TEACHING WRITING FROM GROUND ZERO

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Waiting for me and every other teacher at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) was a packet from the counseling office on post-traumatic stress syndrome. Along with BMCC students (all but 400 returned to their classes), I arrived back on campus with my colleagues after three weeks in limbo. The Federal Emergency Management Agency had been using BMCC as a command center immediately following the collapse of the twin towers on September 11, 2001, down to the resumption of classes on October 1. Many of us were startled to learn we would be returning so soon, especially the parents of students at New York City's premier public high school, Stuyvesant, which is down the block from BMCC. Great agitation was in the air, literally: lingering debris from the former World Trade Center burned the eyes and enflamed the skin. People coughed a lot. But we at BMCC went back to school only three weeks after the cataclysm, just a few blocks away from a smoldering mountain of wreckage. Despite militant opposition from a large group of parents, Stuyvesant students returned a week after we did. The double and triple meanings of the phrase "back to ground zero" did not escape any of us. We are teachers and students at the City University of New York: CUNY, the largest urban university system in the United States and currently one of the most underfunded in the history of public higher education. We returned to ground zero after having been there already.

The helpful pointers on dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome were well intended but unnecessary. One of the suggestions, naturally, was that students talk and write about their

experiences on the day of the attacks. But my intuition was that BMCC students would want to get right back to the course work, not because they were eager to "get on with life," as Mayor Giuliani kept repeating in the press ad nauseam, but because they have a tight plan to execute and there is no time to spare.

BMCC is 93 percent not-white and 65 percent female.[1] Most students work full-time and have families to support. More than half of the students at BMCC come from families that earn less than $20,000 per year. Spanish-speaking students make up 30 percent of the student body. Around 12 percent of the students are on visas from other countries or are undocumented. We have 20,000 students and 1,000 faculty. Only 30 percent of the faculty is employed full-time. GED recipients make up 25 percent of the student body; 16 percent of the students are enrolled in ESL courses. Around 80 percent receive financial aid. In the academic year 2000-2001 BMCC graduated 1,803 students and dismissed 1,327 for academic failure. BMCC's tuition is the most expensive community college tuition in the U.S. as a share of family income. In terms of state funding for public higher education, New York ranks 50th. Although I could tell you on how many acres the campus sits, and about our facilities—in particular about the irrevocable loss of Fiterman Hall on 9/11, that description is not the purpose of my essay. I want to talk about teaching writing at BMCC, which turns out to be just as complex as 9/11, and 9/11's far-reaching effects on life in New York City, civil liberties in U.S. society, and the future of the world. For just as 9/11 symbolizes for the political right the legitimacy of U.S. imperial conquest abroad and a new system of repression at home, teaching writing from ground zero could now signify for the left a new departure point, hitherto marginalized, for the building of a new mass movement for equalitarian social change.

How to teach college writing in the twenty-first century? This question is usually asked by English composition specialists at annual conferences held in luxurious hotels, or raised by professors at well-funded faculty development seminars. It is a great and necessary question for college English teachers to be

asking. Yet rarely is the question posed from ground zero. Usually it comes from the middle ground—from some place neither here nor there. Or it comes from everywhere all at once. But in this interstice between, say, Yale and BMCC there are a lot of ideas about writing strategies, standards, theory, and pedagogy. It is a "free" space in that real students and their real conditions of life are often abstractions, not basic elements of the discussion. It is an "open" space in that almost anything can be entertained as a real possibility and every possibility is real entertainment. It is a space where college writing teachers feel good about themselves, leave renewed in spirit, and are well prepared for another semester of anguish.

My feeling is that college writing teachers today bring a lot of the anguish on themselves. They want to know why college students can't write; they want to know how to preempt plagiarism; they want to understand how a whole generation of young people could have turned their backs on the reading of books; they are eager to herald the dawn of new writing technologies. They want to coddle or they want to punish. But, in the main, they don't want to ask themselves what they would want to write and what they would want to read if they were in the position of their students. It is a simple, dangerous question.

Admittedly, teaching college writing in New York City has its own particular advantages that are not available to teachers in Detroit or Santa Monica. For example, every day on the subway I observe directly what working people in New York are reading. I have incorporated several novels into my curriculum this way: for instance, Sister Souljah's ubiquitous novel *The Coldest Winter Ever,* Sapphire's *Push*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The other day a young Caribbean woman was reading Langston Hughes's 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter*—for pleasure. I am already teaching that one in my English 101, but it was reassuring to see that my method seems to have a recognizable logic.

My method is premised on studying the elements of my people. I don't pretend to belong to a homogenous group, but I don't act as if I'm so different from my students either. I belong to

this world and this world belongs to me. I study it as a sociologist and live in it as a worker: as a writing and literature teacher and as an administrator of a large composition program. What I discover about the reading and writing preferences of my people, their habits of mind and body, is transferred to my different syllabi and my teaching methods. These discoveries are not absolute truths but rather provisional ones that can be shaped improvisationally into new assignments and daily writing exercises.

