

BASIC WRITING, CUNY, AND “MAINSTREAMING”: (DE)RACIALIZATION RECONSIDERED

ABSTRACT: This essay begins by using the notion of education as “white property” to explore the racialized discourses surrounding BW students. By analyzing accounts from the early period of open admissions at CUNY, it shows how students are racialized as “minorities” despite the significant numbers of whites in the program. It argues that because open admissions students embody a threat to established structures of white power and privilege, they are discursively coded as non-white.

In its next major section, the essay contends that racialization within contexts like BW needs to be identified and understood in order to truly dismantle these structures of whiteness. As a means of proving this, the essay explores two examples of discourse that is “deracialized” in some way: one pertaining to the end of CUNY open admissions, and one advocating for mainstreamed BW courses. Both examples demonstrate that by not directly addressing issues of race, structures of whiteness are ultimately left intact.

In “Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies,” Catherine Prendergast argues that there exists a complex and relatively unexplored relationship between the field of Composition and the notion of race. Rather than dealing with the effects of race and racism in explicit, concrete ways, Prendergast suggests that much composition literature subsumes race into “‘basic writer,’ ‘stranger to the academy,’ or the trope of the generalized, marginalized ‘other’” (36). And, as one searches through past issues of a journal like *JBW*, it seems that Prendergast’s description of the trope of “basic writer” holds true: basic writing and discussions of race do often appear hand-in-hand, yet their connection is not always clearly defined.

Consider the following pronouncements drawn from *JBW* articles. In his 1993 piece “Basic Writing: Pushing Against Racism,” William Jones insists that the term basic writer “has been used with notable frequency, as euphemism and code for minority students” (74). A few issues later, in his 1994 article “*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a

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Basic Writing Text," Geoffrey Sirc declares in his opening sentence that "Basic writers are almost wholly, racially other by definition" (50). Ira Shor's 1997 piece describes basic writing as "Our Apartheid," thus not only suggesting that basic writing is the territory of racial minorities, but implying that it involves the kind of racially-sanctioned violence and hatred which apartheid entails. Finally, in the most recent issue of *JBW*, Keith Gilyard notes that BW programs consist of a "solid majority of people of color" (36).

If we take these articles as an indication, it appears as though race is a key component of BW discussions: each article suggests that basic writing and minority students are related in some important way, whether by euphemism, definition, or association. Yet, at the same time, much BW literature is quick to point out that basic writers are a culturally diverse group of students, and not simply people of color. In her rebuttal to Shor's "Our Apartheid," for instance, Karen Greenberg asserts that "[m]ost basic writing students are not 'Blacks' [referring to the language of Shor's piece]... they are ethnically and culturally diverse" (90). In their piece "Basic Writing Class of '93 Five Years Later: How the Academic Paths of Blacks and Whites Diverged," Eleanor Agnew and Margaret McLaughlin demonstrate that BW students come from a range of racial backgrounds, and suggest that these backgrounds are important to their success or failure. Even Shor's 2000 piece "Illegal Literacy" (his *JBW* follow-up to "Our Apartheid") mentions both black and white individuals who suffer under the BW bureaucracy at his home institution.

It appears, then, that there is a contradiction here. On one hand, the discourse surrounding basic writing recognizes basic writers as minorities; yet, BW scholars are quick to note that many basic writers do not fit this description. It is worth asking questions about why such a connection exists, and why it has become such a common way of talking about basic writing.

Race and Open Admissions at CUNY

In order to begin answering such questions, I will turn first to discourses surrounding the early stages of the open admissions program at CUNY. I make this choice for several reasons. First, open admissions is widely regarded as an important home of BW research; from the very beginnings of this program, well-known basic writing scholars like Mina Shaughnessy, Ira Shor, Marilyn Sternglass, Karen Greenberg, and a host of others have spent their energies determining the best ways to serve the influx of non-traditional writers who were entering CUNY for the first time. Open admissions is therefore a context with clear ties to much contemporary BW scholarship, and a con-

text with which *JBW* readers are intimately familiar. More important, though, the discourses surrounding open admissions (particularly those from the “mainstream”) are rife with references to race. I will argue that these racialized discourses serve to mark open admissions in much the same way that BW discourses do; further, I will argue that by doing so, they mark the phenomenon of educational access as a distinctly racialized space.

The first examples relevant to this discussion are two well-known accounts of open admissions written by CUNY professors in the 1970s. These professors equate open admissions students with minorities as a means of justifying their opinions about who should and should not be granted access to the academy. For instance, in his 1976 work *The End of Education*, Geoffrey Wagner suggests that he is profoundly disturbed by the influx of open admissions students into CUNY, and implies that this discomfort is based in part upon their racial difference. At one point in his text he describes a group of open admissions students as the “senior class at Rikers Island” (132).¹ Shortly after uttering this statement, he goes on to make specific comments about the racial and ethnic traits of these students, implying that their perceived criminality and background are closely intertwined. For instance, he characterizes one group of Latinos and Latinas in the following way:

I can testify that one colleague the first term had a group of Panamanian girls in [his] Basic Writing course who were so abusive, stupid, and hostile that he could conduct his classes only by ignoring their presence, as they sulked in the back with their babies. Puerto Ricans, meanwhile, demanded extra credit for having to learn the lingua franca of English in the first place (128).

