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THE VANISHING SITE OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY'S ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS¹

ABSTRACT: *This article "historicizes" recent reassessments by Min-zhan Lu and Stephen North of Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations and the field of composition in the 1970s. It argues that these retrospective accounts neglect the historical and political forces of institutions that shape the rhetoric and methodology of particular practitioners, scholars, and researchers.*

Educational writing allows for many gradations in the degree of political awareness it manifests. Besides overt argument, there are indirect ways of writing that emerge from certain educational and historical moments. When Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* was published in 1977, it adopted a degree of distance toward certain kinds of political questions that may strike today's clearly more politically self-conscious composition specialists as evasive or naive. Yet history teaches us to acknowledge that to learn to read or write at a given time in a particular place is to engage with current conventions of writing, and the social and institutional expectations of what form it can take.

Recent retrospective accounts of the teaching of writing by Min-zhan Lu and Stephen North illustrate the current neglect of

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this historical dimension of composition studies: both authors focus to varying degrees on the period of Open Admissions when Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* was part of the canon for teachers of basic writing in urban universities. Ignoring the fact that educators and linguists—no matter how hard they try—are not always in control of the definition of terms like “competency” and “error,” both Min-zhan Lu in “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence” (*JBW* 1991) and Stephen North in *The Making of Composition* (1987) fail to represent and analyze the complexities of this educational moment. The work of composition is reduced in these accounts to one text, one voice, belying the “dialogical” nature of educational movements and the “rich” description of people, programs, institutions, and politics that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz advocates.

Min-zhan Lu, in her reassessment of *Errors and Expectations*, does away with the site of City College, the mute historical ground upon which this educational movement stands. An educational movement cannot be analyzed in one text for it cannot possibly represent the institutional dialogue, the “polyphony,” to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term, from which it grew: its multiple expressions and silences; its multiple experiences of students and faculty; its multiple ethnicities and races; its multiple perspectives of students, faculty, administration, public figures, public relations offices; its multiple discourses. Similarly, Stephen North in his useful study of the “methodological communities” in composition—the practitioners, the researchers, the scholars—ignores in his own methodology the history, traditions, and politics of particular institutions at particular historical moments from which certain composition leaders emerge, including Mina Shaughnessy. Reading Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, a study of the transformation of the eighteenth-century French prison system, reveals the importance of analyzing the hidden parts of an institution to unravel its politics and philosophy, including the way its physical spaces are designed.

Recent accounts of Open Admissions in the 1970s are more preoccupied with advancing an explicit ideology of conflict in Gerald Graff's sense, than in historically reassessing Shaughnessy and the movement in which she became pivotal. Graff argues that “the most educationally effective way to deal with present conflicts over education and culture is to teach the conflicts themselves” (51). Similarly Min-zhan Lu urges the foregrounding of “politics,” criticizing writing and “pedagogies [like Shaughnessy's]

which promote . . . a politics of linguistic innocence: that is a politics which preempts teachers' attention from the political dimensions of linguistic choices students make in their writing" (27). Such analysis ignores the historical currents in which writing is taught, not acknowledging that institutions shape what form the teaching of writing can take. In addition, it ignores the fact that certain educational moments are more likely to produce more overtly political discourse in the classroom (and outside of it) than others.

Rather than pluralizing students' linguistic differences, their dialects and their languages (Min-zhan Lu's "discourses") to the point where no discourse is shared in common—Mina Shaughnessy and others developed a pedagogy in 1970 in response to a given time in a given society. What students wanted to learn was standard English. Far from being a group of Mr. Gradgrinds or Ms. Choakum-childs with "essentialist views of language" repressing the voice and cultural discourses of students, a core of teachers at City College were eager to learn about linguistic difference. Enlightened by Joe Dillard and his research on Gullah, we learned of the similarities between this dialect and the underlying structure of African languages; taught by William Stewart, we studied the features of what was then called Black English Vernacular to enhance our understanding of patterns of interference and dialect variation in our students' writing; led by native speakers of foreign languages, we prepared charts of the contrastive grammars of Spanish, Chinese, and Creole (French); led by Ken Bruffee, we experimented with small-group learning; informed by Mary Epes, Carolyn Kirkpatrick and Michael Southwell, we created "hierarchies" of coding problems; visited by Don McQuade, we became more thoughtful about rewriting and the use of folders long before "portfolios" emerged; led into discussion by Bob Lyons, we learned to balance the values of meaning and correctness in writing; urged by Harvey Wiener, we considered the use of audiovisual approaches to the teaching of writing; informed by Marie Lederman, we learned of new research methodologies in composition. Joining with Paulo Freire, we taught the students the "majority" language, effectively intertwined with activities that related to their lives so that they could enter the mainstream of American academic, social, and economic life.

