet, the politics of recognition might not be all it is cracked up to be, suggests Patchen Markell in *Bound by Recognition*. The act of recognition, Markell argues, finds itself stuck in a kind of identity cul-de-sac, a circular politics implicitly reliant on an *a priori* account of identity. More specifically, Markell insists that recognition mistakes the necessary fragility of political and social life for something that can be overcome. And if Taylor believes recognition can overcome this fragility, Markell argues, he must also understand identity as preceding recognition. If so, recognition relies on the possibility of mutual transparency, a social and linguistic impossibility. We see a similar critique in composition in the argument that certain forms of reflective and expressive writing ask students to peer into an identity that was always already there (Feldman 112).

Markell’s alternative, the politics of acknowledgement, emphasizes ongoing action in the presence of others, an argument I see as fundamentally rhetorical. The politics of acknowledgement “demands that each of us bear our share of the burden and risk involved in the uncertain, open-ended sometimes maddeningly and sometimes joyously surprising activity of living and interacting with other people” (7). Acknowledgement emphasizes identity as the result of action over time, requiring ongoing insight into oneself and the other. In other words, the politics of acknowledgement demands engagement in a continual *rhetorical* negotiation for justice in the spirit of practical reason, as opposed to the implied finality and totality of recognition.

Recognition in a writing class can easily veer away from the need for rhetorical action. Based in the mutual transparency of one’s *a priori* identity, recognition seeks what Markell calls the elusive “pleasure of sovereignty” (188). Markell sounds as if he might have an alternate career in basic writing when he insists that the goal rather should be to engage others by using, “serviceable forms of meaning [which] emerge out of local, contingent patterns of language use, [whose] operation does not depend upon the illusion of certainty” (184). As opposed to the politics of recognition, then, the politics of acknowledgement offers “the less grand and more tentative pleasure of potency” (188), a worthy, and politically defensible goal for basic

writing, and one that emphasizes the importance of rhetorically-oriented writing instruction.

But what has this meant for the students at Roosevelt, and our programmatic proposal and new course design? In what follows, I describe both our formal proposal to pilot a new stretched basic writing class and the common syllabus for that pilot through Markell's lens.

### **PROPOSING CHANGE AT ROOSEVELT: STRETCHING RHETORIC**

At RU, writing faculty decided upon two angles of action for 2010-2011, writing a proposal for a Stretch-style pilot program in 2011-2012, and the design of a common syllabus for the pilot. Our goals were twofold: 1) to write a proposal that utilized liberal logic and language in order to win money to run the pilot and 2) to write a common syllabus that would move the program toward teaching writing rhetorically and away from teaching it as an elementary and transparent technology. We believed both Stretch and a rhetoric-focused course design enhanced the social justice elements of the program without overestimating our power to alter the University's liberalism.

In the proposal, we appealed to both economic arguments and arguments for social justice. By emphasizing how much money was being lost with our poor retention numbers, we hoped to make the case for how much we could save (and even earn) the university with a revamped basic writing program, a compelling argument at a tuition-driven university like RU. Glau's follow-up report on Stretch's effects on retention at Arizona State proved crucial in this regard ("Stretch' at Ten"). In short, we were able to say that even if we were only half as successful as Glau's program, we could have saved RU \$1.3 million dollars over the last four student cohorts. Our social justice argument entailed comparing the persistence to graduation rates of basic writers and students of color at RU to our peer institutions in Illinois by various measures. Our numbers looked even worse by comparison than they did alone. If RU was as committed to social justice and those historically underserved by higher education, we said, approve our proposal.

This document worked within liberalism in that it made the economic argument first, in spite of the fact that most of us were much more concerned with the social justice implications of the status quo. Secondly, when we began to discuss our plans, upper administrators seemed willing to simply allow us to put in place just about whatever we wanted. We, our new director especially, insisted on writing a proposal, starting with limited pilot sections

of the new program, and only later moving toward full implementation if our data supported doing so. We *wanted* to solidify our own efforts within the institution, to work in ways recognized by the bureaucratic liberal structure. Even the choice of Stretch was an effort to negotiate embedded liberalism. Though we were not using the political theory language I use here, there was discussion about whether we wanted to use a model that continued to segregate basic writers from other writing students as Stretch does or to use a more mainstreaming model like Studio. One reason we went with Stretch was that its continued segregation of basic writers would be familiar, given the liberal reflexes of administrators in charge of whether our proposal went ahead. Though still liberal, Stretch emphasizes a less marginalizing experience for students in its use of the same curriculum as “regular” English 101 and its graded, for-credit status. In the end, we were lucky; we received \$20,000 for a one-year pilot in a bad economy, winning the stamp of approval for both the Stretch-style pilot and a rhetorical curriculum and pedagogy.