Clearly, Wagner sees open admissions as a threat, as it allows these “abusive, stupid, and hostile” students (students who are clearly marked as racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities) into the university where they would not otherwise be. It is interesting, too, to note that he dwells specifically upon the writing classroom as the context for his discomfort; in doing so, he establishes a clear link between the notion of race and issues of literacy, one which suggests that literacy is a privilege inappropriate for people of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Along slightly less caustic lines, Wagner’s colleague L.G. Heller writes *The Death of the American University* in 1973 during an earlier stage of open admissions. His discussion is similar, although perhaps it does not reject minority students as openly as Wagner’s does. For instance, Heller insists that “Black and Puerto Rican students” (20) were among some of the groups responsible for the political disruptions which took place on campus, groups which also included the radical

organization Students for a Democratic Society. Here Heller does not openly reject minority students in the way that Wagner does; however, he does subtly imply that race makes these students appear threatening, in much the same way that the political agendas of the (apparently white) radical groups makes them a threat.

Heller then offers a characterization of the open admissions program as a whole which insists that, although there is room for the

perfectly legitimate escalation of the level of aspiration of some minority groups . . . the associated move toward open-admissions policies . . . constitutes part of this phase of the problem, at least to the extent that the would-be college or university-bound applicants have not mastered the knowledge and skills heretofore delegated to the elementary and high school levels of education (155).

This passage suggests that open admissions is exclusively the domain of minority students when it speaks of "the legitimate escalation of the level of aspiration of some minority groups." In addition, it juxtaposes race and academic ability by suggesting that these open admissions students are simply not prepared for the university. So, while Heller does not say explicitly that minority students do not belong in the academy, he implies it when he simultaneously suggests that open admissions students are minority students, and that open admissions students are unprepared for (and therefore undeserving of) a college education.

The next piece to which I turn is Bruce Horner's "Discoursing Basic Writing," a contemporary discussion that also notes this tendency to construe open admissions students as minorities. Horner suggests that the popular media constructed open admissions students of color as both political militants and academic failures (202). He also points to several *New York Times* articles which single out Black and Puerto Rican students as "ignorant and disruptive," others which accuse students from these groups of engaging in the "Wrecking of a College," and still others which refer to these students as "barbarians" (203). In these ways, Horner suggests that the mainstream media in the 1970s reacted to open admissions students of color much like the two professors noted above: they explicitly identified them as minorities, associated them with ignorance and barbarism, and shunned their presence at the university level.

Horner's discussion then provides additional insight into this situation as he focuses specifically on white open admissions students, students who appear to be discoursed very differently. Horner suggests that "unimaginable within the framework [of open admissions discourse] . . . were the so-called 'white ethnics': working-class whites,

many of them at CUNY of Italian or Irish Catholic background" (202). This assertion that whites were "unimaginable" within open admissions is intriguing for two reasons. First, as Horner remarks, "the majority of open admissions students at CUNY were whites of working-class background" (202); second, articles appeared within the mainstream media with names like "CUNY Open Admissions Found Benefiting Whites Most," and "Open Admissions Found to Benefit Whites Too" (202). These facts suggest that whites were clearly present within open admissions, and that their presence was even discussed to some degree within the mainstream. Apparently, though, because they were not the "right" color, they were still not regarded as the true population of the program. Sociologists David E. Lavin and David Hyllegard also note this paradox when they suggest that "the benefits to whites under open admissions have not generally been recognized" (34), despite occasional stories like the ones that Horner mentions.

When examined as a whole, the accounts of Wagner, Heller, and Horner all suggest that open admissions students are minority students "by definition," much like in the BW literature mentioned previously. These students are labeled as minorities and consequently determined to be unfit for college-level work. This is not to say that whites are totally ignored within accounts of open admissions; after all, they are the focus of the kinds of articles that Horner mentions. However, in these articles whites are not discourses as "barbarians," but simply as bystanders who happen to derive benefit from a program not intended for them. In this sense, they do not constitute the "legitimate" focus of open admissions talk.

In a broader sense, then, these processes of racialization within BW and open admissions suggest that race is fundamental to issues of educational access. As multitudes of non-traditional students seek higher levels of education, they are clearly labeled and sorted according to racialized conceptions of who does and who does not belong at the university. In the process, notions of race, academic ability, and overall worth become intertwined such that minority status and remedial status become one and the same. With this in mind, I now turn to the work of several critical race scholars who highlight the connections between race and issues of power and privilege in educational contexts. This work will help to explain why such racialized discourses emerge in contexts like open admissions and BW; further, it will illuminate some of the implications that such discourses can have.