In the age of the sophisticated postmodern sensibility, the term "my people" is clearly indefensible. Yet, I understand humanistic education to be based on people, not technology, institutions, or academic discourse. I assume that the latter are meant to serve the former. It is necessary, then, for the humanistic teacher to arrive at rational knowledge of the people he or she is teaching, and to be able to intuit their preferences, desires, styles, and lived experiences. The composition theorist Ira Shor put it well more than fifteen years ago when he explained how he teaches English composition: "I research the spoken and written words of students to learn what they know, what they want, and how they live" (1987, 9). Moreover, the term "my people" puts the emphasis on social class. In U.S. society, where class is usually seen as subordinate to race, in opposition to it, or transcendent of it, the concept of "my people" or "the people" is reflexively denied any real credibility or explanatory power. Nevertheless, the writing teacher, perhaps more than any other kind of teacher, must be class conscious if he or she is to understand, and feel, the racial, gender, sexual, and national histories that each student brings to the classroom. Are not all students working people? Are not all teachers working people? Thus, an identification between teacher and student, for it to be all-encompassing and as sensitive to difference and real diversity as it can be, needs to have grounding in the working-class concept of "the people." Without this concept, the classroom can become monadic, or worse, segregated in all the familiar ways: between men and women, Euroamericans and African Americans, queers

and straights, American English speakers and ESL students, United Statesians and foreign-born.

Levels of Discovery

The first level of discovery involves what Langston Hughes—a writing instructor himself—called in his writing workshops "the rhythms of the world" (47). What are the everyday rhythms of my students? What is one day of life for my students? How does it begin and how does it end? What happens in between? These questions give rise to radically different answers; however, the intent is to find the underlying structure of my students' everyday life. In a society where the average workweek is now around sixty hours, the act of laboring will be determinative, whether or not the student in question works sixty hours per week herself. But for BMCC students, working fifty or sixty hours a week and attending college full-time is "normal"—a perverse reality that every teacher at BMCC confronts daily. Moreover, today African American families work more hours than families in other racial/ethnic groups. According to the Economic Policy Institute, African American families' 4,278 annual hours were 489 more than those for white families and 228 hours more than those for Latinos (Bernstein 25).

This first level of discovery is made easily by assigning a writing exercise that requires students to narrate one day of their lives from beginning to end. The difficult part is drawing certain conclusions about how the writing course will then proceed based on these narratives. In other words, a pre-orchestrated syllabus is null and void. Instead the syllabus is made up as we go along. Today book orders can be processed and shipped within three or four days, and late night photocopying centers are easy to come by on almost every campus. For the past twenty years a tremendous amount of excitement about computer technology has filled the halls of English composition. Yet the real advantages of computerization are to be found less in online teaching and learning (and the innovative uses of the computer lab), and more in the simple fact that today books and articles can be acquired for

classroom purposes with great speed and efficiency. Gone are the days when teachers had to place their "final" book order form with the college bookstore two or three months in advance.

Writing theorist and teacher Patricia Bizzell advocates a similar approach in her excellent essay "'Contact Zones' and English studies." "Instead of finagling the new literatures and the new pedagogical and critical approaches into our old categories," she writes, "we should try to find comprehensive new forms that seem to spring from and respond to the new materials" (168). In a different register, Shor emphasizes the democratic effect of beginning from a student-centered starting point. He argues that beginning with students rather than the teacher or the college causes a "democratic disturbance" by confirming "a primary goal of shared authority: to restructure education into something done by and with students rather than *by* the teacher *for* and *over* them" (1996, 148; emphasis in original).

This pedagogical "restructuring" is extremely distressing to the big textbook publishers who thrive on the pre-orchestrated syllabus and a hierarchical English studies curriculum. Writing and literature textbooks, a huge industry, depend on a teaching pedagogy that does not ask about the everyday rhythms of student life. In the theory of my teaching pedagogy, the writing and literature textbook is a millstone on the teacher's chest since she is burdened with it for sixteen weeks. And it is an unjustifiable expense for students because they will most likely never again use the costly textbook after completion of English 101.

Yet, the pressing issue today of part-time instruction and English composition complicates the democratic advance made possible by this new pedagogy. Does not the new pedagogy depend on full-time teachers in the writing classroom? How could a part-time writing teacher, who is increasingly coming to represent the entire profession, achieve this kind of restructuring when she is neither enfranchised by the college nor able to establish logistically the kind of high maintenance relationship with students required by this method?

In principle, the answer is straightforward: let this be an argument for full-time teachers supporting the part-time teacher union organizing campaigns at U.S. colleges and universities, as well as for the creation of many more new writing teacher lines. Restructuring writing pedagogy is nearly impossible without first enfranchising the tens of thousands of second-class writing teachers across the country. But in practical terms the answers are very difficult to come by. My advice is that writing program directors encourage part-time instructors to spend the first two or three weeks of the semester learning about the reading preferences and habits of their students through daily writing assignments along the lines I have sketched above. Although the spontaneous creation of a course-pack one month into the semester is a seemingly unrealistic request, a core of readings will likely emerge to which future composition courses would have recourse. Democracy is hard work; and my own experience is that democratic part-time teachers are relieved when told they do not have to use a $60, five-pound composition reader in their class but rather are free to arrange their own readings in harmony with their students and themselves. My intuition is that this kind of arduous course building is appealing to new writing teachers who are just as eager to learn and to innovate as they are to teach the basics.

The second level of discovery is improvisation. Rhythms imply both permanence and spontaneity: the task is to differentiate the two. For example, one of my students—I'll refer to her as "C"—works at Starbucks full-time. Her shift is from 9 am to 5 pm; then she gets on the subway downtown for BMCC, and is in her desk at 5:45 pm for the start of English 101. She lives at home with her mom in Harlem and suffers from a terrible case of insomnia; rarely does she get more than three hours sleep per night. The permanent part of her everyday rhythm is working full-time at Starbucks in the day and attending BMCC full-time at night, while the spontaneous part is her insomnia. In C's case she uses her insomnia to great advantage by reading and writing during these tortuous hours of the night.