The first description of English 1, the first basic course in the composition sequence, included this reading list: Chapman and Abraham's *Black Voices*, Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Rene Marques' *The Oxcart*, George Orwell's *Essays*, Richard Wright's

Black Boy, Carolina Maria de Jesus' *Diary*. Students were required to keep an outside journal relating to their daily lives, their reading, or their trips to museums or galleries. Concurrently, students worked on high-frequency grammatical problems in the context of their writing, but the syllabus stated that "From the beginning, the student should be encouraged to take the responsibility for his development as a writer—to analyze his difficulties and to make use of the services that are available to him in the way that works best for him."

It was a delicate balancing, honing meaning and correctness in writing, but linguistic codes were not taught in isolation from meaning. To deny the common goal—to engage students in reading and to nurture students' writing in standard English—to trifle with our students' lives, sacrificing their desire to enter the educational, economic, and cultural mainstream to notions of "multiple discourses" would have been pernicious. Knowledge of student dialects and languages was always part of our linguistic and cultural discussion in class, and, sometimes, dialect was part of the writing assignment.

No rereading of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* can occur in a neutral field without this landscape of place. The history, meaning, and understanding of ethnic succession at City College—both its faculty and students—each group with differing educational, social, and cultural needs, is missing from Lu's analysis. What T. S. Eliot called "a dissociation of sensibility" develops, an increasing refinement of language and theory with a loss that results in the separation of thought and feeling. Yet it is amidst these cultural and educational tensions, in this place, where the guiding metaphor of error was transformed by Mina Shaughnessy, and where one of the most optimistic, and perhaps naive ideas about American education began: naive because in subsequent years the necessary funding and support for this program disappeared.

Reading Institutions

To understand this transformation, we must learn to read institutions with new schemas; must gather the complex forces of an institution in our analysis. For *Errors and Expectations* is as much a "reading" of an institution as it is the reading of student errors and changing teacher expectations.

Let me describe some aspects of City College in 1970 with its simultaneous conversations or discourses—only a few of which, I

might add, entered into the text of *Errors and Expectations* and other public statements at that time (by Irving Howe, Leonard Kriegel, Geoffrey Wagner). Other conversations are there to be read in the margins of many articles, or other yet unrepresented faculty perspectives. No one who was there could fail to hear the plurality of voices, the multiplicity of points of view—the conflicting discourses that inextricably mixed linguistics and politics in a way that could never be separated again. If it is a truism in feminism that the personal is the political, then in the field of composition, the linguistic is the political.

Guiding institutional change, as Mina Shaughnessy did, required a nuanced appreciation of cultural dynamics. There was a political and cultural subtext to all of our educational and linguistic discussions for we were dealing not simply with punctuation, perception, writing, and literature, but also with the social consequences of linguistic choice. What can now be said overtly, was submerged then: it was the 1970s, an early phase in a controversial educational movement. Sometimes it was a strategy to employ understatement and unspecified agency in public statements, not openly acknowledging the linguistic or cultural conflict inherent in certain situations. Not because of rhetorical or intellectual innocence or cowardice, as suggested by Lu, or an agenda of repression of difference or multiple discourses, as some would have it, but because of a necessary period of negotiation of values and accommodation within the institution. Note, for example, the rhetorical stance in Shaughnessy's distanced statement of "background" in the introduction to *Errors and Expectations*:

Toward the end of the sixties and largely in response to the protests of that decade, many four-year colleges began admitting students who were not by traditional standards ready for college. The numbers of such students varied from college to college as did the commitment to the task of teaching them For such colleges, this venture into mass education usually began abruptly, amidst the misgiving of administrators, who had to guess in the dark about the sorts of programs they ought to plan for the students they had never met, and the reluctancies of teachers, some of whom had already decided that the new students were uneducable. It was in such an atmosphere that the boldest and earliest of these attempts to build a comprehensive system of higher education began: in the spring of 1970, the City University of New York adopted an admissions policy that guaranteed

to every city resident with a high school diploma a place in one of its eighteen tuition-free colleges. (1)

Anyone who knows the history of Open Admissions recognizes the exquisite control, the understatement, and the unarticulated conflict in this early description. Who can measure the force of stress in an institution like City College, of an educational movement introduced five years earlier than planned, and modeled on the state-mandated SEEK program. Initiated in 1970 because of student takeovers and the shutting down of the campus, Open Admissions was propelled by the virtual shutdown of the college campus, including the barring of gates and the burning of rooms (the beautiful music room in Finley Student Center) and buildings. Open Admissions began on the campus of City College with a virtual revolution. Note then the irony of Shaughnessy's understatement that "this venture into mass education usually began abruptly" (1).