Critical Race Theory and the Notion of "White Property"

My analysis thus far has arisen from the idea that we must identify and analyze the racialization of BW and open admissions rather than leaving it unexplored. By doing this, I think that we take impor-

tant steps toward minimizing the negative effects that such racialization can foster, particularly with regard to the sorts of racism mentioned above. This claim is similar to one that theorist Ruth Frankenberg makes as she focuses on the structural racism inherent in the concept of whiteness. She defines “whiteness” as

a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination . . . among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility (6).

Here Frankenberg suggests that the power afforded to whiteness exists in its status as an invisible “default” position; because whiteness is the norm, it is unlikely to be questioned, and the structures of power that undergird it are unlikely to be changed. For this reason, Frankenberg insists that any critical examination of race must attempt to account for the power inherent within whiteness in explicit ways.

One tool for unpacking the effects of whiteness that will prove useful here is the notion of “white property,” a concept which critical race theorist Cheryl Harris discusses in detail. Harris insists that notions of race and property have evolved within U.S. law such that they are inextricably linked, constituting a “racialized conception of property implemented by force and ratified by law” (1715). She suggests through multiple examples drawn from U.S. law (both past and present) that whiteness has become synonymous with wealth and ownership, while non-whiteness has come to represent poverty and non-ownership. For instance, when Harris speaks of the evolution of slavery, she suggests that whites became coded as property-owners, while non-white slaves came to represent a “hybrid, mixed category of humanity and property” (1718). Later, she argues that whites were legally entitled to usurp Native American lands because “solely through being white could property be acquired and secured by law” (1724). In these ways Harris suggests that whiteness has become a kind of “property” in itself, as it guarantees certain privileges and perks to its possessors, and denies the same to those who do not possess it.

Although her focus in this context is primarily a legal one, Harris does spend one section of her analysis discussing issues related to educational access: specifically, the proliferation of so-called “reverse-discrimination” cases at colleges and universities. Early in her piece, she suggests that this type of case posits whiteness and white property as a kind “baseline” against which the rights of all other groups are judged (1714). Later, she suggests that these sorts of cases provide whites with the power to determine the “extent of infringement on [their] settled

expectations" (1768); in other words, they allow whites to determine the degree to which college admissions will reflect diversity without upsetting expectations that whites themselves will remain the majority. For support, she mentions a case in which one white student sued for admission to an elite university on the grounds that "less-qualified" minorities took the place guaranteed to him by virtue of his score on a test (1769). Harris sums up this case (along with several others) in the following way:

The underlying, although unstated, premise . . . is that the expectation of white privilege is valid, and that the legal protection of that expectation is warranted. This premise legitimates prior assumptions of the right to ongoing racialized privilege (1769).

Harris' comment suggests that educational access itself falls under the rubric of "white property": whites perceive access to educational resources as an exclusive right, one which they are entitled to govern as they see fit. In this particular case, the right is manifested as a (racialized) test score which provides white students with the sense that they should be guaranteed admission to a particular school, as well as the sense that "unqualified" minorities occupy their "rightful" place. This belief is further bolstered by the fact that students are entitled to sue for this right in the U.S. legal system, and to assert that their whiteness is being infringed upon. In this sense, Harris' example suggests that education is not a neutral entity, but one which exists in a larger framework of white power and privilege.

This idea of education as white property has been employed by several other critical race scholars as well, particularly as a means of analyzing the impact of the Civil Rights legislation from which open admissions initiatives were derived. In *We Are Not Saved*, Derrick Bell applies this notion of white property to the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. In contrast to the traditional liberal view of this decision, one which suggests that it helped to create more egalitarian educational and social conditions for African Americans, Bell suggests that it actually served to protect white property interests. He argues that

[w]hile the desegregation debate had focused on whether black children would benefit from busing and attendance at racially balanced schools, the figures put beyond dispute the fact that every white person in the city would benefit directly or indirectly from the desegregation plan that most had opposed (107).

The "figures" that Bell refers to here include things like teacher

salaries, school buses, new school construction, federal and state funds, and taxes (105-106), all of which would accrue to white school districts as they implemented mandatory school desegregation. This suggests that the economic benefits of forced integration were quite apparent from a white perspective, regardless of the Civil Rights agenda which this move was supposed to promote.

Along similar lines, Bell later argues that the *Brown* decision was not only influenced by immediate economic factors, but also by concerns over the international prestige of the U.S.. For instance, he notes that NAACP court victories must be viewed in relationship to the fact that “abandonment of state-supported segregation would be a crucial asset [in competing] with Communist countries for the hearts and minds of Third World people” (62). To put this comment in terms of the “property rights” mentioned above, Bell suggests here that the (white) image of the U.S. as protector of the free world was placed in serious jeopardy by these negative perceptions, and that white property was jeopardized as a result. Historian Mary L. Dudziak echoes this sentiment in her piece “Desegregation as Cold War Imperative.” She suggests, for instance, that

as news story after news story of voting rights abuses, state-enforced segregation, and lynchings appeared in the world media, many questioned whether American constitutional rights and democratic principles had any meaning. In many African and Asian countries, where issues of race, nationalism, and anti-colonialism were of much greater import than Cold War tensions between the superpowers, the reality of U.S. racism was particularly problematic (119).