### **Potency without Certainty**

Rhetoric, as I intend it here, does not adhere to the classical persuasive strategies of the virtuous man speaking well, nor to the “modes” lionized in scores of textbooks throughout the 20th century. For our purposes, rhetoric referred broadly to any communicative action taken in response to a particular situation. Rhetoric, so defined, connects the language of students’ everyday lives to academic and other discourses by emphasizing each as the product of strategic choices negotiated within complicated social situations (Swales). A growing number of first-year writing programs, including basic writing classes, work from a fundamentally rhetorical perspective on writing (Lu, Grego and Thompson, Davi, Pine, Berlin, Bawarshi, Feldman, Miller). In general terms, what this has meant for college composition is a seismic shift away from teaching writing as though it were a universal and universally recognizable skill towards writing as a specifically social act occurring within highly complicated and particular contexts—a shift that begins to explain its confluence with the politics of acknowledgement. Basic writing, however, still needs to intensify its commitment to rhetorical instruction and to more thoroughly consider the political implications of this commitment.

I believe we achieved something like the politics of acknowledgement in rhetorically-oriented writing classes by asking students to write in a way that is conscious of and reaches out to the other, with critical awareness of situation, audience, purpose, and genre. Students choose some of

their own purposes, audiences, and genres for writing, and because they write analyses of their choices and the possible consequences of them in the public sphere, we acknowledge the student and her interests, offering what Markell calls the “tentative pleasure of potency” without the “illusion of certainty.” Rhetoric and its effects are unpredictable, to put it mildly. The key is to value differences among students, as in the politics of recognition, while also mobilizing acknowledgement by setting students into certain types of rhetorical motion.

The new curriculum at RU exemplifies what I came to think of, in hindsight, as features of acknowledgement, which I can describe in two categories: the overall course design and process-oriented mechanisms.

### **Acknowledgement as Course Design**

Overall, the course begins where students are and then takes an outward turn, following an ever more public trajectory. More specifically, the class first encourages students to recognize what rhetorical savvy they already possess. In discussion and low-stakes writing, students consider when they are most aware of their own language use, what sorts of circumstances cause this heightened awareness, and what this change does to their efforts of self-representation and persuasion. Doing so acknowledges students’ pre-existing and unique rhetorical savvy in some contexts and provides an intellectual path to the thresholds that we want them to cross, the belief that all writing is rhetorically motivated and situated, and the skills to analyze and utilize broadly rhetorical factors like situation, genre and language choice.<sup>5</sup>

Continuing its outward turn, the class next considers others’ uses of rhetoric and how rhetoric operates at the community level, along with increasingly public writing assignments. Accordingly, writing for the teacher gives way to blogging and other online writing. Students explore and write about discourse communities—ones they belong to, first, and then ones they do not, including conducting interviews with members of those communities. The course ends with a writing project in which the students join an ongoing, public discourse, or what Jenny Edbauer and others call a rhetorical ecology.<sup>6</sup> The outward turn of the course, then, is embedded in the sequence of assignments and the scaffolding that leads to each of them. We begin by recognizing each student’s rhetorical expertise in one situation or another, then acknowledge them by *asking them to acknowledge others through their writing*, to examine, that is, their own rhetorical positions and the community’s discourses they wish to join and tailoring their writing accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

### **Process as Politics**

Here, I follow Joseph Harris in doubting that the process approach constitutes a pedagogy *per se* (55). In our pilot, process amounts to a political commitment in that we understand peer review, meta-cognitive analysis, and the format of final assessment as all part of the rhetorical model of acknowledgement. Like Mark Hall, in *The Politics of Peer Response*, we re-imagine peer review as a democratic process in which students collaboratively construct peer review guidelines and even grading rubrics. This primarily takes place in the form of open classroom discussion. Doing so constructs students as part of a community enterprise demanding self-awareness, awareness of others (including peers, faculty, and institutional context), and ongoing deliberative negotiation *about writing*. In other words, it emphasizes the message that writing and its evaluation constitute dialogical processes, precisely in line with the participatory emphasis of acknowledgement.

