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# (RE)WRITING YOUTH: BASIC WRITING, YOUTH CULTURE, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

*ABSTRACT: As an extension of Henry Giroux's critique of mainstream media and popular culture's depictions of young people, this article examines the ways in which students in basic writing respond to rhetorical constructions of their generation. It argues that compositionists' efforts to intervene and mediate society's conceptions of youth are complicated by students' simultaneous acceptance and rejection of these representations and also explores the subsequent implications for students' and teachers' responsibility and complicity in society's "demonization" of young people. Claiming that students in basic writing are uniquely situated to write across and against society's definitions of them, the author suggests approaches to critical basic writing pedagogy that bring youth culture into its critique, paying particular attention to public writing.*

In "Public Pedagogy and the Responsibility of Intellectuals: Youth, Littleton, and the Loss of Innocence," Henry Giroux calls on critical compositionists to factor the category of youth into broader discussions on power, politics, and change. In response to what he describes as the "demonization" (35) of youth in the post-Littleton (Columbine High School shootings) climate, Giroux argues that we must consider "the question of how young people experience, resist, challenge, and mediate the complex cultural politics and social spaces that mark their everyday lives" (10). The "crisis of youth must be central to any notion of literacy, pedagogy, and cultural politics," he argues, because youth have become the "victims of adult mistreatment, greed, neglect, and domination" (10).

As an extension of Giroux's critique of mainstream media and popular cultural depictions of young people, this article examines the impact of students' own constructions of youth and youth culture. Specifically, I focus on my students in basic writing, their investment in and response to rhetorical constructions of their generation (as they define themselves in relation to news media as well as contemporary music, television, and film).<sup>1</sup> Using student essays and classroom tran-

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scripts, I argue that efforts to intervene and mediate society's conceptions of youth are complicated by students' simultaneous acceptance and rejection of these representations and their implications for "responsibility," "innocence," and "complicity."<sup>2</sup> Finally, I suggest various approaches to critical basic writing pedagogy that bring youth culture into its critique, paying particular attention to opportunities for students to engage in public discourses.

## **Rhetorical Constructions of Youth**

Sometimes called "Generation Y" or "The Millennial Generation," labels having to do with time rather than character, young people are indeed the victims of what Annette Fuentes describes as a "sour, almost hateful view." The past two decades have seen a dramatic change in attitudes toward youth, she asserts, "reflected in the educational and criminal justice systems as well as in our daily discourse." This "criminalization of youth" is evidenced in the "zero tolerance" policies in schools nationwide and the increasing efforts to treat younger and younger offenders as adults—to punish rather than rehabilitate. Fuentes also cites a 1997 report from Public Agenda, a nonprofit policy group, which found that that only 23% of adults surveyed had positive things to say about kids. Public Agenda's more recent study, "Kids These Days '99," indicates that disturbing attitudes towards young people have changed little since the earlier study, with substantial majorities of Americans describing teens and children as "rude," "irresponsible," "wild," and "lack[ing] basic values." As David Sarasohn asserts, "in the general view of adults today, adolescents are an assembly of drugs, body-piercing and black trench coats. From parents to commentators to congressmen, American grown-ups are scaring themselves silly about—and scaring themselves away from—American kids."

Perhaps most disturbing of all is how students are portrayed by academics. Todd Gitlin describes today's students in "Liberal Arts Versus Information Glut":

students come to higher education today for largely vocational reasons. A diploma is seen as a meal ticket. . . . Society preaches to them about the overpowering value of money. They see little evidence that philosophy, literature, history, foreign languages, aesthetics or even coherent expression are valued. They arrive at the university immersed in high-technology media, with only the sketchiest command of history or Western literature, let alone experience in thinking about similarities and differences among diverse histories and literatures. Increasingly,

their professors tell them that their education must be multicultural, but their grasp of any culture at all is slight. Few can write cogently, but they find little to help them do so in the ever more abstruse humanities.

Gitlin's purpose in this article is to argue for the important role the liberal arts might play in countering the information glut, and I do not think he deliberately demeans students. Yet, how he constructs students to make this argument — "how students of all stripes arrive at college with shallow and scattered educations, ill-prepared to learn" — does demean them, even if he blames others for students' current state. It is a characterization of students that permeates the halls of higher learning today.

Berl Falbaum is more direct in criticizing students: "Although the following observations are not based on any scientific research, after teaching at two state universities for some 30 years, it is clear to me and some of my colleagues who have taught for decades as well that today's students have been 'dumbed down.'" He goes on to give example after example of college students' inability to produce clear, coherent prose as well as their inclinations to cheat. Andrea Billups echoes these comments, even while citing "good news" about students and substance abuse: students "are less prepared than ever, for the rigors of higher education and seem more blasé about their studies."

Yet Mike Males, a sociologist at the University of California, Irvine and one of the nation's leading advocates for teenagers, contests these views. Males points to the irony of Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*, lauding the youth of the 1930s, by documenting how 1930s media condemned the same generation as "violent, mentally disturbed, drugged, lazy, promiscuous, criminal, and hopeless" ("Generation Gap"). He also contests claims about today's students' poor academic achievement: "Even after 25 years of massive public-school underfunding and classroom crowding, students display higher school enrollments, test scores, college preparatory work and volunteerism than their forebears." Males thus asserts that current attitudes toward young people are likewise misguided and, as they did in the 1930s, function to "whitewash the failures of the adult generation."