Dudziak shows here that the primary goal of *Brown* was to maintain the image of the U.S.. Thus, she too implies that this decision was meant in large part to protect white property interests rather than to address the injustices being perpetrated on African Americans.

Like Harris’ analysis of college admissions, the work of Bell and Dudziak posits educational access as a key component of white property. Their work suggests that educational access was given to non-whites in the hope of larger projected gains, much like an investment or an insurance policy: in the first case, Bell suggests that educational access could guarantee a certain amount of extra income to white property holders; in the second, both Bell and Dudziak suggest that educational access was offered in the hope of preserving larger white property interests against the threat of Communism. Again, then, we see that programs like open admissions exist within a racialized framework of education, one that privileges the status of whiteness over that of all other groups.

White Property, CUNY, and the Racialized Realities of BW

At this point, I would like to suggest that the notion of whiteness as a “property right” and the subsequent manifestations of white property in educational contexts can be quite useful for answering the question of why open admissions at CUNY is racialized as a minority position. I’ve shown that the concept of “white property” codes the power structures of the U.S. according to racial categories, with the term “white” representing power and privilege, and the term “non-white” representing an absence of these assets. Educational institutions are definitely among these power structures, since educational access is contingent on issues of race and racism.

This line of argument suggests, I think, that open admissions at CUNY (and by implication BW) is racialized as a minority position precisely because it stands in discursive opposition to white property. Programs like open admissions and BW seek to extend the white property of educational access to underprivileged groups; in this sense, they pose a potential threat to the hegemony on which this property depends. Within this context of educational advancement, then, individual minorities are perceived as the “best fit” for open admissions/BW discourses because they embody this threat to dismantle white property and redistribute it more equitably for all people. In contrast, white open admissions/BW students are perceived as little more than a categorical mismatch within such discourses, since they ought to possess some measure of this property in the first place.² In this sense, the larger framework of white property does in fact label open admissions/BW students as minorities “by definition,” even if a majority of them are in fact white.

In turn, I would argue that recognizing these discourses of racialization is extremely important. If we focus attention on white property in the educational arena, we can begin to expose it and thus prevent it from operating unnoticed. Rather than being satisfied with unexplored tropes, unclear associations, or hazy definitions, then, we can demonstrate just how important race is to issues of education and educational access.

We might focus, for instance, on the negative potential of this racialization. Attitudes like those expressed by Wagner and Heller are enabled to some degree by this racialized discourse if it provides a structure into which negative stereotypes of minorities can be easily fit. After all, if open admissions students are minorities “by definition,” and if they are typically viewed as academically unprepared, it may be easy for some people to draw essentialist connections between race, intelligence, and overall ability. I would argue that the more we expose the mechanisms of this racialization, the more we problematize

this larger discursive framework that makes racism appear “natural.”

At the same time, though, we can acknowledge that racialization is not always a negative thing; in fact, it can serve as an important basis for resisting whiteness and white property. If we recognize that whites have access to privileges and perks that others do not, we can begin to critique educational discourses which insist that all students are the same. We can scrutinize seemingly race-neutral terms like “equal-opportunity,” “democracy,” and “freedom,” and suggest that these terms do not apply to minorities in the same way that they might apply to whites. Or, when speaking of contexts like open admissions and BW, we can contest the white properties of “literacy,” “competence,” and “intelligence,” and insist that mainstream white standards are not the only ones by which these ideals can be measured. Cognizance of racialization helps us to oppose the idea that whiteness ought to be an educational “baseline” against which all other groups should be judged.

For these reasons, I argue that race and the racialization of educational access must be talked about openly. Doing so will not only help us to better understand the problems inherent within this racialization, but also to understand the important social and educational realities to which this racialization points. In this way, we can both confront racism on many levels, and establish an informed position from which to critique the operation of white property on a larger scale.

A Few Clarifications—Whiteness and White Property

At this point in my argument, I want to pause and make a few clarifications. In particular, I want to address the complexities of a notion like “white property,” and to explain the implications of these complexities for my overall analysis.