One might draw the inference that the proposition here is to treat each student differently in terms of assignments and expectations based on their everyday rhythms. It would be easy to dismiss this notion as fanciful, since the average English 101 classroom has around thirty students. But the idea is more complex. Instead the conclusion to draw is that C's writing assignments, while the same as everyone else's, will be executed differently than those turned in by her non-insomniac peers. They will feel different, will be structured differently, will have a different rhythm and tone, and therefore will be graded differently—*improvisationally*. Not better or worse, just different. But different than what?

In 1981 the Bajan poet and literary scholar Kamau Brathwaite introduced to students and teachers of language and literature the important concept of "nation language." In defining nation language Brathwaite focused on the English-speaking Caribbean. Here, he wrote, "is an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility" (266). But nation language must not be confused with dialect. Rather it is "the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean" (266). Moreover, nation language "may be in English, but it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues" (266).

It seems as if I am leading up to a presentation of certain examples of student writing in which nation language is in use. That would be interesting, and I have plenty of vibrant examples, but I think a better emphasis is on the structure of an English 101 curriculum that comes from nation language and its undeniable presence in U.S. colleges and universities of the twenty-first century. Yet, at issue are not the demographic changes of U.S. society—what is often referred to as the "browning" of the United States—and their real effects on college English instruction. Instead the new factor is the advanced presence of an underground English that has been forcing changes, unconsciously, sometimes semi-consciously but rarely consciously, for several decades now

in the teaching of English composition. The argument is that the presence of underground English must be understood consciously for it to avoid neutralization or, worse, co-optation, which tends to happen in many multicultural writing textbooks.

The Traveling Theory of English Composition

At ground zero there are the relations between work and pleasure. I already alluded to these relations in the brief sketch of C's everyday life, which turn on her insomnia. Of course much further explanation is required to arrive at the components of a fully elaborated English 101 curriculum. But the insight is already there in C's particular situation: the everyday life of our students produces the rhythm and tone of English 101. The first task is to discover it, yet there must be a structure in limbo ready to organize this original discovery, whatever it turns out to be. I call the making of this structure *the traveling theory of English composition*. The traveling theory of English composition has three elements: (1) awareness of nation language; (2) sociological specificity, or political economy; and (3) situationism, or current events.

Nation language raises the question of the political right's Trojan Horse, the issue of *standards*, but from a different angle. In large state and city university systems as well as private ones the issue of standards is always a pressing one. Accreditation and the articulation of transfer credits are necessary concerns always, but the main problems are testing, funding, and downsizing. Since the Reagan counterrevolution of the 1980s in which public education was defunded at all levels, the charge of "declining academic standards" has been used by state bureaucracies to justify the downsizing, and in many cases the privatization, of public education. In big U.S. cities such as New York the counterrevolution has produced a disaster of epic size and character. Today more New York City high school students, the majority of whom are black and Latino, drop out than graduate—a situation exacerbated by the recently imposed New York State Regents Exam. And at the college and university level (CUNY)

the number of students who are being academically dismissed or who are on academic probation is close to exceeding the number graduating, due in part to the new ACT writing exams as well as the College Proficiency Exam. Each of these new standardized exams was imposed behind the momentum of the conservative campaign against "declining standards" in public education. Each exam places a heavy emphasis on writing. Each exam was conceived and implemented without the slightest awareness of nation language.

While the excellent national organization Fair Test has been vigilant in pointing out the racially discriminatory, anti-intellectual class structure and mechanisms of standardized testing, the centrality of literacy, or the nation language question, has yet to be raised to the fore. In the case of Fair Test, its work has been taken up, almost exclusively, with fighting back the right-wing imposition of standardized testing from coast to coast. More than anyone else, Fair Test has showed us convincingly how standardized testing "damages education." Its research shows that as a result of standardized testing,

> Students from low-income and minority-group educations are more likely to be retained in grade, placed in a lower track, or put in special remedial education programs when it is not necessary. They are more likely to be given watered-down or "dummied-down" curriculum, based heavily on rote drill and test practice. This only ensures they will fall further and further behind their peers. On the other hand, children from white, middle and upper income backgrounds are more likely to be placed in "gifted and talented" or college preparatory programs where they are challenged to read, explore, investigate, think, and progress rapidly (fairtest.org/facts/howharm.htm).

At the end of standardized testing—when we abolish it finally—is an open horizon of testing possibilities, which Fair Test is quick to emphasize. But these possibilities need to be worked out

simultaneously with the critique of standardized testing. Nation language is one such possibility.

Nation language produces its own standards of writing excellence. I want to quote now from two student essays written in one of my remedial English courses at BMCC. Both students were designated "failures" on their standardized writing placement exams by readers selected by the ACT corporation, an entity operating out of Iowa and contracted by CUNY's central administration in 2000 to take over all placement examination procedures for incoming CUNY students. Hitherto the placement process had been conducted internally through the CUNY Writing Assessment Test. Instead of entering English 101, both students were sent to English 095, which is a six-hour course (per week) with no credits. At the end of English 095 students re-take the ACT placement exam that they had failed sixteen weeks prior. If they pass the exam, they enter English 101, which is three hours and three credits. Students are limited in what courses they can take without the English 101 prerequisite. Currently the pass rate for the ACT writing exit exam is less than 50 percent CUNY-wide.