Fuentes looks specifically at perceptions of juvenile violence, asserting that youth crime has not increased, despite the fears and exaggerations resulting from recent school shootings. Fuentes cites studies by the Justice Department and the National Center for Juvenile Justice demonstrating that today's juvenile offenders are "not significantly younger than those of 10 or 15 years ago," nor are today's youth committing more violent acts as their predecessors of 15 years ago. Moreover, as Fuentes points out, the increase in juvenile arrests is more likely due to the shrinking "universe of permissible behavior" — for example,

curfew arrests — than because more teenagers are behaving criminally. Males points out, furthermore, that juveniles commit far fewer crimes than adults and, in fact, teenagers and children are far more at risk of being victimized by adults than by children or teens. (*Framing* 9) In fact, a majority of births to teenagers under sixteen result from sexual relations with men over that age (197). Criticizing the media's hyping of teens' self-reported sexual activity and debunking the notion that teenage girls are hypersexed, Males points to how poverty, disintegrated families, rape and sexual violence in childhood, and adult sexual pressures are more instructive of teen girls' sexual activity (196).

Why do Americans harbor such negativity toward young people? Certainly popular culture has played an important role in constructing public attitudes about youth. From shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and films such as *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, *South Park: Bigger, Longer, & Uncut*, and *American Pie*, young people are depicted as crass, vulgar, violent, promiscuous, and vapid. The music of youth culture, from the explicit violence, misogyny, and homophobia of Eminem to the hate-filled lyrics of Limp Bizkit, fares no better in swaying public opinion of young people, nor do magazines marketed for teens, such as *Seventeen*, *YM*, *Sassy*, and *Teen*, which portray scantily-clad young people and stories of teen sexual activity.<sup>3</sup> As Giroux notes, overly sexualized images of youth pervade television, advertising, and other popular culture forms, for corporate culture "makes a constant spectacle of children's bodies" to turn a profit ("Public" 23).

Perhaps even more important to the social construction of youth than pop culture is the response to it — by politicians, religious leaders, the media, and academics — who offer a never-ending barrage of assaults on pop culture's destructive potential on young people's morals. Males suggests that media does not corrupt youth, but "by presenting a systematically false image of teens," media "frames the public debate" (*Framing* 263). Indubitably, print media has fueled the anti-youth sentiment in our country. In the post-Columbine period, in particular, articles about teenagers, crime, violence, and values were pervasive, as journalists, psychologists, sociologists, criminal justice specialists, teachers, and parents tried to make sense of the tragedy. Any search through databases such as *Periodical Abstracts* or *ProQuest* underscores how negative these articles were towards young people; whether they outright attacked youth for their lack of values or sought causes for what was perceived as increased youth violence, collectively, print media constructed youth negatively — as a grave problem either to be dismissed or fixed. Headlines such as Elizabeth Mehren's "Tragedy in Colorado: Growing Gap Between Teens, Adults Creating a Cultural Divide" in *The Los Angeles Times* and Michael Schrage's "Disruptive Teens Totally Rule (Your Future)" in *Fortune* foster a rhetoric of

hate against young people. Saundra Smokes' "For Today's Teens, It's a Different – and More Violent – World," in *Masthead*, based on a conversation with 17 adolescents, constructs a teen world so frightful it reads like fiction.

## **Complicating Youth Culture in Composition: What Students' Texts Reveal**

Responding to Giroux's call to factor youth into critical composition, I designed a course that I hoped would help students to see how language works to construct meaning and arm them with the rhetorical skills and critical understanding to write across and against their socially inscribed youth identities. I had not yet imagined how students' texts would reveal the several ways they construct themselves in response to the discursive representations that surround them. These insights both highlight the importance of what Giroux has asked educators to do as well as problematize the tasks, making more complex issues of "responsibility," "innocence," and "complicity." They impact Giroux's call for educators to "connect their work to the political task of making research, teaching, and learning part of the dynamic of democratic change itself" ("Public" 29) as they account for youth culture as a site of critique and reform. They require us to take our students' perspectives into account as we further consider youth culture at the intersection of politics, pedagogy, and social change.

In order to give a sense of the context in which these student texts were written, I will briefly describe the course and its purposes. Participating in this critical moment of defining their generation, my students in basic writing examined, interrogated, analyzed, and then wrote against the demonization of youth that permeates society's discussions and representations of young people. In collaboration with classmates as well as individually, students examined the rhetorical construction of youth in print journalism and popular culture, and students (re)wrote youth constructions through asserting the meanings they see in popular culture and by speaking to their peers in an interview essay.<sup>4</sup> The culminating project of the course extended students' writing from the academic to the public sphere.

