

William Jones

## BASIC WRITING: PUSHING AGAINST RACISM

*ABSTRACT: The author argues that racism sustains basic writing programs as Jim-Crow way stations for Black and Latino students by insisting on a hierarchy of intelligence among races. General negative societal perspectives on Blacks and Latinos constitute bedrock beliefs. Black culture counterstates these beliefs in order to assert Black humanity and finds powerful countervailing expression in Black religious folk statement and in the blues, significant repositories of the Black community's existential attitudes of resistance. The success of historically Black colleges results, in significant measure, from such resistance and can serve as models for writing programs for inexperienced Black and Latino student writers, encouraging the development of enabling pedagogies.*

Let me start by using words from a statement on racism I made at the Conference on Composition and Communication in March 1991 in Boston in the special interest group meeting of the Conference on Basic Writing.

"I begin with the assumption that racism is a core feature of American life, that White supremacy is a central tenet, that efforts to maintain White privilege and power spring naturally from its assumption, and that it posits intelligence as innate, unequally

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distributed among individuals and, by easy extension, hierarchically arranged among races. In its insistence on hierarchy, racism situates basic writing programs as Jim-Crow way stations for minority students, for the thousands of Black and Latino students who fill basic writing classes across the nation.”

Racism constructs a particularly negative perspective on its Black and Latino citizens. In 1991, the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, a nonprofit institute at the University of Chicago, reported that three of four Whites believed that Blacks and Latinos are more likely than Whites to prefer living on welfare, “more likely than Whites to be lazy, violence-prone, [un]intelligent and [un]patriotic”(Poll 10). These opinions are statistically fascinating since never fewer than fifty percent of the 1,372 Whites surveyed had negative opinions of these so-called minority citizens. For instance, of the Whites surveyed, seventy-eight percent believed the Blacks and seventy-four percent believed that Latinos more than Whites preferred living on welfare; sixty-two percent believed that Blacks and fifty-six percent that Latinos were likely to be less hardworking than Whites. Fifty-three percent believed that Blacks and fifty-five percent that Latinos were less intelligent than Whites.

In tone and sentiment, these opinions are similar to the now familiar conclusions drawn by pioneering researchers into the writing behavior of inexperienced writers: that basic writers “[a]re... easily satisfied with first drafts, [t]hink of revision as changing words or as crossing out and throwing away [and r]evis[e] on the level of single work or sentence” (Walwood and Smith 7).

The problem with these conclusions is not that they are inaccurate but that they seem to function as a taxonomy, a description of fixed behavior verified by the research itself. The taxonomy, we should assume, was produced the way taxonomies are produced by botanists and zoologists, natural scientists whose bailiwick it is to produce taxonomies. Natural scientists analyze and differentiate distinctive features and behaviors but codify them only when they are certain that their research has been thorough. Once satisfied, natural scientists write their taxonomies. The taxonomies are fixed. They do not change.

Few, if any, behaviors in writers are fixed although this fundamental observation seems to have been disregarded, for what passes as taxonomical behavior—as fixed behavior—is the description of behavior in an instructional moment that should last only until change can be affected by purposeful teaching and by variations among learners. Only when I realized that *basic writer*, the term

itself, was used with notable frequency, as euphemism and code for minority students could I understand how writing instructors had accepted these conclusions with worshipful silence, without serious questioning. In the early to mid-seventies, the term *basic writer* had a currency similar to *disadvantaged* and *culturally deprived*, but *basic writer* more than those terms observed the etiquette of civil interracial exchange that requires the neutralizing or masking of differences. The price of that masking may have been that we failed to confront, in any serious way, the fact that basic writing is fundamentally framed in terms of deficit, in terms of linguistic and cognitive inadequacies.

My observations here should not be interpreted as assertions that the researchers or their intentions were racist. But I can identify no dissonance between these research conclusions and what Dolores Kohl Solovy and Patricia Brieschkeis call society's bedrock conviction that Black and Latino youths are incapable of high academic achievement (10). Solovy and Brieschkeis were commenting on *Stand and Deliver*, the 1988 film that chronicles the achievement in mathematics of Jaime Escalante and his students at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, making the point that the work of Escalante challenged what those two called the bedrock convictions about the academic abilities of Latinos. On one occasion, large numbers of Escalante's students passed the Educational Testing Service's Advanced Placement Examination in calculus, but there was inexplicable duplication of answers in two areas in the examination, suggesting the strong possibility of cheating. What is notable to me is not these circumstances—the circumstance of the students' achievement or the suggestion that they might have cheated. What is notable is the language that Solovy and Brieschkeis use to characterize society's evaluation of minority students. That evaluation should be viewed as an ethnographic statement, a statement that reveals fundamental, core beliefs held by the culture that generates it. Ethnographic statements are seemingly incidental observations, so routinely made, that they are recognized as characteristic ways a culture construes the world. Such statements capture attitudes that are so pervasive that the statements become cultural truisms. In this light, the statements that the majority culture commonly makes about its Black and Latino citizens reveal the racist underpinning of the majority culture.