"Error," however, though we would have wished it otherwise, became the institutional ground for discussion of Open Admissions. The institution was reformulating competency. "Error"—and this may be difficult for a generation now intent on ignoring it to understand—was the public space where the latent theoretical and educational commitments of faculty members, departments, and divisions met and interacted. Do we believe in these students? Can they learn? Can we teach them? These were the questions that beleaguered faculty asked in the 1970s, placing the mission of the university in question.

Mina Shaughnessy, in transforming the guiding metaphor of error, changed the instructors' and the institution's attitude from one of negativity—the malfunctioning of students' linguistic systems—to one of possibility—that of a predictable pattern of interference from other languages and dialects. "Error" was the first word on the lips of the faculty after they read their first batch of papers. Not surprisingly, the essays these students wrote during their first weeks of class stunned the teachers who read them. In her book, Mina Shaughnessy describes this reaction:

Nothing, it seemed, short of a miracle was going to turn such students into writers. Not uncommonly, teachers announced to their supervisors (or even their students) after only a week of class that everyone was probably going to fail. These were students, they insisted, whose problems at this stage were irremediable. To make matters worse, there were no studies nor guides, nor even suitable textbooks to

turn to. Here were teachers trained to analyze the belletristic achievements of the centuries marooned in basic writing classrooms with adult student writers who appeared by college standards to be illiterate. Seldom had an educational venture begun so inauspiciously, the teachers unready in mind and heart to face their students, the students weighted by the disadvantages of poor training yet expected to “catch up” with the front-runners in a semester or two of low-intensity instruction. (3)

Profound changes occurred in conceptions of teaching and learning. There were some in the English Department and other departments who were overwhelmed by the students’ lack of preparation. The first issue then was the credibility of students as students; the second was the faculty’s image of itself and its credibility as teachers. The focus in the early days of Open Admissions, indeed the focus of the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, founded at City College by Mina Shaughnessy, with Sarah D’Eloia Fortune, Barbara Quint Gray, Valerie Krishna, Blanche Skurnick, Nancy Lay, Betty Rizzo, Isabella Halsted, Santiago Villafane, Nate Norment, and myself in 1974, was “Error.” The conversation that you read in *Errors and Expectations* was the response of an educational movement that still had the burden of proof to a traditional faculty in the institution and to the public. We who were involved in Open Admissions understood too well T. S. Eliot’s refrain, “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase Then how should I begin. . . .”

The Faculty

Though we speak a lot of the culture and diversity of our students these days, we neglect the “polyphony” (to use Bakhtin’s terminology of voice) of the faculty. As Dennis McGrath and Martin Spear suggest, in models for institutional change, teachers and administrators are presented as “fully rational actors, carefully planning and choosing, in control of their institutions, shaping them to their will” (62). But no policy or practice is culturally neutral and no institutional response to educational change is “fully rational.” During the early years of Open Admissions, the faculty, under stress, knew that the Open Admissions policy was not simply a few new practices added on to the old; it created a new academic culture.

In that first core of instructors who worked with Shaughnessy were literary critics, creative writers, and linguists, all of whom were interested in teaching—a creative mix of people who believed that the borders between these fields, all focusing on language, after all, were permeable. It was this mix of specialties and people that was the second transforming factor in our traditional department. People spoke of writing with special emphases, yet with the sense of overlapping concerns, not believing or articulating (as some in our field do today) a polarization among those in literature, creative writing, and composition. A repertoire of techniques and assignments was developed and discussed with no formulaic or “essentialist” positions on the relationship between thought and language that remains as mysterious today (just read William James and Virginia Woolf), as it did then, in spite of our cognitive labeling. This core group created direction for the rest of the faculty.

It was, admittedly, a faculty torn by uncertainties, ambiguities, frustration, and isolation in those early days of Open Admissions when each faculty member was required to teach at least one basic writing course, and often two, and many went through a period of transformation. Traditionally trained literature professors came to understand their professional roles in new ways and were influenced by the institutional structures they shared but somehow felt that they had not shaped. There was resistance, there was good will; there was an air of skepticism mixed with hope about the intellectual and social environment of the institution as it was being shaped anew by Open Admissions. Very different, and even opposed educational and cultural traditions coexisted peacefully—or seemed to.