What was particularly striking to me as students revealed themselves through their written and oral texts was their ambivalence about popular culture and how they might respond to it. While on the one hand they recognize how popular culture constructs teenagers in destructive ways, they embrace it passionately, while simultaneously buying in to many of its depictions. Although they were initially somewhat resistant to the assignment that asked them to take a frank and honest look at these images, my students were able to employ rhetori-

cal analysis to uncover popular culture's portrayals of young people. Kathy, for example, argues that the magazine, *Teen People*, "sends out a message to others that says teenagers only care about looks and getting a hot guy."<sup>5</sup> Todd, another student, studied the magazine, *Maxim*, and concludes, "young girls, in both the advertisements and the actual body of the magazine, are being portrayed as objects of men." In her analysis of MTV, another student, Justine, stresses the numbers of "young girls that were no older than twenty, wearing tight, barely there clothing" with "excessive amounts of make-up" singing songs about being "boy crazy." Justine then observes how lyrics such as "Hit me baby one more time" or "what a girl wants, what a girl needs" are sexualized, but what matters even more, she concludes, is that the videos are produced "not to show off the singer's voice, but to show off their body." Nidia, a great fan of Lil Kim and Foxy Brown, argues that they are "dressing 'sluttish' just to gain more attention and sell more records." Melinda writes about Eminem, arguing that his song about finding his wife cheating on him, in which the listener "hears Eminem brutally killing his wife," "pushed his limits and sets a bad example for his listeners."

And yet, despite some level of awareness of the marketing value and commercial rationale for such images and how media targets youth with its destructive images and messages, many of my students buy into these images. The constant barrage against youth culture has distorted my students' conceptions of themselves. Ramesh, Adam, Rob, and Justine begin their group essay by stating, "Many teens are leading troubled lives. Teens need to be helped, so they know right from wrong." However, when in our writing conference I expressed surprise that they had taken such a stance, each student looked back at me with surprise: none were consciously aware that they had made this assumption. Melinda, another student, interviewed three teens, all of whom "party," drink alcohol, and smoke marijuana fairly regularly but who are, in her mind, perfectly "typical" teenagers. For one student, Mike, interviews with his peers only reinforced for him what he had himself proclaimed throughout the course, both in his written and oral work: "These students said that our generation is very bad, but that it's not all our fault." Mike emphasizes his interview subjects' own admission to "immoral" behavior, but no matter how hard I pressed him, he was unable (or unwilling) to point to any specific behaviors, values, or attitudes that cause them to make such an assertion or cause him to take them at their word.

Students' constant criticism of parents was another important insight revealed by their work in the semester. The vast majority of students in the class described parents as "hypocrites," "uninvolved," "too wrapped up in their jobs," and "absent," yet very few of these students described *their own* parents this way. Todd, Marlene, and Jeff

use the following dramatic introduction to their group essay, connecting the misdeeds of young people with pop culture's influence in the absence of parents:

Imagine being a seven year old child coming home from school having no one to greet you other than the television. This is a scenario that occurs to a large portion of our youth today. After school, we used to go outside and take part in extracurricular activities, which kept us away from popular culture media. Modern youth does not take part in as many extracurricular activities. Instead they stay inside and use their abundant resources available to them. Modern youth turns to popular culture media due to the lack of adult guidance.

These students' perceptions of parents and children today have been influenced to such an extent by what they hear around them that they speak nostalgically of the world in which they grew up. In our class discussions, no student in the class actually knew any young child who came home to an empty house. Adam, another student, emphasizes parental absence in his analysis of the television show, *Dawson's Creek*. Arguing that the show "reveals the pressures and social views teenagers may encounter in their lives," Adam asserts that "in the show the parents are not really involved in teenagers' lives. Dawson's parents are separated and seem to worry more about themselves than Dawson. . . . In today's society parents are also not connected with their child. The drama purposely has the parents in the episodes as little as possible."

While not mentioning parents specifically, Giroux directs much of his ire at an adult society that he believes cares more about material goods and profit than about its youth: "Too many adults rely on the commercial language of self-help and character formation to further their own obsession with themselves, and they ignore the social problems that adults create for young people, especially those who are disadvantaged by virtue of their class, gender, and race" ("Public" 25). Fuentes certainly echoes Giroux's sentiments about parents: "To an older America in a postindustrial world, children have become more of a liability than an asset. Middle-class parents calculate the cost of raising kids, including an overpriced college education, as they would a home mortgage." Mehren cites various positions blaming parents for alleged out-of-control teenage behavior: "Some say many adults are little more than overgrown adolescents themselves and that they are too self-obsessed to know what's happening with their own children. Others say grown-ups are too busy: working too many jobs and otherwise failing to connect with their kids. . . . Teachers say they have never seen so many mothers and fathers who have no idea how to

parent." A 1999 Kaiser Family Foundation study of 3000 children ages 2 through 18 indicates that children spend an average of 5 hours, 29 minutes every day with media for recreation, and that the total is higher for kids eight and older, who spend much of that time alone (Edwards). Donald F. Roberts, a professor of Communications at Stanford University and an author of the study, states, "Most parents will be dumbfounded by this...Most parents will say, 'Not my child.' And most parents will be wrong" (Edwards). In article after article, parents are constructed as materialistic, narcissistic, self-absorbed, and totally disconnected from their children's lives.

