Comment on Horner–Lu/Gailliet (28.2) and Bruce Horner’s Review of Rethinking Basic Writing

Bruce Horner’s recent review of my book, Rethinking Basic Writing: Exploring Identity, Politics, and Community in Interaction, like the exchange between Horner/Min-Zhan Lu and Lynée Gailliet (CS 28.2), raises several issues that deserve attention. While the substance of the arguments offered is quite valuable, the mode in which the arguments are conducted should give us pause. Such debate is increasingly informed by anxieties over the legitimation of Basic Writing as a scholarly enterprise. As a result, Basic Writing scholars are rehearsing fairly limited lexicons and terminological investments associated with the theoretical stances to which they wish to connect Basic Writing, staking out positions at least in part colored by this anxiety. In “Terministic Screens” Kenneth Burke indicated that “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention to some channels rather than others,” such that what we take to be “observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (Language as Symbolic Action, U of CP, 1966, 45-46). The words we utilize, Burke cautioned, necessarily limit our ability to pursue our intended agendas. Interrogating the terms surfacing in our critical debates, it follows, is necessary if we are to understand the consequences of our scholarly conversations, and what contributions they might make to the future of radical inquiry in Basic Writing.

The Horner/Lu–Gailliet debate concerns an issue, the status of Shaughnessy, that will likely occupy Basic Writing scholars for some time. Unfortunately, the short format of this recent exchange sometimes devolves into a rehearsal of positionings made available by participants’ chosen terminologies. Indeed, there is a substantial unity among the scholars’ ideas that is obscured. All are evidently committed to the critique of imperialistic language-use: Horner and Lu argue against the colonizing aspects of Shaughnessy’s practice and theory; Gailliet asserts that Horner and Lu’s insistence on broadly-conceived social categories for critique results potentially in an imperialistic mis-reading of Maher’s efforts and therefore of Shaughnessy’s work. To my mind, this common ground is likely the location of the debate’s potential. However, the deepening allegiances of Basic Writing scholars to terminology fixed in contemporary theoretical frameworks make it exceedingly hard for these common identifications and the value of these insights to be acknowledged. Instead, the terms themselves stress what Burke wisely describes as “division.”
Horner’s review of my book also depends largely on divisive terms similar to those that structure the Horner/Lu–Gaillet exchange. Although debate necessarily involves difference, and division itself is not inherently negative, interrogating the motives underlying division might prove useful. One of Horner’s most telling criticisms of my work comes in his closing comment that he is “not sanguine about the potential of Gray-Rosendale’s study to sway public opinion on the legitimacy accomplished in ‘basic writing’ and ‘remedial’ college writing programs” (139). Leaving aside the fact that Horner assumes an audience for my work (“the public”) that my book isn’t primarily concerned to address, the comment is ostensibly meant to connect to claims Horner offers elsewhere about the necessity of construing Basic Writing work in the widest social terms. But the misreading of my intended audience also illustrates an anxiety about the legitimation of BW studies within the public and academic spheres that has become one of the most obvious features of recent BW scholarship. This is anxiety has been largely quelled by turning to broad social theories, already legitimated years ago in philosophical and literary theory circles, for support.

Horner appears to be engaged in just such a practice. As a result, Horner is led to supply a rehearsal of familiar arguments associated with a poststructuralist-Marxist position [a desire for a description of the “larger social and institutional settings in which that work takes place” and a call for greater “critical reflection” about methodology and “rendering” of “discoveries” (139)]. That is, Horner’s most substantive criticism entails admonishing the writer for not repeating work already done (broad sociological approaches). For such criticisms to hold, however, Horner’s position forces him to rewrite and decontextualize. My book actually addresses his first charge throughout Chapters One and Two and his second on pages 71-75, specifically, as well as in sections of Chapter Three. But, perhaps more importantly, Horner’s discursive identifications demand that he rely upon a form of argumentation that is less persuasive than it could be. Horner criticizes my text for not doing something rather than establishing why the approach he advocates would indeed be more beneficial than the work my book in fact does. A more convincing critique would require evidence for why an exclusive focus on “larger social” issues is necessarily better than a focus on the combination of broad and local, what my book seeks to provide. But Horner’s terministic screens afford him little help with this: while they allow him to adeptly employ a set of rhetorical criticisms, they do not furnish him with sufficient evidence to substantiate them.