The first student paper is by "B," a young male African American New Yorker who works on Wall Street. He is responding to an assignment that I gave asking students to describe a person they know. It was one of the first writing assignments of the semester. This is B's text in its entirety, uncorrected:

> When I think about Samora, I think about things like: sunsets, a summer breeze and tranquility. Everything about her is sensual, even her name, Samora. When she enters a room she quietly takes it over. She has such a smooth way of handling herself and can make herself comfortable in almost any situations. When she walks, she seems to glide. Talking with her is a tranquil experience; her voice has this calming, relaxing quality, and the way she moistens her lips with her tongue she can hold your attention for hours. I once had the chance to see her under the setting sun. The sun brought

this wonderful glow to her caramel complexion. Samora has thick black hair which she wears in a short tapered style; alone with these dark piercing eyes that just dance with mystery. She has this provocative way of raising her left eyebrow to let you know that what you are saying is questionable. It's surprising to know that she has so many female friends. She just has a way about her that is attractive to both male and female; you just want to be around her. The most incredible thing about all this is that she's not aware of any of it. She is free of any pretentious ways, it's almost innocent. When I first met her it was at a party that I was invited to. She was having a great time mingling and getting other to relax and enjoy themselves. I was surprise to find out that she was not the host. Samora is a gem, it's just the way she is.

My Microsoft Word program's grammar auto-correct indicates that B's paper is almost without error. But that is not the most scandalous aspect of B's placement into remedial English. Rather it is the fact that his writing sets a certain standard of excellence. His visualizations are rendered vividly and precisely; the subordination of ideas is logical and nearly seamless; his word choices are supple; the presence of a singular voice is unmistakable; and there is an economy of language that many writing teachers dream of when they sit down to grade student essays. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on rhythm and narrative flow. Yet perhaps the most compelling feature of B's short piece is his *interest* in the subject matter and how he expresses this interest in writing.

The second student paper is by "P." She was asked in a different assignment to recall a memory through the use of metaphorical language. She chose as a metaphor a fruit native to her place of birth, Guyana. She is a middle-aged working-class mother with three teenage children. Her paper, which she titled "Memory of the Jackfruit," is two-pages long; I'll quote only from her opening paragraph, uncorrected:

> The Jackfruit is a wonderful fruit, greenish yellow on the outside and yellow on the inside when its ripe. It is very sweet, juicy, and delicious. The outer skin is hard and rough like that of a crocodile or an alligator. Inside the Jackfruit is a big heart, and big eatable delicious pulps with seeds in them. The seeds, wow, make a delicious soup along with corn pork, dumplings, yellow yam, potatoes and red beans. When its green (not ripe), its very hard and if you should run the palm of your hands against it, it will prick you as if struck with that of a rose bud. Tempted to bite the skin of the Jackfruit is not allowed because of its rough crocodile skin, but a sharp knife will do the job quite well. After opening the skin of the Jackfruit, the strong aroma engulfs the entire territory for miles; the taste alone takes your breath away while the pulps soothe and caress the plate of the tongue for sheer pleasure.

This second student paper also establishes a certain standard of excellence. As in B's paper, there is an advanced use of *visualizations*. In fact visualizations are a basic element of nation language, as I understand Brathwaite's work on the concept. For Brathwaite, nation language is about "total expression," which he defines precisely. It comes about, he writes, "because people live in the open air, because people come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their own breath patterns rather than paraphernalia like books and museums. They had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves" (273; emphasis in the original).

Returning to C for a moment, there was an assignment she and her classmates were asked to do that springs from Brathwaite's concept of immanence, and which is associated closely with visualizations. I told the students to take a look at their own hands and write a short piece on what they observe visually. This is what C wrote, uncorrected:

I have long fingers with brittle nails on each of them. They're very light with color and have a few battle scars. My two pinkys are crooked but one is not fully. It looks like they were broken when I was a baby and no one knew so it healed on its own. My palms used to be so soft and moist but now because of hard labor at work, they are now cracked and rough. My palms' skin are red and tight. I love to look at my prints because they are so obvious to see. I have a mole on two fingers and one inside my right palm. Also one on my left wrist. My hands have completed many jobs. Braiding hair, washing dishes, cleaning everything, mopping, or even always being washed away from dirt. My fingers have been cut, jammed, smashed, and more. But there are mine. I think I have beautiful hands no matter what they look like and no matter what kind of labor they have done.

I want to stress that these three examples of student writing at BMCC are not exceptional; rather they constitute a new standard of writing that is close to what Brathwaite terms "nation language." Students who write in a nation language turn inward for their images, vocabulary, syllables, and syntax. They are not looking to *The New York Times* or the *Paris Review* because they do not need to. The essence of nation language is that it is at home wherever it is at. The rhythms and tone of nation language writing are individualized according to a felt cultural style and definite aesthetic preferences. Meaning is not central. The outlook of nation language writers is worldly or dialogic: it takes into account the presence of others. Their attitude is often didactic, for they are conscious of the marginalization of nation language in U.S. society, especially in public education. They seek to educate others about their own knowledge and experience, hoping this education will enliven the minds and bodies of those who do not know who they are or where they come from. Perhaps a romanticization of writing, there is nonetheless a rich body of evidence to support the claim that nation language is different than

the "standard" or "normal" model of good writing that is being put forward in contemporary writing textbooks. To put it differently, nation language begins at ground zero while the prevailing "standard" begins already heavily invested in a hierarchical system of educational rule and social control.