Students' constructions of youth and parents raise many important questions needing thoughtful consideration at the intersection of youth culture and critical composition and lead me to question my role as an educator. Primarily, these questions hinge on innocence, protection, independence, and responsibility, age-old questions made more compelling (and complicated) in the current climate of animosity toward young people. First, how do instructors respond to student attitudes toward parents? Are they mythologies, or are they reflective of adult society? As an educator and a parent of young children, I wonder about my own stake in believing that students' attitudes toward parents are internalized social constructions. Is it possible that parents today behave as my students describe them? As a working mother, I cannot help but question how my students' hostility towards (alleged) absent parents does not represent the backlash against feminism and choice. But am I ensnared in discursive constructions of feminism, unable (or unwilling) to consider the consequences of women's work roles and children's development? How do I respond as an educator? As a parent? As a working mother?

My students were also passionate about defending specific, often targeted forms of popular culture, despite the class' consensus that "popular culture" – in the abstract – took over where absent parents abdicated their responsibilities and left kids vulnerable. Nidia, whose earlier essay discussed the "sleazy" and "sluttish" images of musical artists Lil Kim and Foxy Brown, defends rap in familiar ways: "rappers have a right to express their opinion," "teens like rap's beats and rhythms," and "rap doesn't cause me to kill anyone." At the same time, she takes issue with the alleged connection she'd come across in her reading between low test scores for African American youth and rap music: "once again the media is trying to blame rap music, when in fact the problem is lack of good schools in urban neighborhoods. The reason why we lack good schools is lack of funding. Children that live in the suburbs receive more money." Nidia's text reveals important contradictions: a simultaneous defense of popular culture and an awareness of its potential to reinscribe rhetorics of injustice.

Justine's interview with some of her peers revealed that one stu-



dent “looked up to” Fred Durst, the lead singer from Limp Bizkit, “not because of the trashy lyrics” but because “he’s never afraid to speak his mind.” Justine thus concludes that Durst “seems to be a positive role model in that he will always stick to what he believes in and that is a positive thing for many teens.” Giroux stresses the need for educators to allow young people to speak for themselves about pop culture, to consider how young people use these venues as “site[s] of negotiation” (“Public” 20). And yet, I cannot help but wonder whether Justine and her peers fail to consider how their understandings might be framed in terms of how youth are sold to mainstream society. What, then, are compositionists’ roles as educators in providing sites for teenagers to negotiate and resist media depictions of them? If I encourage students to negotiate meaning in rhetorical and popular constructions, should I also make them aware of how their negotiations are necessarily limited? Am I naively affording my students too much volition, when it may be that their discourse is institutionally, rather than individually, controlled?

This question is made even more complex by what Giroux refers to as the “myth of childhood innocence” (“Public” 14), and how it works to erase young people’s civil rights and agency. The myth of childhood innocence, Giroux argues, constructs children as white, middle-class, static, and passive. This social construct denies children any role in political spheres and leads to the “erosion of students’ civil rights” (“Public” 18). What do we expect from students as they negotiate youth culture, pop culture, and youth identities? How do we balance responsibility with protection?

For the most part, my students agree with Giroux’s claims about the increasing restrictions on young people. They do not want adults — their parents or anyone else — censoring or restricting what they can watch, listen to, or play. As Kathy asserts, “What I’ve learned from my interviews [with four teenagers] was that teenagers like to feel like they can make their own decisions. Also, when parents tell their children that they can’t do things it makes the teen want to do it more.” Justine’s interviews suggested to her that adults should “not be concerned” with the music teenagers are attracted to and should let teenagers listen to it without restrictions. After conducting his own survey, Adam argues that young people, by and large, use the internet productively and should not be restricted, even if “some teenagers do use chat rooms to verbally abuse other people online” or to access instructions on how to build bombs.

My students spoke about how it felt to be treated as criminals during their final year of high school, and one after another told similar stories about lockers being searched for drugs and weapons as well as students being interviewed and interrogated. Todd, for example, talks about interrogations after bomb threats were called into the school,

and male students “were required to show proof of where they were when the calls were made.” He writes about how a “fleet of assistant principals was on patrol at all times” and describes how demeaned he felt when he was stopped in the hall and questioned for missing a hall pass when he was late due to a doctor’s appointment. Melinda describes her high school as a “prison” after the Columbine shootings, as “different cliques were torn apart and investigated” for problems. Mike criticizes random drug testing of student athletes which “puts a guilty label on most innocent students” and “violates students’ privacy.”

Students’ ambivalence over the destructive potential of popular culture, their defense of it, and their strong opposition to the increasing restrictions placed on them as a result of society’s fears about/for youth raises some complex issues. Joseph Harris argues that cultural studies pedagogy in composition must allow students to “write as people who are at once rock fans *and* intellectuals” (35), because as our students simultaneously experience and critique their cultural world, we give ourselves the opportunity to “listen to and learn from” them (36). And just what do we learn? My students’ ambivalences problematize questions about young people’s as well as instructors’ complicity in social constructions of youth. They also problematize how critical educators might position themselves in relationship to students’ rights and responsibilities. When students insist, as they often do, that the violence in pop culture is meaningless for them because they are not violent and they have good morals, are they failing to realize how media frames youth, even if it doesn’t corrupt youth? And does this serve the larger crusade against youth, if youth uncritically align themselves with these depictions in popular culture? To what extent should students be held responsible for their embrace of repugnant forms of popular culture? On the other hand, what are the implications when we ask students to critically analyze their attraction to the violent and misogynistic forms of rap, for example? Are we fueling anti-youth constructions? When do we allow youth to simply experience popular culture without expecting them to be critical in their response to it?