Simultaneously, every major project includes what we call meta-writing. Meta-textual analysis plays an important role by requiring students to analyze their rhetorical choices in light of audience, genre, and possible outcomes. Meta-writing asks students to perform a deep reflexivity, and politically acknowledges student-writers' intentions as significant. It also asks students to write in another relatively high stakes situation. They write to their teacher explicitly instead of implicitly, as in all the traditional classroom genres where students are instructed to write for the "general academic audience." Assigning meta-texts asks students to raise their level of self- and other-consciousness and to consider the ways they have interacted with those others, and the kinds of outcomes those choices create, a way to emphasize potency without certainty.

Lastly, we replaced timed writing with a portfolio of student work in the final assessment, an uncontroversial move at this point. Accordingly, I spend little time explaining or defending it, except to note that Pepinster Greene and McAlexander cite portfolio assessment as one of the most widely embraced elements of the process approach. Portfolio assessment acknowledges students in that it, "allows the student to be a participant. . . rather than simply an object of assessment" (13). Again, we can see acknowledgement's emphasis on self- and other-directed action.

While our proposal worked self-consciously to grasp opportunities within a liberal value system, I believe that the pedagogical approach of our pilot course, wedding rhetoric and the politics of acknowledgement, resisted traditionally liberal composition. Rhetorical education represents

a significant re-boot for basic writing, a change that has been happening here and there across the field, but our model begins to realize more fully the deeply political implications of this shift.

## **AGONISTIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We know from the work of Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason (“From Remediation to Enrichment”) and Gleason alone (“Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time”), that pedagogical change cannot generate on its own a new politics. As I have noted, our changes at Roosevelt matched a rhetorical pedagogy with a Stretch-style program, creating the overall effect of a politics of acknowledgement. While Patchen Markell himself cautions us against hoping that the politics of acknowledgement can, “settle political controversies or prescribe courses of action” (178), he hopes for “other, subtler effects” (178). He believes acknowledgement, “can change our view of the nature of the problems we confront; it can alter our sense of what courses of action are open to us in the first place” (178). I must ask, therefore, what sorts of institutional negotiation are “open to us” in basic writing once we’ve ceded liberalism’s reflexiveness?

Chantal Mouffe’s concept of *agonistic pluralism* suggests an answer. Mouffe both acknowledges liberalism’s hegemony and advocates the generation of productive pressure (*agon*) within that paradigm. I do not propose this last section as an unearthed solution to the 90s political crisis—as an eureka! moment—but as a way to re-consider and re-organize our relation to the liberal reflex.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe approaches the same set of problems addressed by Perelman and Taylor, the tension between the liberal tradition and the pursuit of democratic justice. Like them, she takes on John Rawls, among others. Unlike Perelman and Taylor, Mouffe does not argue that Rawls has incorrectly solved the problem of liberalism and democracy. She argues, instead, that *there is no solution*. More specifically, Mouffe identifies the source of liberal democratic political tension as, “[resulting] from the articulation of two logics which are incompatible” (5). These two logics do not fit and never really have: “On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation” (2-3). Like

Markell's claim that recognition seeks the unattainable, Mouffe characterizes as fraught the very grammar of liberal democracy, concluding that there is no resolution to such a tension. We can only aim for "temporary stability through pragmatic negotiations" (5). Rejecting consensus as a political goal, Mouffe calls for a process of temporary stabilization she calls *agonistic pluralism*. Her theory focuses on active negotiation toward always-temporary, imperfect agreement, and thereby forwards a permanently dialogical account of politics (15). Mouffe calls political agents "friendly enemies" who share common symbolic space but have different organizing goals for that space (13). Rhetorical practice within liberalism, in this model, operates like a complex ecology, rather than according to the more strictly persuasive definition, which operated like a train that stayed on the tracks and arrived at its destination (consensus) or didn't. Mouffe's approach suggests a productive mindset for basic writing administrators, who constantly negotiate the shifting terms of upper administration anyway.

Rather than seeking solutions to the political tensions that fractured basic writing, we can craft dialogues that maintain an agonistic space, even as they require constant revision. The seeds of this kind of thinking exist in much of the literature I have already cited. Perelman, for example, argues that legislation is creative work, requiring a kind of public, discursive synergy (67). Similarly, Markell claims that time constitutes part of the difference between acknowledgement and recognition; acknowledgement is a perpetual dialogical process, rather than the end point of a teleology (15). In pedagogical circles, Grego and Thompson, in *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*, evoke something like agonistic pluralism when they claim that Studio seeks not solutions, but "lateral interactions across previously existing institutional hierarchies or boundaries" (50). Practicing acknowledgment in our classes and in our larger institutional contexts, with the goal of maintaining agonistic space rather than foreclosing it, generates productive forms of pressure on traditional liberal practices.