An objection to my treatment of these three writing samples could be that they are merely narratives, albeit intriguing and successful ones. They are not "critical" essays nor are they even close to showing competence in the areas of thesis-centered composition and structured prose writing. Perhaps a good beginning, they cannot stand as a standard of good composition. This kind of objection contains many assumptions about writing and thinking, perhaps too many for the sake of this discussion. But the main one is that writing "critically" is more difficult and complex, and hence of higher value, than writing narratively. It is something like saying that managing a business is more difficult than doing the hard labor that makes it money; therefore managers are justified in being paid more than "unskilled" laborers.

In terms of nation language, analyzing an object and narrating an account of its existence happen simultaneously. A useful parallel is the antislavery narratives of the African American tradition. Few critics today would argue that Frederick Douglass's and Harriet Jacobs's narratives are each wonderfully written stories but that the narrative form in which they wrote prevented them from analyzing critically and systematically the institution of American slavery. In the case of Douglass and Jacobs, their powers of analysis come precisely from their narrative authority—from their magisterial use of nation language. Learning to read and write English under severe duress—under racial slavery and its illegalization of literacy—was the sine qua non of their freedom struggle and of their specific critical standpoints vis-à-vis racial slavery and oppression.

In this context, are the three student essays cited above critical-minded and analytical about their subject matter? The one about hands is about hard work and pride in one's own labor, an

issue of critical importance always, especially in times of draconian budget cutting on the backs of working people. The one about the jackfruit is an analysis of a specific element of a national culture: a national food that cements a person to her place of birth. And the one about Samora analyzes subtly a phenomenon that Toni Morrison brings to light in her essay "Cinderella's Stepsisters"—female violence against other females. That Samora does not participate in this violence is considered by the student writer to be one of her many remarkable qualities. To put it differently, all three essays narrate critically a particular problem. I think it goes without saying that each narrative could produce a wide range of formal, thesis-centered composition pieces with relative ease.

Circling back to the issue of writing standards and assessment, it would be a misunderstanding to think that the use of a nation language approach to teaching writing makes systematic writing assessment obsolete or unnecessary. Rather the argument for a nation language method is an argument for establishing different criteria of judgment, for new standards of successful writing that *enlarge* the composition horizon. To be sure, standardized writing assessment tests are not part of a right-wing conspiracy to keep "undesirables" out of college or from matriculating. Yet the *outcome* of conservative standardized writing assessment tests must be confronted at the ideological level, especially when they produce consistently high failure rates. For unlike math or the hard sciences, successful writing can never be quantified, nor is it interesting or fruitful to do so. If standardized writing assessment tests are producing alarmingly high failure rates, then criteria of judgment are at issue, not the students' preparedness for college writing. In the age of nation language, the attempt to assess writing by narrow criteria, such as counting the number of grammatical, spelling, or syntactical errors in a student essay, will invariably produce a negative outcome for nation language student writers. My overall claim about nation language and conservative standardized writing assessment is that they belong to two wholly different worlds, one equalitarian and the other hierarchical, and

that despite positive trends in the appreciation of nation language in composition studies, the hierarchical world and its criteria have not been dealt with as such.

Take, for example, the introductory remarks of Jonathan Silverman and Dean Rader in their writing textbook, *The World is a Text: Writing, Reading, and Thinking about Culture and Its Contexts* (Prentice Hall, 2003). "To our knowledge," they assert, "there has never been a great writer who was not also a great thinker. What's more, to be a great thinker and a great writer, we must also be great readers" (7). They go on to quote E.M. Forster, Aristotle, and I.A. Richards to support their contention. Even a down-to-earth writing textbook such as Elizabeth Penfield's *Short Takes: Model Essays for Composition* (Longman, 1999) departs uncritically from an entrenched place in the composition hierarchy. Consider her opening statement about writing: "The making of meaning is the heart of the essays contained in this book... this book reinforces a basic assumption: reading and writing are highly individual processes that are active, powerful, and interrelated ways to discover meaning" (2).

The popular *Blair Handbook* by Toby Fulwiler and Alan R. Hayakawa (Prentice- Hall, 1997) provides the best example, I think, of the systematic denial of nation language in the college writing textbook genre. The revised edition of 1997 begins on a promising note, announcing to its readers that in the new edition "we focused sharply on the needs of college writers approaching the end of the twentieth century" (v). But writing teachers hoping to see a nation language approach to composition—an approach that begins from below—are immediately turned back as they encounter the next several sentences: "A world of electronic textual resources now awaits us. The Internet, e-mail, software programs, and even electronic scanners all provide a dazzling array of possibilities for reading, writing, and learning. We revised *The Blair Handbook* to reflect these developments and to provide students with guidance for negotiating the electronic world" (v).