These questions become even more profound as we consider them in light of the racialized nature of the demonization of youth. Giroux rightly argues that the attacks on youth have insidious racial undertones. The liberal assault on pop culture is both racialized and “Victorian,” he argues, a nostalgia for the white middle-class lifestyle now corrupted by electronic technologies as well as the influence of minority culture (hip hop, etc.) (“Public” 19). For minority youths, the myth of childhood innocence, yields two results: they are viewed as a threat to middle-class life and subsequently “disposable” (“Public” 21), or they are “commercial[ly] appropriat[ed]” (21).

In my class, issues of race arose in students’ writing and our class discussions because many students chose to write about hip hop and

rap. One student, Ramesh, an Indian student who spoke often, openly, and eloquently of his own victimization by racism, wrote about Tupac Shakur: how he presented himself, the image he chose, deliberately, to project. Ramesh writes, "Tupac wears a black bandana, has his nose, both his ears pierced, has tattoos of people who have passed away, wears heavy amounts of jewelry, and wears 'ghetto clothes.' This image has begun to frighten a lot of the adults." Ramesh then discusses the violent lyrics and vulgar language in the same vein, concluding that Shakur and his lyrics are "dangerous" and "terrifying."

But it took heated class discussions and a lot of urging from me (in our writing conference and in my comments on his drafts) for Ramesh to look at Shakur from this critical perspective. Perhaps he simply capitulated to "what the teacher wants," or perhaps he finally acknowledged how Tupac was being marketed (and marketing himself) to fit a particular image, one that mainstream society fears and that perhaps these teens weren't even aware they were buying into. Either way, I can't help but wonder whether by asking Ramesh to more closely examine the image /believe Shakur projects, I became complicit in reinforcing negative stereotypes of black youth. Again, as I encouraged students to resist these discursive constructions, did I fail to adequately address the ways in which I am entrapped by those same constructions?

Arguably, students' associations with rap music are racialized (even racist, according to some researchers). Jack Solomon, a professor of English at Cal State Northridge, questions the staying power of gang-related fashions in middle-class suburbia, concluding that, "A lot of suburban kids dress like gangsters because they admire gangsters. The menacing appearance, the capacity for sudden violence, simply looks cool to a lot of middle-class kids without gang affiliations." Yvonne Bynoe argues differently, asserting that white suburban youths' embrace of gangster fashions and music represents "the re-emergence of the White Negro." Suburban white kids, she argues, coopt a narrow and stereotypical view of Blackness as an act of rebellion against mainstream society: "For whites brought up in suburbia or in affluent, homogenous urban neighborhoods, the biggest, nastiest, lustiest, most uninhibited edge they can find in their nearly all white experience is dressing 'black,' talking 'black,' and walking 'black,' even as their 'black' is a distorted MTV version."

These are difficult and potentially explosive issues for students. Most students disagreed vehemently with both Solomon's and Bynoe's claims, viewing their allegiance to rap music as signs of racial tolerance. They argued that hip hop fashions are no different than any generation's "rebellious" fashions, and that Solomon's and Bynoe's views, not theirs, are prejudiced. One student, who took issue with Bynoe by defending white youth's embrace of the gangsta culture,

nevertheless exposes how her own newly acquired appreciation of gangsta rap reinforces negative images of black youth, even as she tries to defend the music and her white friends' embrace of it. She writes about how one of her African American friends introduced her to rap music, which she now "appreciates" and listens to regularly. But then she goes on to talk about how this black friend "is different from other young Black kids because he doesn't really use slang or curse a lot."

Giroux begins to address some of these questions of educators' responsibilities when he asserts that we can challenge abhorrent representations of youth in media culture without aligning ourselves with conservative politics. Progressive educators, he argues, can both protect First Amendment rights and rights to artistic expression even for material they find offensive and simultaneously "take up what it means to provide an ethical discourse from which to criticize those images, discourses, and representations that might be destructive to the psychological health of children or serve to undermine the normative foundations of a viable democracy" (*Channel* 6). I agree with these assertions, see them as even more complicated than Giroux implies. The "ethical discourse" to which he refers is not easily defined, nor can we easily or uncritically work our way out of the trap of our own complicity in discourses to which we feel allegiance. The ideological conflicts at the intersection of youth culture, feminism, racial politics, liberalism, and conservative agendas are far more complex than I imagined when I initiated this project. Clearly, these issues beg further inquiry as we bring youth culture into composition's critique.

## **Rhetorical Interventions: (Re)Writing Youth in Basic Writing**

Giroux's article on youth culture was published at approximately the same time as the Spring 2000 special issue of *JBW*, which centered on the current and future status of basic writing. Giroux's article resonated for me in light of *JBW*'s focus on the justness of basic writing's very existence and the Othering of basic writers. This issue's articles on the assault on basic writing – and on the students in basic writing – from basic writing's inception to the present day illustrated the unsettling fact that our students in basic writing are *twice-demonized* – marginalized both as youth and as basic writers.<sup>6</sup> Although Giroux never specifically mentions basic writing or students in basic writing as he encourages compositionists to factor youth culture into its critique, as a teacher of basic writing, I was particularly inspired to act.