I do not want to give the erroneous impression that white property is something unilaterally available to whites or unilaterally unavailable to peoples of color. Because white property entails a hybrid of race and economics, it follows that only those who possess significant power and privilege truly possess white property in its fullest sense. For example, Bell notes that poor whites are barred from full possession of “white property” simply because they do not have access to the power and prestige which is essential to it. He suggests that for many whites, white property may entail little more than “[living] out the lives of the rich and famous through the pages of the tabloids and television dramas like *Falcon Crest*, and *Dynasty*” (81). In this way, Bell argues that race does not guarantee economic success. However, as Cheryl Harris notes, this does not imply that the situation of poor whites and people of color is therefore equal. She suggests that even

poor whites retain “relative privilege . . . in comparison to people of color . . . whiteness retains its value as a consolation prize: it does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose” (1758). In other words, even if privilege is not distributed to all whites on an equal basis, it is nonetheless more readily available to whites than to minorities.³

It is clear, then, that white property is a complex idea that cannot be applied reductively. Rather than confusing my overall analysis, though, I would argue that this complexity actually adds to it. As I’ve outlined, white students at CUNY seem to be ignored or glossed over rather than identified explicitly. We can say that these white individuals lack the resources and power to be raced as “truly” white; instead, they are treated as little more than (embarrassing) exceptions to this “natural” rule that open admissions and BW are the domain of minorities. Yet, at the same time, the situation of these whites is not identical to that of people of color within these programs. Whites seem to fare much better in these programs on the whole: they are more likely to get good grades, more likely to graduate, and more likely to obtain higher-paying jobs than their minority counterparts. In a study of BW in their home institution, for instance, Agnew and McLaughlin point out that white students have a much higher chance of passing their BW courses on the first try, and a significantly better chance of graduating within five years of beginning their degree (46). Similarly, Lavin and Hyellgard suggest that open admissions as a whole “did not entirely erase inequalities that separate minorities from whites in educational attainment and in labor-market rewards” (198).

Again, then, I want to recognize that white property is not a simple concept. We cannot assume that being labeled as white or as a person of color guarantees a particular economic or social status. At the same time, though, we should still recognize the importance of white property and its implications for educational access.⁴

Deracialization and the End of Open Admissions at CUNY

I have been arguing thus far that racialization is endemic to educational enterprises, and that we must work to explore the implications of this as much as possible. However, I have only focused on discourses in which race is clearly foregrounded. It is just as important to look at discourses in which race is conspicuously absent; after all, this absence can hide a great deal, and may work to further mask the operation of white property. As a means of proving this, I will now focus upon instances in which race has been omitted (either deliberately or unintentionally) from discussions of open admissions and BW, and analyze the consequences of this omission. I begin with the

recent decision to end open admissions at CUNY, and suggest that this decision has been enabled largely by an avoidance of race and the power structures intertwined with it.

At first glance, many of the debates over the recent decision to end open admissions at CUNY seem to treat race differently than the texts which I have analyzed thus far. Rather than making explicit references to race, these debates rely heavily on ideas like “standards” and “academic excellence.” New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani suggests that he supports the abolition of open admissions only because it will help to “restore [CUNY’s] reputation as one of the great institutions of higher learning in this country” (Arenson A1). Similarly, a spokesperson for Governor George Pataki insists that “We’re pleased that the board voted to restore standards at CUNY” (Arenson A1). Here both the Mayor and the Governor insist that the move to end open admissions is based only on academic standards, and hence, by implication, not on issues of race.

Other accounts pay a bit more attention to race, but even they focus most of their attention on this notion of standards. In an op-ed piece, John Patrick Diggins insists that administrators who oppose this plan are only “committed to achieving ‘diversity’ at four-year colleges, even though this means admitting unqualified students” (A1). Along similar lines, James Traub (author of *City on a Hill*, a book-length account of the problems which he perceives with open admissions) mentions in another op-ed piece that “perhaps there’s an element of exclusion to these mild reforms, but it’s an exclusion that is plainly good for the institution and the students” (A13). Both of these accounts do make veiled reference to race through the terms “diversity” and “exclusion,” yet they do so only to characterize it as irrelevant in comparison to standards. It seems that race only emerges here briefly in order to be dismissed in light of the “truth” of the standards argument.

In one sense, all of these comments represent a mild version of Heller’s argument, as they champion the notion of high standards, and suggest to some degree that racial minorities represent the antithesis of those standards. Yet, they seem much more wary of race in general, only alluding to it in off-hand ways (if at all). It seems that these proponents of the end of open admissions are engaging in what Frankenberg calls a “color/power evasive” discourse, one which “insists that we are all the same under the skin; that, culturally, we are converging; that materially, we all have the same chances in U.S. society; and that—the sting in the tail—any failure to achieve is therefore the fault of people of color themselves” (14). By simultaneously championing standards while downplaying race these proponents imply that indeed “we are all the same under the skin,” and hence deny that there are structures of white power (including educational opportunity, school funding, and testing programs), which grant privileges to

whites while denying them to others. Basic writing scholar Tom Fox puts it another way when he suggests that such claims “[reassert] a standard that supposedly existed in the past and is now threatened or abandoned, without having to deal with the fact that we now face students whose diverse histories and cultures challenge an easy sense of comparison” (41).