Indeed, if Solovy and Brieschkeis' statement is accurate, if it points, in fact, to a core belief, we can only conclude that society does not expect or work for minority academic achievement. If it

is indeed society's belief, it means that all of us—White, Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow—policymakers in the public and private sectors, those in government agencies, foundations and educational institutions; and ordinary people, those of us with ordinary names and ordinary faces, including parents, teachers, school administrators and, sadly, Black and Latino students themselves—have internalized this negative view and are influenced by it. And if the metaphor is accurate—if it is bedrock belief—we can only imagine how deep the belief is. We need also to remind ourselves that, in the real world, engineers intent on constructing where bedrock exists must use dynamite to dislodge the unyielding stone before they can erect the structures they desire.

I am reluctant to claim that minority communities have the power of dynamite to dislodge the effects of racism, but forces to counterstate and push against those effects have produced ethnographic statements that testify that resistance and struggle against racism are central characteristics of the Black community. Such statements emerge in the most improbable places and are so central that they find voice in folk expression, the place that ordinary people store the attitudes, beliefs, and values that define who they are. I delight in finding them in the blues, for instance, and in nonsecular folk expression.

Bessie Smith sings, "I walked and walked / 'Til I wore out my shoes / Can't walk no more / Yonder comes the blues." An unsentimental view of the world emerges here. When Bessie looks over her shoulder, what she sees is life's difficulties. While life is relentlessly trying, even brutal, trouble is not its final definition since Bessie confronts its harshness and, in doing so, defines herself, endures all trouble, transforms and transcends a negative reality to make a world for herself. She is never naive. She never falsifies. Instead, in "Long Old Road," she sings, "When I got to the end of the road / I was so worried down (Repeat the first two lines.) Picked up my bags, baby, and I tried over again." It is the trying over again that informs us how Bessie has chosen to move through the world: audacious, tough, resiliently human.

While we might well debate whether racism is part of what worried Bessie down and whether racism is what she confronted on that road in that song, perhaps we need just to remind ourselves that she did meet racism on a real road in Clarksdale, south of the Tennessee border on the road to Memphis on September 26, 1937—the day before I was born. On that day, she was in an automobile accident that nearly severed her right arm. She was denied admission into one hospital because she was Black and

bled to death en route to another.

Another Black voice, an anonymous Black voice, singing or praying, confronting what life has meted out to her says this: "Trusting in him for my journey / I am not afraid of his name or afraid of hellfire / for I have been killed dead and made live again and am fireproof..." (Johnson cited in Powell xxiii).

To say that she is "fireproof" is to speak powerfully of her resistance to life's vagaries, and since it is a Black voice singing or praying in this land, I contend that part of what she must resist is racism. I contend, further, that that voice and that image of resistance are ethnographic features that are the cultural legacy and spiritual inheritance of the Black community. That resistance has sustained Black people through physical enslavement and its endless social and psychological variations. That same power is available in the present to Black people of conscience who are aware of the pervasive nature of racism and its insistent insertion into every aspect of American life. While that power may wane in difficult times, it is never absent in the Black community.

Where resistance constructs an ethos that influences educational policy and decisions that counterstate the deficit model of minority student functioning, successful programs are likely to be routinely expected and achieved. That resistance is the force behind the circumstances, for instance, that enables historically Black institutions of higher education like Howard, Xavier, Morehouse, and Spelman to distinguish themselves in the difficult area of preparing undergraduates for admission into medical school—sending more Black students into medicine than major White institutions such as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Berkeley, Columbia, and Northwestern (Chira B8).

If success can be achieved in the science and mathematics preparation that admission into medical school entails, perhaps it follows that such patterns of success can be transferred to other areas. We can all learn from historically Black colleges since it is they that have the longest cumulative record of minority academic achievement in the nation, a record that testifies that achievement follows intention and expectation. Black colleges have welcomed, because for the greater part of our history few other colleges and universities would, the products of underfunded, underequipped, segregated school systems and produced the professional and leadership class of the Black community. They have recognized the existence of student academic talent and motivation even in the face of underpreparation. In the face of low SAT scores and writing samples that would assign students to the rejection pile of

private and state institutions, Black colleges have crafted programs of instruction and academic support that foster competence, balancing and juxtaposing course work, faculty mentoring outreach, and academic advising and individual support that may include peer tutoring and counseling by both professionals and peers.