From the inception of basic writing programs in the Open Admissions movements of the 1960s and 70s, students in basic writing have been demonized by both popular/news media and academic

elites, labeled as “‘not belonging’ to the academy” (Horner and Lu, “Introduction” xv). Tracing the history of the Open Admissions policy at CUNY, Bruce Horner describes how opponents framed the debate in terms of the “intellectually undeserving” students draining resources and thus depriving “intellectually deserving” students of academic excellence (7). Significantly, even advocates of Open Admissions participated in the demonizing discursive constructions of these students, demarcating social goals of Open Admissions as separate from the goals of “academic excellence” (10), since these students were largely perceived as politically active (as opposed to intellectually motivated), “‘unqualified’ blacks and Puerto Ricans” (8), when most were whites of working-class backgrounds (8).<sup>7</sup> Still today, students in basic writing are viewed skeptically by some faculty in English and across the disciplines: many faculty in English refuse to teach “those students,” and many faculty across the disciplines complain endlessly of these students as a threat to academic standards.

Laura Gray-Rosendale’s analysis of the discursive history of basic writers’ identity similarly emphasizes how students in basic writing have been identified as outside the mainstream, even by basic writing specialists themselves. Tracing the discursive construction of basic writers’ identities from the cognitive developmentalist model to the socially constituted/ initiation/academic discourse model to the conflict model (gendered, raced, and classed forces acting upon the basic writer), Gray-Rosendale argues that the basic writer’s identity in each of these three dominant models is marginalized and ghettoized, delimited “according to a deficit theory model, an etiological ‘problem’ that the Basic Writer endures, be it cognitive, discursive, or social, in spite of professed efforts to work outside a diagnosis/cure model” (126-27). Paradoxically, then, even those who care most deeply about these students have furthered the Othering of students in basic writing.

Presently, the public, political assault on basic writing programs reinforces the marginalization of students in basic writing. Deborah Mutnick points to Nancy Romer’s observation that a key strategy in the campaign to eliminate remedial programs at CUNY’s eleven senior colleges was “to demonize students in remedial programs” (73), which in turn “‘humiliated the students of CUNY into stunned inaction’” (qtd. in Mutnick 73). Equally significant, the assault on remedial programs, like assaults on academic support programs and on affirmative action and like the demonization of youth Giroux describes, is racialized, “disqualifying poorly-prepared minorities and discouraging those who are better prepared from even applying” (Mutnick 75). Moreover, the public assault on basic writing programs from outside academia are based on negative attitudes towards the very youth that can profitably benefit from them, and is thus another example of how educational downsizing and the elimination of social programs are

premeditated attempts to limit access to those already disenfranchised.

Finally, mainstreaming proponents within our own discipline point to the pernicious labels placed on basic writers by virtue of the existence of basic writing programs. Judith Rodby and Tom Fox assert that "basic" is a construct that supports an inequitable credit system, so that basic writing is punitive (84-85).<sup>8</sup> For Ira Shor, basic writing is "our apartheid",<sup>9</sup> constructing students as "cultural deficit[s]" ("Illegal" 102) and targeting students of color and low socioeconomic status to maintain inequality rather than promote democracy (107). My point here is not to argue for mainstreaming, but rather to underscore the manner in which many of our students in basic writing have been doubly marginalized: as basic writers and as youth.

Given the complexities of students' positionings within social constructions of youth, how can we, as critical educators, respond to Giroux's call to factor youth into critical composition? How can we negotiate our own contradictory positions to intervene in such constructions, help students gain a more critical understanding of how discursive construction occurs, and help them feel empowered to resist and rewrite those constructions? In particular, how do we answer Giroux's call for students in basic writing?

In some ways, these are not new questions. Indeed, compositionists have long considered how we can help our students to feel empowered to act if we are all constituted by multiple discourses. But there's something uniquely compelling for students in basic writing when they have the opportunity to rhetorically deconstruct youth culture and *see* discourse in action as it constructs youth. Just as discourse can construct young people so negatively, so might young people use discourse to turn those constructions back on themselves, to configure and reconfigure "the codes, scripts, or terministic screens that define individuals as helpless ciphers" and replace them with "narratives that enable democratic participation" (Berlin 98). As Alan France asserts, our curricula should help students understand the "dialectic between self and culture" (149) so that they can "learn to assemble and assimilate the fragments of postmodern experience into a coherent, self-conscious identity in order to communicate, or to join discourse communities, as we say" (149). Like Berlin and France, I believe we can assist students to become aware of how they are multiply constituted as a first step toward social action.

Pedagogically, youth culture as a site of critique in basic writing has distinct advantages. Students in basic writing need to be better readers of texts (written and visual). They must learn to apply rhetorical analysis to understand how texts are rhetorically constructed as well as how texts construct rhetorically their subjects so students might see more clearly how writing works in our world to create rather than merely reflect meaning. Students in basic writing need to be empow-

ered with a sense of agency by having the opportunity to write back against the assaults on them; they need to claim discursive power and become meaning-makers. They need opportunities to deconstruct their world or their identities and also to (re)construct them.