Several critics have insisted, in fact, that this de-emphasis on race clearly contributed to the end of the program. Journalist Richard Perez-Pena insists that the stance of Guiliani and Pataki allowed them to limit open admissions while simultaneously avoiding charges of racism by their opponents (B 8). Journalist Karen W. Arenson notes the presence of many protesters at CUNY board meetings who argued that the abolition of open admissions at CUNY would have explicitly racial repercussions; she also suggests that several groups such as the NAACP, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, and the American Jewish Congress had considered taking legal action against the move (A1). However, she notes that because open admissions served white students, the likelihood of obtaining favorable court decisions upon racial grounds was slim. (A1). Apparently, some groups involved in the debate did recognize this link between access to power and notions of race, even though their voices ultimately were not recognized. It is particularly ironic to note that one cause of their silence was the presence of individual whites in the open admissions program—the very same whites who had been largely ignored throughout the history of CUNY. In this case, though, they were specifically identified as “white” so that proponents could assert that such cuts were not “racist” (after all, whites who didn’t “measure up” were being excluded too). This again shows white power interests utilizing notions of race to serve their own needs; avoiding or reframing issues of race here proved to be the most expedient way to do so.

For these reasons, I would argue that the implications of intentionally deracialized discourses may be just as damaging (or even more damaging) than the unabashedly racist remarks made by the likes of Wagner; whereas openly racist discourses are at least straightforward in their aims (and therefore easily identified), these discourses of “standards” attempt to re-render whiteness and the power attached to as invisible. Fruitful debate about the nature of power relationships is unlikely to take place in contexts where such discourses take hold.

CUNY as Lesson for Basic Writing: Race and Mainstreaming

In this final section of the argument, I’d like to suggest that the risks of deracialization within educational discourses are not only

present among discussions designed to promote white hegemony. Ironically, they can also be found in discourses meant to increase educational access for all students. As a means of demonstrating this, I now turn to several well-known accounts of "mainstreaming" within the BW literature. While these approaches no doubt operate with the best intentions of BW students in mind, they exhibit a relative inattention to the racialized context of BW that might prove detrimental in the long run.

I'd like to turn first to David Bartholomae's oft-cited 1992 piece "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum" in order to provide a sense of history for this mainstreaming movement. In this piece, Bartholomae makes the general claim that while BW operates with the general goal of improving students' chances of success, it unintentionally creates the very inequalities which it purports to be addressing. Perhaps the most well-known quote from this piece is the following:

I think basic writing programs have become expressions of our desire to produce basic writers, to maintain the course, the argument, and the slot in the university community; to maintain the distinction (basic/normal) we have learned to think through and by. The basic writing program, then, can be seen simultaneously as an attempt to bridge and preserve cultural difference, to enable students to enter the "normal" curriculum but to insure, at the same time, that there are basic writers (8).

Here Bartholomae suggests that basic writing creates a false binary of "basic" and "normal," then treats students according to that binary: "normal" students are provided with challenging curricula and instruction because they are assumed to be capable of success; "basic" students are relegated to meaningless skill-and-drill exercises because they are assumed to be capable of nothing more. In this sense, Bartholomae suggests that BW is itself responsible for these problems, and that it must be abolished in order to address them.

And, while it has been nearly a decade since his argument first appeared in print, Bartholomae's admonition appears quite frequently in the recent mainstreaming debate as well. For example, in his well-known 1997 piece "Our Apartheid," Ira Shor makes a somewhat similar claim:

I see the BW/comp story as part of a long history of curricula for containment and control, part of the system of tracking to divide and deter non-elite students in school and college. The students themselves are tested and declared deficient by the

system, which blames the apparently illiterate and cultureless victim, stigmatizing the individual as the problem while requiring BW/comp as the remedy (98).

Here Shor paints BW more as a malicious attempt at social control than as a good-hearted attempt gone awry; nonetheless, he shares Bartholomae's view that BW creates basic writers. Shor attempts to prove this by pointing to specific structures within his own institution which he deems responsible for such "containment and control." For instance, he criticizes the use of unfair assessment tools like the "infamous Writing Assessment Test" (96), and rejects the institutional structures which force students to take non-credit courses that slow their progress toward a degree (96). In "Illegal Literacy," Shor speaks of non-credit courses in greater detail through the situation alluded to earlier. He outlines the story of two women (one black and one white) who were deemed basic writers by virtue of test scores, even though they had already passed the "normal" freshman composition course without completing the non-credit prerequisite. They were ultimately forced to take the BW course for no credit despite the fact that it was clearly unnecessary (101-103). Again, Shor makes this point in order to show that BW creates basic writers out of individuals who can clearly succeed in "normal" courses.

Other well-known versions of these mainstreaming programs stem from this same premise. In their account of the mainstreaming program at South Carolina, for instance, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson cite the same Bartholomae passage that I mention above, and suggest that they had grown weary of "the basic writing 'slot' and the argument that holds it in place" (62). They too agree with the fundamental belief that BW helps to foster a divide between "basic" and "normal" writers.⁵ Similarly, a recent account of the program at Cal State, Chico offered by Judith Rodby and Tom Fox traces its theoretical heritage to Bartholomae and "[questions] both the definitions of 'basic writers' and the effectiveness of [BW] programs" (85). They also remark that the that the term "'basic' did not describe students' practices, but operated as a construct that supported a remedial economic structure that distributed 'credit' unequally" (85).