Each of these approaches to composition studies would have had a difficult time producing the three student papers cited above. First, being a so-called "great thinker" has little to do with showing a command of language, writing with rhythm and purpose, and finding an interest in writing itself. Many great thinkers have been terrible writers, and the cognitive links between thinking and writing remain undecidable in the disciplines of psychology, linguistics, and philosophy. But more significantly, the notion that one cannot begin to write well without first becoming a "great thinker" is an effective way to demoralize student writers before they even pick up a pen or sit down at the computer. It is a transparent attempt to hierarchize the writing process. Second, privileging "meaning" as the goal of writing is another attempt to make a hierarchy within composition. Is there a meaning already figured out and waiting for students at the end of their writing and reading journeys? Whose meaning is this? Many students will assume that it is the teacher's meaning. If it is a completely subjective meaning, then why posit meaning as the end of composition? What kind of standard is that? Third, the obsession with computer technology is becoming neurotic and negative. Is the idea to replace the composition classroom with e-mailing and scanners? If so, what evidence is there that the new computerized composition classroom is an advance on the hands-on writing workshop environment?

Perhaps this evidence is forthcoming, but the authors of *The Blair Handbook* act as if the case has already been won. Besides the disturbing wish-fulfillment inherent in such confident declarations of the death of the hands-on writing workshop and the call for a new world of highly-mediated, computerized writing instruction, there is the particular departure point of such arguments. It is a class- and race-determined place of mediation where personal computers are easily accessible and computer literacy has been already attained. In 1998, for example, 79 percent of households with annual incomes of $75,000 or more owned computers, while just 25 percent of households in the $20,000-$24,999 range

owned a PC (Bernstein, et al. 273). The most recent surveys indicate that almost half of white households own computers, while less than one-fourth of African American households do (Bernstein, et al. 274).

Sociological specificity or political economy, the second element of the traveling theory of English composition, is implicit in the critique of *The Blair Handbook*. Each and every classroom in the United States is determined by class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation. But this is not an argument for identity politics. Rather the argument is for an *objectification* of the individual writing classroom in terms of political economy, not personal identity. Teaching writing from ground zero implies an *equalitarian* approach to history and society in which prevailing socioeconomic hierarchies, racial and otherwise, could be felt as determinative of the writing process itself. Thus recognition of these hierarchies is the first step toward writing against them, in-between them, or for them depending on the standpoint of the student writer. The problem in English studies is that socioeconomic hierarchies are perceived as extrinsic to the writing process, a notion impossible to maintain in the rest of the humanities where the interrelations between politics and literature are openly acknowledged and debated. But in the composition classroom, class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation are usually treated as topics or themes rather than determining factors in the way students come to the writing experience.

At the same time, many composition theorists and teachers have made significant progress on the sociopolitical character of writing. For example, in 1998 the Conference of College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a national organization of 9,000 teachers across the country, and a vital part of the National Council of Teachers of English, issued a position paper on Ebonics. CCCC asserted that Ebonics "is not an obstacle to learning. The obstacle lies in the negative attitudes towards the language and literacy skills, and an unwillingness to adapt teaching styles to the needs of Ebonics speakers" (ncte.org/cccc/positions/ebonics.shtml). Of course the Ebonics issue is also a nation

language question, but the fact that CCCC sees Ebonics as a pressing sociopolitical issue with broad effects indicates the steady march forward of composition studies today. Not surprisingly perhaps, many of the most remarkable democratic reforms inside English studies are being carried out today not by Ivy League literary and cultural studies theorists but rather by composition teachers at ground zero.

In U.S. college and university writing classrooms, an emphasis on socioeconomic hierarchies is crucial considering the intensity of ideological indoctrination in K-12 public education. The myths of equal economic opportunity and the classless society, as well as the latest—the myth that white racial preferences are gone—are still the ideological fulcrums of U.S. public education and of U.S. mass culture as well. Yet the facts contradict the myths powerfully. Based on their recent empirical research, the Economic Policy Institute puts the matter succinctly:

> Contrary to widely held perceptions, the United States offers less economic opportunity mobility than other rich countries... low-wage workers in the United States were more likely to remain in the low-wage labor market five years longer than workers in Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden... poor households in the United States were less likely to leave poverty from one year to the next than were poor households in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom... The international data also show that workers in the United States put in more hours per year than do workers in every other advanced industrialized economy except Portugal (Bernstein, et al. 11-12).

Arising from an objectification of the various socioeconomic hierarchies in U.S. society is a set of aesthetic preferences and modes of writing. For instance, BMCC students tend to address hierarchies from the standpoint of class, race, and gender where a strong sense of indignation over the persistence of "savage

inequalities," to use Jonathan Kozol's classic formulation, is preferred over an emotionally detached appraisal of the empirical data. In terms of analysis, BMCC students prefer to first locate themselves in the hierarchy and then proceed to assess the social facts in front of them in relation to their own situations. I call this writing preference the impulse toward *testimony*. Modes of writing vary widely on the subject of socioeconomic inequality, but lyrical expression tends to dominate—a "discovery mode" of writing in which social facts are objectified or externalized away from the individual self. For students from the black working class who are bombarded every day in the mass media by racial images of failure, delinquency, and incompetence, it often comes as an important "discovery" that they are not personally responsible for systemic poverty and the enduring lack of social mobility in U.S. society, and moreover that the majority of poor people in the U.S. are white.

Current events or "situationism" is the third element of the traveling theory of English composition. This element is an "outside" agent in the writing classroom. Whereas the first two elements—nation language and political economy—are built into the structure of the writing process, current events are spontaneous eruptions that often shock and disrupt the otherwise closed space of the classroom. The Bush administration's war against Iraq is an obvious example, in particular for students who experienced firsthand the terrifying fall of the twin towers on September 11. But other current events are just as riveting, and they provide today a perfect illustration of the felicitous "outside" role that sociopolitical situations could have on the writing process.