In my course, I tried to provide opportunities for students to claim their discursive agency by re-writing their socially inscribed, and often demonized, youth identities in academic and public discourses and empower students with a sense of their own potential to make a difference. In the pages that follow, I discuss one specific strategy from this course that I hoped provided opportunities for students to take on the role of "cultural workers" who might begin the movement to "reclaim the promise of democracy for the lived majority of citizens" (Giroux, *Channel 17*). As I will suggest, this strategy was one way for students to begin to negotiate questions of innocence, responsibility, and complicity.

In their final writing project for my course, students wrote for the public sphere, as a letter-to-the-editor for mainstream print media and in other forms for alternative media. This assignment was a logical extension of our work in the course, which encouraged various mixtures of academic and non-academic discourse forms. I firmly believe that helping students appropriate academic discourse is among the most important work we do in basic writing, for it is through their ability to operate inside academic discourse that students can choose to reinforce or resist injustices that discursive codes, such as academic discourse, reinscribe. But I also recognize the limitations of academic discourse in its tendency to reproduce hegemonies, for evaluating students on their adeptness with academic discourse ignores or dismisses the diverse and multiple literacies they have at their disposal, and of course marginalizes those discourses (see Bizzell; Bartholomae). While accurately observing that "what has remained constant" in academic discourse even as it has changed over time is "the privileged social position of whatever currently counts as academic discourse" (6), Patricia Bizzell rightfully argues that scholars' discursive innovations should be extended to our students' writing.

Furthermore, I believe it was vital for my students to write beyond the academic community and into the public sphere, in other forms and for other venues. By taking their writing out of the classroom, students began the process by which they could intervene discursively in rhetorical constructions of youth. As Giroux argues, cultural studies theorists and practitioners (and I assume he would include students as well) should "speak to multiple audiences and actively engage . . . in broader public conversations" ("Cultural" 530). The course's focus on youth culture gave students a meaningful and potentially fruitful conversation in which to participate. It enabled them to see how politics and power intersect, and how vital it is for all of

us – our students included – to become a force in these intersections, to direct traffic there, and to disrupt the ways in which knowledge and practices are produced, distributed, and imbued with meaning.

But what kind of public space is available to students in basic writing? Is there a public space in which their writing will be taken seriously? Referring to Jurgen Habermas' definition of the public sphere as a place where private citizens engage in debate, Susan Wells notes, however, that while ideally the "public sphere promises equality of access and discussion governed by rationality, with no holds barred, no topic off limits" (327), such is not usually the case for students. Certainly this dilemma is intensified for students in basic writing, whose difficulties with writing limit their access.<sup>10</sup>

In my course, many students chose a traditional public venue, submitting letters-to-the-editor to *The Reading Eagle/Times*, the local newspaper. Despite the constraints on basic writers in the public sphere, one student, Pam, had her letter published in *The Reading Eagle/Times* in December, 2000. In her letter, Pam cites the "inflammatory adjectives" that have been used to describe teens – "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild" – but counters that "In my experience these inflammatory adjectives do not apply to teens" and that when the media chooses to describe teens so negatively, "they are widening the gap of understanding between teens and adults." Melinda, another student, argued in her letter that the newspaper's positive articles about young people are placed mainly in the Sports section rather than in the front news section.

Wells argues that we must construct a public sphere for our students (328); although I did attempt to construct such a sphere in my course, and although one student was successful in becoming a participant in a traditional public venue, the more significant result was that some of my students constructed these spaces for themselves through the World Wide Web, providing unique opportunities to negotiate youth culture outside teacherly authority. My students taught me that there are now numerous public venues in which they can participate – even as students in basic writing – and it is vital that we continue to encourage students to participate in these public forums. One very effective type of venue for my students was online mainstream news sources, such as *cnn.com* and *time.com*. Justine wrote her essay on the negative portrayal of teens on *cnn.com*. When she searched the site and realized there was no place for her to contribute these ideas and begin a conversation on the issues, she chose to contact *cnn.com* through their "Feedback" feature, requesting that the editors "take [her] writing into consideration as a possible discussion topic," *cnn.com*'s main interactive feature. The Message Boards and Chats on such sites as *cnn.com* allow students to venture out into the public arena with their written words, and we should take more advantage of such public



forums.

Another student, Amy, chose *DoSomething.org*, self-described as a “nationwide network of young people who know they can make a difference and take action to change the world around them.” In her essay, which she submitted to this website, Amy (re)writes society’s negative depictions of youth through the assaults on youth music. She writes that Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys are “good role models for young kids today,” citing their community work and affiliation with *DoSomething.org*. Specifically, Amy points to the articles written about these musicians on *DoSomething.org*, *Yahoo!Music*, and *RollingStone.com*, asserting that “the authors of these articles are helping to portray youth in a positive way.”

Through Amy’s and other students’ work in the public sphere, I have learned more about the possibilities of these public youth forums as venues for students in basic writing to participate in public politics. These sites provide ways for us to heed Giroux’s call to seek opportunities for youth to “narrate themselves, to speak from the actual places where their experiences and daily lives are shaped and mediated” (*Channel*31). As such, they help educators negotiate our role in such a process. In these public venues, students negotiate youth culture outside the purview of their instructors and thus help us to reconcile the complexities of students’ innocence, responsibility, and complicity. Student participation in the public sphere does not absolve us of these complexities, but they do provide a “moment” when students can exert a measure of control over how they will mediate social constructions of youth.