The faculty was in crisis about the meaning of the books it had grown up on, and long before it became fashionable to talk about the “canon” our Open Admissions students reinvented it. On a daily basis, we read these books through the students’ ethnic, racial, and political perspectives. There was, for example, the student who, during a discussion of *The Great Gatsby*, wanted to discuss not Nick and the “American Dream” but the “Dream” in relation to the few shadowy Black servants represented in the novel, refocusing decades of literary preoccupation. Our own relationship to language and literature became deeper because of our teaching, seeing literature read with different cultural assumptions, recognizing what Derrida labels “the violence of the letter” to our students’ sense of self and their cultures, in certain books. In the institution, the very presence of African American, His-

panic, Asian, Haitian, and Greek students meant that there was a politically submerged and powerful subtext in every classroom that questioned the institution—the teaching of the majority language, standard English; the way we taught; what books we taught. There was no need, as Gerald Graff and Min-zhan Lu urge, to “structure” conflicts into the curriculum (Graff, 52). Perhaps such strategies are necessary at the University of Chicago and Drake University (we should begin to differentiate pedagogies that fit the cultural needs of different classes and institutions), but the presence of large numbers of minority students in the institution brought the linguistic and cultural questions and problems of our city and society into the classroom every day in our discussions of reading and writing. We struggled, at times, with this powerful subtext, trying to balance sometimes global discussions of conflict and oppression with what Stephen North calls the “practitioner’s arts”—teaching ways of reading and the majority language to our students—or in discussions of techniques sorely needed by a faculty that was routinely experiencing difficulty in teaching its students.

Anyone who was there in those early days knew that we were not just dealing with language, we were dealing with our students’ vulnerable lives. How can I forget my Jamaican students sitting in class with their coats on unable to warm themselves to the degree of the Caribbean sun during our New York winters; the Asian American student who when asked to write about an object in his house, wrote an essay about the one table in the middle of his kitchen and the large board that was added to it to make it into a homework table, then a table for making wontons, then a dinner table, then a resting place for the baby’s bathtub, ending its day by becoming the ironing board for the laundering and ironing of other people’s shirts, the family business; the Iranian students who when they were forced to return to Iran during the hostage crisis told me (suitcase in hand) that their not having passed the Proficiency Exam would mean that they could not have a career in Persia: an “international” crisis. Or the African American student who rhetorically organized his essays as if he were a preacher beginning each one with “hallelujah.”

Had she lived, Mina Shaughnessy might well have written another book entitled, *Confessions of a Director of Writing*, or *The Political Underside of Errors and Expectations*: some things remain unsaid. But make no mistake, *Errors and Expectations* is the public face prepared to meet the faces in a public space preoccupied by “error,” and the question of the teachability of these

students. Mina Shaughnessy took the advice that she gave to her composition students, "Know your audience," and guided institutional change with a nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the diversity of the faculty, awareness of the public, and a rhetorical strategy of indirection and understatement. What is now fashionably explicit had to be implicit at that historical and educational moment at City College.

In reading *Errors and Expectations*, we are reading only part of a conversation in an urban educational institution at a certain historical moment. A quality of the writing—its style of indirection, and, sometimes, elegance—creates order out of the clamor of a desperate educational moment. To cast such a moment into a timeless landscape, as Stephen North does in portraying the writing of *Errors and Expectations* as a heroine's archetypal quest, an "epic" told by a "special storyteller . . . to promote one version or another of a community's mythic self-image" (32) is to romanticize a troubled educational moment and to deny its historical specificity. This book emerged from more than the "society" of composition or a "methodological community"; rather from the turmoil of an institution, a city, a society. Different methodologies and stances spring from different student populations at public and private colleges; urban, suburban, and rural; commuter and residential. For example, the educational stories of historically Black colleges and midwest land grant colleges, also pioneers in the field of composition, may develop differently because of different traditions or expectations. In the next decade, educational stories and accounts will emerge in all their specificity and plurality to defend against ahistorical retrospective accounts of the beginnings of the field. Each conversation will be historically informed by different personalities; different regions of the country; different classes, ethnicities, or races of students; different educational missions and traditions. And when we have this kind of knowledge to be gathered by more inclusive methodologies than those represented here, we will begin to read the texts, the institutions, and the field with more sophistication. We will learn to read the mute historical background and "political unconscious" in public texts like *Errors and Expectations*.

Note

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