As a result of these fundamental beliefs, all three sets of authors propose alternatives to current BW configurations. Shor's project is entitled "Critical Literacy Across the Curriculum," and features group work, ethnographic research, and support services designed to insure that students succeed. In a recent interview with Howard Tinberg, he suggests that in his program

subject matter [should be] situated diversely and critically in the identities, interests, and conditions of the students... [this

subject matter will be used in] a field-based, project-oriented, action-centered approach which develops critical literacy through student participation in diverse organizations on and off campus as ethnographers and writing interns (166).

Similarly, the programs at South Carolina and Cal State, Chico seek to foster literacy experiences through group work and support. Grego and Thompson's program offers a non-credit "studio" which is held in conjunction with regular for-credit freshman composition. In these "studio" sessions groups of four or five students meet with experienced instructors to discuss readings from their courses, to discuss the writing that they are engaged in, and to provide a general atmosphere of encouragement and support for one another (75-81). Rodby and Fox's program is structured similarly, as students are placed into small discussion groups dedicated to reading, writing, and thinking (91-93). Both programs offer plenty of opportunities for students to discuss their work with other students at their level in a low-pressure environment (Grego and Thompson 76; Rodby and Fox 92-93), to compare and contrast their workloads and experiences in various sections of the course (Grego and Thompson 76; Rodby and Fox 97), and to use the groups as a source for venting frustration or critiquing the academic settings in which they find themselves (Grego and Thompson 77-80; Rodby and Fox 94-95).

In this way, Shor, Grego and Thompson, and Rodby and Fox all argue that their mainstreaming solutions can counteract the ill-effects of BW programs by restructuring these programs more fruitfully. Their solutions expose students to the standard first-year curriculum while offering support mechanisms to improve their likelihood of success; they provide a for-credit context for former BW students, thereby rewarding effort and achievement on the part of students; finally, they operate on pedagogical principles that reject skill and drill type of work and in favor of contextualized and collaborative literacy learning.

Race and the Question of Mainstreaming

Before I move on to discuss these projects in light of the larger issues I've raised concerning race and property, I would like to state that there is much merit in all three plans. I find their arguments regarding non-credit courses to be quite compelling, insuring that students receive credit for their hard work makes good sense. Similarly, I find the pedagogical approaches which all three programs employ to be laudable, as they feature principles of collaboration and collegiality that are admirable bases for any writing program. I imagine that under the supervision of thoughtful and knowledgeable individuals like

Shor, Grego and Thompson, or Rodby and Fox, all of these programs can and do serve as excellent sites for teaching and learning.

Yet, in light of the critical race perspective that I've presented in the essay, I do find myself concerned about the macro-level social and political implications of these mainstreaming arguments. In effect, they suggest that BW *creates* inequality through its practices; thus by removing BW, they insist that inequality is removed along with it. In contrast, though, the critical race perspective I've outlined here suggests that inequalities present in BW are largely *effects* of racialized economic, legal, and educational processes; thus, simply removing BW will not ultimately foster significant change, since it does not address the source of the problem. It seems that at best, then, the mainstreaming argument is focusing its energy in the wrong place. Regardless of the form of the program (traditional BW program, critical literacy program, or mainstreaming program with studio support) students will face racialized inequalities endemic to the academy.

At worst, though, there is the potential for much more than mispent energy here: namely, the "de-racialization" of discourses surrounding BW, and the subsequent problems that can arise from this. In particular, I am concerned that former BW students will be placed into mainstream FYC without recognizing the ways in which that mainstream can serve to protect white property interests. I realize of course that racializing FYC as a "white" space might raise some eyebrows, especially since all of the programs mentioned above employ critical literacy and group approaches that can certainly address issues of race and racism. While I agree that the mainstream can be made more equitable through these means, I am worried about the possibility that the mainstream will not be radically restructured in the long-term, particularly in light of the work of Bell and Dudziak. Recall that even the Civil Rights movement itself (complete with its federally-mandated attempts to restructure racial hierarchies in fundamental ways) seems to have fallen far short of complete equality for all races. I fear that FYC will likely suffer the same fate.

I think for instance of Linda Brodkey's ordeal at the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1990s, in which the introduction into standard freshman comp of material considered "too political" resulted in national outcry from the white mainstream. I strongly suspect that the outcry would not have been nearly as great had the same material been introduced into a BW course; after all, BW exists on the fringes of the academy by definition (as suggested by the notion of "white property"), and therefore is perhaps viewed as a more "proper" context for such discussions.