Successful writing programs for Black and Latino students incorporate features similar to those in the most successful academic programs in historically Black colleges. Where writing instruction exists that testifies to a clear understanding of what students need, and recognizes the societal forces that vitiate achievement, success is available. The most useful pedagogues encourage Black and Latino students to use the intuitive and generative linguistic powers available to them as native speakers of English and as competent bilinguals. We know that process approaches in writing instruction, particularly those that are dialogic, those that encourage students to connect the acts of planning, revising, and editing to the particular problems they have—are potentially powerful, although a central criticism of such instruction is that it too frequently engages students in process activities in superficial ways only. (Applebee *et al.* 13.) Seldom, in any case, is the accumulated knowledge of the profession, knowledge of innovative approaches to writing instruction, delivered in the service of Black and Latino students. We should question, therefore, any pedagogy that may betray an acceptance of a deficit model of minority student academic functioning, understanding that the pedagogies we choose reflect the evaluations we make of students and the understanding we have of their possibilities as learners. What are the assumptions, for instance, about Black and Latino students that recommend courses in logic and critical thinking as major features in basic writing courses? What is the nature of the evaluation that situates grammar instruction as a central feature in a basic writing program? In what way does grammar instruction focus on remediation instead of on literacy, on the complex acts of reading and writing? When grammar instruction is a feature, does it deepen and increase existing linguistic competence or does it hold students hostage until they master the minutiae of workbook grammars.

While we readily accept that a history of instructional neglect of Black and Latino students necessitates the selection and creation of effective instructional strategies, we should not overlook the need for instructors to examine themselves, to understand the value of reflecting the nature and quality of their relationships as

instructors and adults to their students. When electronic and print media transmogrify minority youths into nonstudents, into violence-prone gang members and drug dealers; welfare-dependent idlers; promiscuous, unmarried mothers; and into athletes and clowns; instructors may question whether anyone who resembles the flesh and blood embodiment of those images should be in college classrooms. And when success in the classes of such instructors requires that instructors make unusual efforts on behalf of these minority academic intruders, such instructors frequently shut down. Few instructors—whatever their color or ethnicity—are not troubled, if only occasionally, by the demands that teaching basic writers place on them. Yet instructors may have to rely stubbornly on their own experience of what students do, noting the contradictions between the public image of minority students and instructors' actual moment-to-moment interactions with their youth charges. It might be useful to note that most official reports on minority citizens are dire and to that extent these reports can be dismissed. If we rely on those reports alone to construct our understanding of who Black and Latino students are, for instance, it would be foolish to continue to harness the energies that successful teaching requires.

It is possible to construct a different, more affirming reality, rooted in the enabling experiences we create for students. It is an affirming fact that at Rutgers in Newark, Black and Latino students that the college would not have admitted were it not for the courses and academic support provided by the Academic Foundations Department and Center and the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program, routinely perform at levels that the college requires. In English Composition, the two-semester writing course that all students must complete, former basic writing students have made a grade of B their most frequently earned grade. The quality of their preparation, their seriousness and their insistence on challenge distinguishes them among student writers. Instructors in the English Department report that they can tell which students are former Academic Foundations Department students. That is not a negative comment. The English Department is committed to ensuring that former basic writers do not complain that English Composition is simply more of what they had experienced in Academic Foundations.

In Spring, 1992, the English Department interviewed and selected twenty students who had entered the college as basic writers to participate in a community literacy project—in what amounted to an advanced placement—that provided students op-

portunities for conventional writing instruction and occasions to work with adult community writers. The English Department simply concluded that students who had completed the Academic Foundations Department's developmental writing courses were the most appropriate writers for the enterprise.

Institutional measures underscore the general success of the Educational Fund Program that the Academic Foundations Department serves. The EOF Program, rated number one in New Jersey in 1991, has maintained a ranking within the top ten EOF Programs in New Jersey since the program began in 1969. The latest statistics indicate that, despite recruiting eighty-two percent of its students from so-called areas of "high economic and educational distress," ninety-four percent of the special-admit students are making satisfactory academic progress, accumulating degree credit according to the schedule set by the Department of Higher Education (Smith, R. 4). "The results of the [so-called] Third Semester Survival Formula for the 1989 cohort indicates a third semester retention rate of 85.6 percent, a rate higher than the 75.2 percent retention rate for regular-admit students in the same cohort (Smith, R. 6).

It is a common experience that educators and administrators, even those with intimate, day-to-day experience with Black and Latino students, question the validity of such statistics, wondering whether they have been falsified or whether the admissions practices of the college are so exclusionary that they yield an EOF special-admissions population atypical of students ordinarily admitted through such admissions programs. If we present literate compositions or display the evidence of the composing processes that typical basic writers develop in our writing courses, we are met with the suspicion that such writers were not basic writers to begin with. We have learned that stories of successful students have to be repeated again and again to be heard. Often, even then, they are not accepted. Tales of failure encounter no such difficulty. Told once, however despairing, such stories function easily to deepen the bedrock conviction that Black and Latino students cannot achieve.

In all this, however, basic writing instructors have a choice. Words that I wrote in the statement on racism of 1991 provide an appropriate coda here: "They can either become accomplices in the suppression of students' intellectual and academic growth, rewarding half-literate efforts with accommodating praise and condescending passing grades, or they can counterstate society's negative assertions, offer honest and humane evaluations, develop



enabling pedagogies that acquaint students with the pleasures and challenges of intellectual labor, and, in turn, repair and resurrect their spirits as bulwarks and shields against the indifference and disdain that racism ensures will always be present in classrooms.”

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