I have argued that the crisis over liberalism in basic writing in the 90s overestimated anyone's ability to operate outside of liberalism. Furthermore, I have advocated for the combination of 1) a rhetorical writing approach crafted in the image of the politics of acknowledgement with 2) a rhetorical effort to maintain agonistic space within liberal institutions. Students benefit, yes, but the combination of the two provides a model for how to realistically manage administrative relationships, too. We practice what we teach: contextualized rhetorical action in constant need of revision.

## **POSTSCRIPT, ON ROOSEVELT**

I left Roosevelt and the Stretch Coordinator position the summer before the pilot began, in order to take a job in the city my partner had already lived for two years. I'm still in touch with friends and colleagues at Roosevelt, and they tell me the pilot has gone well, reporting anecdotally that students have embraced the rhetorical pedagogy, and seem to feel less marginalized than did their counterparts in English 100. We will know more once final portfolios are evaluated and programmatic assessment is conducted over the summer.

Programmatically speaking, there has been an interesting conversation in the last year that I think nicely illustrates agonistic pluralism. Earlier, I described the problematic practice at Roosevelt of placing transfer students in basic writing in spite of our articulation agreement that assured them that we would honor their prior completion of any school's writing requirement. Many of us in the writing program had repeatedly argued that forcing transfers into a first-year basic writing course was unjust, in light of the articulation agreement. But now, if Stretch entirely replaces English 100, RU cannot continue to require transfers with incoming 101-credit to take the class because Stretch utilizes the same curriculum as "regular" 101 and is thus coded as a 101-level class in the catalogue. Our new program closed this particular liberal loophole. For a period of time, it looked like transfers would simply not be required to take any writing classes, a possible outcome about which many felt ambivalence. It was not long, however, before university administrators began to insist that many transfers would still need formalized basic writing in some form and that the old English 100 would serve this purpose nicely. It should be no surprise, I suppose, that in the face of change the liberal reflex kicks in, and that is precisely why my former colleagues at Roosevelt must continually mobilize their own rhetorical practice aimed at maintaining a space for agonism. If English 100 is indeed maintained, now exclusively for transfers, it would continue to exert a blunt assimilatory pressure on students of the very sort that sparked the basic writing crisis in the first place.

At this point, however, RU writing faculty are engaged in a more complex conversation about basic writing than had existed at Roosevelt for some time. Indeed, the conversation continues. I'm happy to report that the writing program has been negotiating with upper administrators to adopt a Studio-style option for transfers, perhaps driven by directed self-placement. Such an outcome would signify, I believe, the successful adaptation of the

politics of acknowledgement in maintaining agonistic pluralism at Roosevelt. The replacement of RU's former program with a rhetorically-oriented Stretch program for freshmen *and* a Studio for transfers, it seems to me, represents a significant improvement—for now. And “for now” is the best any of us can do, when our re-orientation to institutional liberalism is driven by the creative effort for a practical and socially just approach to basic writing.

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### **Notes**

1. I write about this experience from a distance, both geographically and chronologically, as I am no longer at Roosevelt and most of the events I describe occurred in 2010-2011, during the planning of our program proposal and pilot classes.
2. I borrow the term “social groups” from Iris Marion Young’s chapter “The Five Faces of Oppression” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, a term she defines as neither an association nor an aggregate, but a group that is publicly identifiable in Heidegger’s sense of “thrownness” (39-65).
3. All retention numbers came from the Common Data Set from RU’s Office of Institutional Research.
4. Data on retention and persistence on students of color who began as basic writers was not available.
5. While “starting where they are” is close to an old chestnut in rhetoric and composition (see anyone from Shaughnessy to Graff), it also constitutes

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an important element of acknowledgement insofar as it goes beyond recognition of communicative differences.

6. See Rivers and Weber for a detailed example of this sort of assignment.
7. Nancy Pine's model of service learning in basic writing achieves something similar to our pilot's outward turn, especially in her ethnography assignment and in the way she connects this to academic writing. I would argue, however, that her model sometimes settles for recognition over acknowledgement, especially when Pine's assignment leans toward what Thomas Deans calls "writing-about" rather than "writing-for" a community agency.

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