For instance, on January 29, 2003 the Governor of New York, George Pataki, released his fiscal budget for 2003-4. In his budget were cuts to CUNY totaling $180 million, a 41 percent tuition hike (around $1,200 per year), and a one-third reduction of state funding for the Tuition Assistance Program. If the Pataki plan had been passed by the New York State Assembly, thousands of CUNY students would have been forced to drop out of college.

In this situation the question is not how a writing teacher at CUNY could justify including in the curriculum a red hot political issue such as this one, but rather how could a writing teacher at CUNY justify *not* including it? For teachers who are not prepared to integrate current events into the curriculum, an awkward moment arises, since a sudden injection of the Pataki budget proposal into the writing process must come as an uncomfortable intrusion, not a logical outcome of the composition course itself. Consequently, writing teachers in this situation will simply encourage their students to write letters to Governor Pataki, their state representatives, City Council, and the Mayor of New York expressing their displeasure toward the budget proposal. And many students will follow the teacher's sensible advice. But what about all this writing that will be done? Why is it not to be turned in and graded? Could it not be part of a collective class writing project? Could it not be part of student testimonies to be given in Albany or New York City?

Many writing teachers would probably agree that, *in this situation*, an issue as life determining as massive cuts to public higher education should be part of the composition process. But this begs the question of situationism. In other words, if this particular situation calls for direct student involvement in the political process through the institution of Composition I, then why couldn't there be a mechanism already built into the course curriculum that could enable other such timely and necessary interventions? How would this work?

My suggestion is to allow for current events in the form of an internal-external dialectic. For example, if nation language is about *immanence*, then current events are nation language's dialectical opposite: they constitute an external force in the face of the student writer's own desires and preferences. The object is for student writers to find a new language that unifies the opposition between their own immanence and the external situation at hand. This could be accomplished by a strategic selection of readings such as Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience, Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," or, recently, U.S. diplomat John Brady

Kiesling's resignation letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell (*NY Times*, February 27, 2003). These written documents are usually categorized abstractly as "social protest" or texts belonging to the "public sphere." Yet because they originated at a particular place and time by a certain kind of writer, they are excellent examples of the synthesis of immanence and situationism. Moreover, all basic elements of composition—audience, structure, intention, and voice—are powerfully operative in this kind of synthesis.

So far I have not addressed the issue of readings for Composition I. As alluded to in the critique of contemporary writing textbooks, the standard approach to the selection of readings for English composition is based on "model writing." For many years, non-fiction readings have been the rule in Composition I, mainly because the idea is that students need to model their essay writing on someone else's essay writing. It is hard to argue against using an essay by James Baldwin or Susan Sontag to exemplify the essay writing process, yet the premise of the "models of writing" approach must not be allowed to hide safely behind the unassailable greatness of writers such as Baldwin and Sontag. Does this method really work? If so, how? Unfortunately, the correctness of the "models of writing" approach is taken as an article of faith in many writing textbooks. For example, in *Seeing & Writing 2* (Bedford/St. Martin's 2003), Donald McQuade and Christine McQuade use an essay on architecture by Zoe Ingalls entitled "Teaching Architecture Students 'The Discipline of the Hand'" that is meant to be a model of good expository writing. After the essay, they ask students to write "an expository essay in which you compare and contrast the similarities and differences between drawing and writing as a means of 'putting your thoughts on paper,'" which is exactly what Ingalls does in her essay (87). Built into the McQuades' approach to teaching writing is not the assumption that students will emulate the writers they read but rather that students will find their various topics, issues, and writing operations within the "model writing" itself.

I believe there is a distinction between the emulation of style and technique and the presentation of topics—i.e. the *content* of the readings. In *Seeing & Writing 2* there is frequently a conflation of the two. The danger of this approach is that a new kind of hierarchy in the writing process is raised up, that of the self-contained "model essay." Consequently, one conclusion to draw is that if an essay does not produce from its own logic a distinct, self-contained writing assignment, then it is not an essay worth reading and studying. The readings, then, become utilitarian exercises rather than different kinds of literature to be read and analyzed on their own terms. On this note, it is important to recognize the determining role that big business plays in the shape of writing textbooks. In recounting his own experience with HarperCollins, Ishmael Reed told a meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in 2001 that "the textbook industry has it that 60 percent of the contents of each new textbook should be works that duplicate the flagship textbooks currently on the market" (144).

Last semester I taught the following texts in my Composition I: (1) Langston Hughes' novel *Not Without Laughter*, (2) Alice Childress' short story "Hands," (3) Toni Morrison's essay "Cinderella's Stepsisters," (4) Alexander Cockburn's investigative report "Blacklisted at the Polls," (5) Walt Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," (6) Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem Sweeties," (7) Raymond Ker's editorial "Not Another World Con," (8) Jean "Binta" Breeze's poem "Caribe," (9) E.L. Doctorow's short story "Jolene: A Life," (10) Ghassan Kanafani's short story "Letter from Gaza," and (11) Doug Henwood's article "Measuring Privilege." Each text has the three elements of the traveling theory of English composition: nation language, political economy, and current events. How they interact with each other, or the complexities of reading and writing from the nexus of these disparate texts, is another essay. However, it is necessary to note that less than half of the texts were decided in advance: Langston Hughes' novel, Jean "Binta" Breeze's poem, Doug Henwood's article, and Hughes' poem. The rest of the reading selections were