## **(Re)Writing Youth in Basic Writing: Implications for Research and Practice**

I believe there are many further possibilities for factoring youth culture into basic writing, and I will briefly mention a few of them here. Linda Adler-Kassner’s recent work in basic writing suggests that we help students to understand what it means to be students in basic writing in their college or university in order to help them contest those labels (“Just Writing”). I see fruitful connections between students’ reconstructions of their collective youth identities and their institutionalized status as students in basic writing. Like the curricula Adler-Kassner suggests, my curriculum centered on “helping writers develop alternative conceptions of themselves” as they became writers whose work made a difference and who were able to bring what they knew to enrich and inform knowledge-making in our classes (Adler-Kassner, “Just Writing” 81; See also “REVIEW”).

Another direction I see for rewriting youth would involve fur-

ther inquiry into the relationship between youth culture and race. Although this relationship was not a central component of my course, the work we did on this subject leads me to believe that factoring youth culture into the critique might open a window to other rhetorics of injustice, providing a unique opportunity for white, middle-class youth to see how rhetorics of injustice can be destructive and exploitative. Factoring “dominant” students into the critique through an emphasis on youth culture might fruitfully put these students in the margins as they “variously stand with the oppressor and the oppressed” (Alexander 275).

The intersections of gender and the demonization of youth might also be productively explored in basic writing. Despite some discussion of girls with regard to their sexualized images in mass culture, Giroux largely ignores gender issues and uses the term “youth” without critical attention to gender. Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally argue that this gender neutrality was all too common in the Columbine aftermath, but that this tragedy was “not a case of kids killing kids. This [was] boys killing boys and boys killing girls. What these school shootings reveal is not a crisis in youth culture but a crisis in masculinity.” Students in basic writing classes might explore the nuances of gender in youth culture, exploring how media constructs male and female teenagers differently.

As Lu and Horner suggest, there is much to be gained when students’ writing motivates basic writing faculty to escape the perspectives in which we are fluent and “locked” (47). By listening to my students’ critical reflections on youth, pop culture, and even (especially) parents, I was forced to reflect on my own assumptions about youth. I am much more aware of how my own contempt for violent, misogynist, homophobic and otherwise insidious forms of popular culture should not be misdirected at young people. I need to heed Ann Powers’ cautionary remarks that young people often feel that assaults on popular culture are assaults on them. It is not only popular culture that can harm young people; most likely, it’s our responses to pop culture – and to young people – that can do the most harm. In my research and my classrooms, I intend to continue to work through questions of complicity: of my own and students’ rights and responsibilities when it comes to media representations of youth as well as adults’ and young people’s responses to them.

I will thus echo Giroux’s call to encourage compositionists to include youth culture in critical composition – as well as emphasize its import to basic writing research and pedagogy – to create “pedagogical conditions for students to critically engage knowledge as deeply implicated in issues and struggles concerning the production of identities, culture, power, and history” (Giroux, “Cultural” 511). Together with our students, in our classrooms and in our research, we can “re-

write the importance of what it means to treat youth with dignity and respect" (Giroux, *Channel* 33).

### Notes

1. Like Linda Adler-Kassner, I have deliberately chosen to use the phrase "students in basic writing" rather than "basic writing students" or "basic writers" (REVIEW 232). I, too, am concerned with how these labels emphasize students' deficiencies.

2. I have not made any changes to students' texts.

3. The research I found on teen magazines for girls focuses on girls' socialization and their understandings of femininity through the magazines rather than the image of teenage girls presented (for example, see Duke).

4. I began the course by assigning eight articles addressing youth culture collected from a wide variety of print media. These articles included Edwards; Fuentes; Gottschalk; Kantrowitz and Wingert; Males, "Generation Gap"; Mehren; Miller; and Romero.

5. Throughout this article, I use pseudonyms for my students.

6. While many basic writing programs have a large number of non-traditional age students, at Penn State, Berks Lehigh Valley, where I teach, 18 and 19-year-olds dominate classes in basic writing. In the course under study, I had one non-traditional age student out of a class of sixteen.

7. Citing a study by Nancy Romer (1999), Deborah Mutnick points out, however, that Black and Latino enrollments increased enormously at CUNY after Open Admissions, and that basic writing, "for all its internal contradictions, has played a vital role in increasing access to higher education, in particular for working-class people of color" (72).

8. Judith Rodby and Tom Fox differentiate themselves from conservatives whose arguments against basic writing have to do with "limiting access" to higher education (8).

9. Shor uses this phrase in the title of his well-known article, "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality."

10. Not only is their writing less likely to be accepted into the public sphere, students' lack of confidence in their writing likely makes

students in basic writing reluctant to submit it. Indeed, in the beginning of the semester, when I first mentioned their final project involving public writing, most students laughed or rolled their eyes. But by semester's end, there was quite a change, as many students embraced the assignment and expressed great hope and desire to see their writing published.

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