Furthermore, I worry that our current political situation is even less amiable than it was during the early 90s. The tenor of our time seems to be increasingly anti-egalitarian, as demonstrated by the de-

mise of open admissions as well as by the recent moves in California, Florida, Texas, and other places to end affirmative action. Thus, the kind of outcry voiced a decade ago may be even more intense today if we attempt to radically restructure FYC.⁶

For these reasons, I would suggest that the critical race perspective demands that we reframe this mainstreaming debate in more race-cognizant terms. Rather than asking whether BW programs should be converted into mainstreaming programs (thus posing an either/or question), we might be better off asking how any and all programs for students at risk can be best equipped to recognize the racialized context of the academy, and how they can best work to prepare students to operate within it. Among the questions we might ask are the following: In what sense do current BW programs contribute to racism? In what ways do they help students to identify racism and work against it? How might we better prepare students to recognize the functioning of race in their lives, and better assist them in dismantling white property? How might mainstreaming proposals help us to reach these goals? How might they prevent us from doing so?

In answering these questions, I think that we can profitably borrow much from the aforementioned mainstreaming approaches to BW. Critical literacy practices can help students to identify the ways in which racialization affects them in their educational pursuits, and can help them to change their own realities; similarly, studio programs can allow students to discuss the racialized nature of their educational experiences and thus negotiate these experiences more comfortably. Yet, I think that in addition to these measures, we need to insure that our programs (in whatever form they ultimately take) clearly preserve some sort of institutional space in which opposition to the white mainstream can be openly maintained. As Keith Gilyard notes, we ought to be wary of totally dismantling old BW structures, since "any space one gets to promote agency and critical faculty is valuable territory not to be conceded" (37). As we consider ways in which BW programs can better adapt to reflect the racialized realities of the academy, we simply cannot forget the institutional dimensions of our actions.

Mary Soliday offers important food for thought toward this end in her discussion of her own attempts to improve BW conditions through mainstreaming. She agrees with many of the goals of the mainstreaming enterprise, yet notes her hesitancy to completely do away with established forms of BW. For instance, she writes that she was given a special grant to explore the possibilities of mainstreaming; from this experience, she warns that "once [a program is] no longer protected by the prestige and funding of a special grant, politics can redefine the [program's] original goals" (96). In this sense, Soliday feels that if such programs are not assured of an institutional home, they can be placed in jeopardy. She also argues that any move to restruc-

ture current programs must be accompanied by two things: a move to firmly entrench the new programs within the academy (97), and a push to convince administrators that these programs are not meant as cost-cutting measures, but rather as a means of improving the education that can be offered to students who enter at relative disadvantage (97). I concur with all of these suggestions, and would further add that discussions of race and the racialization of educational access need to be made explicit within these attempts at institutionalization. This will insure that issues of race cannot continue to be swept under the rug of "standards" as they were in the case of CUNY.

Carrying on Our Work

Throughout this piece I've insisted that we take a closer look at the operation of race and racialization within the context of BW. We must recognize that our students are discourses in opposition to the white mainstream, and we must continue to explore the effects of this process as much as we can. This is especially important for us as BW teachers and scholars. We have direct influence on the ways in which our students gain access to the discourses and knowledges that are valued within the (white) academy, and thus are in a prime position to address racial issues in a significant way. As we expose students to various literacies and discourses, then, we must teach them to recognize the role that race plays in the academy, help them to negotiate this academic environment more successfully, and ultimately give them the tools to change this environment in ways that they see fit. I think that the very fact that we spend so much time in a journal like *JBW* discussing issues of race and racism shows our collective commitment to helping our students succeed; defining and clarifying the importance of race in the ways that I've outlined can help us to do an even better job.

Notes

1. Rikers Island is regarded as one of New York's most notorious prisons.
2. I will have much more to say about whites and white property in a later section.
3. Similarly, there might be instances in which people of color possess significant amounts of white property, particularly if their economic and/or social status is high (for example sports figures, entertainers,

politicians, and others). Again, though, this idea of white property suggests that the experience of such individuals, while perhaps more favorable than that of other minorities, is still somehow different than the experience of whites from similar economic and social backgrounds.

4. I should note too that some of my claims about racialization may seem to rely quite heavily on essentialist notions of “white” and “black.” I agree that such notions can oversimplify otherwise complex ideas if they are employed haphazardly; after all, “whiteness” and “blackness” are socially-constructed terms, and therefore open to continual interpretation and change. However, I would argue that the use of such terms is justified in part by the way in which these binaries have been employed historically in the U.S.. At some level, these binaries have been instrumental in creating racialized material realities that rely on simplified notions of race (i.e. race-based slavery). Thus, while I do not want to posit essential difference between black and white in these contexts, they have always held a great deal of significance in the U.S., and hence are still useful for describing the ways in which power is negotiated between different groups.

5. I should mention, however, that Grego and Thompson do ultimately extend this argument by taking particular issue with the way that BW programs serve to mask the “*personal and interpersonal* mental processes that compositionists (especially teachers of those designated as 'basic writers') engage in with student writers and student writing” (64).

6. Recent discussions on WPA-L suggest that there is a debate brewing over whether or not FYC itself ought to be abolished. My wariness of unqualified mainstreaming efforts is only further intensified by the presence of such debates. Without *any* sort of institutionalized writing requirement, it seems that former BW students will have even fewer resources to help them negotiate the racialized realities of the academy.

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