decided based on in-class discussions. For instance, many students registered concerns in their first several narrative essays about terrorism in New York, and they wanted to know what the connection was between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the "Orange Alert" in New York City. I decided to give them a 1956 short story by the great Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani called "Letter from Gaza." There is information in the story about the conflict in Israel/Palestine; but I wanted the students to write a letter of their own to someone close to them about what is happening right now in New York City, not about the conflict itself. In this assignment they were able to negotiate three difficult mental terrains: their dreams and anxieties, a seemingly opaque geopolitical situation in which they are implicated, and their own material position in New York. For many of the students, these three aspects of the assignment emerged without instruction. In fact, the only guidance I gave them on the assignment was to write a letter from New York City that deals with the current situation as they see it and feel it everyday. They tended to emulate Kanafani's style, which is very intimate yet coldly factual and graphically illustrated with details. For instance, several black students wrote about how they are terrorized daily in their own neighborhoods by New York City police officers, while others commented on a recent incident in which an elderly African American woman in Harlem died of a heart attack after the NYPD knocked down the door of her apartment. But they did nothing with the content of Kanafani's story other than to internalize some of the images and realities of the situation in Israel/Palestine. That is, they didn't use it as a model of good writing but rather as a way of conceiving a particular problem and responding to it literarily. The content of their essays turned out to be the student writer's individual approach to social crisis, psychological terror, and collective insecurity.

In closing, I want to focus on a few objections to my method. First, it appears that no uniform standard of writing is produced from this curriculum. Second, the readings are too easy in the sense that they conform closely to students' own lived

experiences. And third, the writing teacher seems to be shaping student writing in a particular way rather than having it take its own shape based on an already established, objective criteria of writing competence.

The third objection is the most complicated, since it confronts the role of the teacher directly, a question that will never be resolved finally. But a few things are certain. The college writing teacher should be a friendly guide, and she should enable the process of discovery in each of her students. How she does this is determined in advance by the languages her students speak, the society in which she and her students live, her own moral-intellectual formation, and the specific needs and desires of her students when it comes to education, in specific reading and writing. In other words, the important thing is that the real conditions of life are felt and understood correctly by the writing teacher, so that she can be the best guide possible to her students. For a college writing teacher in Miami to start with criteria devised in Madison, Wisconsin is much like the former British education system in the Caribbean where students were told to write descriptions of snow falling on the cane fields.

The question of standards is also complicated, mainly because of the ideological baggage attached to it. Recall that the issue of standards was not such a volatile question in the days before the civil rights movement. We should be conscious of the fact that whenever the issue of standards is raised it involves another issue altogether: the assault on affirmative action at the very moment in which large numbers of formerly marginalized, not-white people in U.S. society are enrolling in its colleges and universities. While there is such a thing as a complete sentence, there are an infinite variety of sentences. And while correct logic is objectively verifiable, the methods by which to teach logic are highly variable and open to radical experimentation, as demonstrated by Socrates. To allow "standards" to take precedence over actual teaching is to preclude teaching itself.

In today's visual age, readings in Composition I are often seen as the least compelling aspect of writing, as evidenced by the

McQuades' writing textbook *Seeing & Writing 2* in which the visual dominates every writing exercise. The readings are an afterthought under this way of thinking; the important thing is to get students to write. Yet the problem remains: the U.S. population today is barely literate. Thus readings should be literary in the highest sense. They should directly involve students in the lives of the characters and the events written about. Although my readings have been criticized as "anti-canonical," they feature some of the best writers in the world, past and present. The writing teacher should give students the best writing available. After that, the task is to select readings that encourage the *habit* of reading. For this purpose readings should be highly variable in terms of length, form, style, and tradition. One of the great shortcomings of the conventional composition reader is that the readings are all the same length, and their form is basically the same from one selection to the next. To get into the habit of reading, students need to have diversity.

Teaching writing from ground zero is a lot about literacy instruction. I have laid out several ideas about teaching writing, and made some polemical remarks along the way. What I did not mention is that my students learn ten new vocabulary words a day and that they practice logic, revise endlessly, study geography, and read a variety of newspapers and magazines each week. This is what happens as the student of writing advances from ground zero. But at ground zero itself life is complex and a million things can happen all at once. This is why the beginnings of what we call the writing process are the most important part of teaching writing, for just as a million things happen here, a million things can go wrong. Or they can go right. But they cannot happen at all unless we begin right where we are.

To conclude his talk at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in 2001, Ishmael Reed elaborated the ethos of ground zero literacy teaching with great clarity and precision. "At this point in my career," he told his audience,

I've come to the conclusion that the problem of literacy, a problem that afflicts students of all races and classes in our society, is a problem having not to do with the intellectual inferiority of the students, or their willingness to learn, or peer group pressure, or any of the other ghosts and hobgoblins afflicting the so-called public discourse, which is usually led by operatives and proxy intellectuals. Instead the problem lies with what is taught, how it's taught, and who teaches it (144).

Notes

[1] All facts about BMCC cited in this essay come from The Office of Institutional Research's study *Borough of Manhattan Community College Fact Book, 2001-2002*, published by BMCC's Office of Academic Affairs, and Cecilia McCall, Secretary of the CUNY Professional Staff Congress (see psc-cuny.org).

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