Although adopting authorized theoretical positions has struck many of us as a likely avenue to the legitimation of Basic Writing within the academy, it is imperative that we begin to question why this is the case and whether we’d like to work against
this tendency. The rigid force inherent in such positionings to some degree has rendered us all pawns in the discursive regimes with which we ally ourselves. While in many ways our theoretical affiliations have provided critical insights for our teaching and research, they have also clearly constrained the very terms and tenors of our debates. As Foucault warned, no theories of discourse, most especially those designed to challenge dominant discourses, should themselves become new metanarratives (see, for example, "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation Between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze" in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, Cornell UP, 1977, 203-217).

Sensing that we have not in fact heeded his advice, Rethinking Basic Writing aims to make a small step toward changing the conversation. I argue that we need to let an examination of students’ own interactions drive our investigations, aided by theories that allow for both broad and local analyses—understandings of how social forces shape identities as well as how minute interactions construct “the social.” The book suggests that clinging to static theoretical identifications, whether deemed progressive or conservative, may be ultimately limiting to radical inquiry in Basic Writing studies. This is the aspect of my text that Horner does not discuss in detail. And, if my book could have any lasting value for Basic Writing studies, I hope it might be precisely in this area.

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Bruce Horner Responds

Despite Laura Gray-Rosendale’s expressed concerns about the discourse of scholarly exchange, her own response provides a strikingly discouraging illustration of the power of a dominant discourse to limit such exchange. From the cultural materialist perspective on language informing both my review of her book and the response of Min-Zhan Lu and myself to Lynée Lewis Gailet’s review to which Gray-Rosendale refers, the work of writing must be understood not as the product of the labor of the writer alone but as material social practice, in which meaning and effect are constantly reworked by readers whose labor is itself both a response to and a potential means of reproducing or altering existing material social conditions. From this perspective, Gray-Rosendale’s response to my review is “written” by a discourse that, contrastingly, assigns full responsibility for the effects of writing to the writer as autonomous agent. (This same discourse evinced in Mina Shaughnessy’s writings as criticisms of an individual named Shaughnessy.)

That this discourse dominates Gray-Rosendale’s response is discouraging. In the review, I suggest that some readers of her book “may be unwilling to [accept her claims about the value of peer oral interactions in writing courses] without a more detailed investigation of the relation between the work accomplished in those interactions at the micro-level, and the macro-level contexts of not...
only course pedagogy but the larger social and institutional settings in which that work takes place” (an estimation borne out by Susanmarie Harrington’s review of Gray-Rosendale’s book [CCC 52 (2000): 151–53]), and that other readers “would welcome more critical reflection from the author...[about] her research methodology and her rendering of her ‘discoveries.’” This is my attempt to contextualize the reception Gray-Rosendale’s book is likely to receive in light of the perspectives different sectors of the profession might bring to their reading of this book. But the discourse dominating Gray-Rosendale’s response requires that writers be understood as sole producers of the meaning and effects of their work; hence, my estimations about how some readers may react are rendered, in Gray-Rosendale’s response, into statements “admonishing [Gray-Rosendale] for not repeating work already done (broad sociological approaches),” and as “charges.” To adopt the theoretical stance rehearsed in her response for the moment, her “terminological investment” in a particular view of “a post structuralist-Marxist position” that she ascribes to me leads her to “rewrite” and “decontextualize” the review to cast it as unsympathetic to any approach to understanding basic writing that does not account for it strictly “in the widest social terms.” Most strikingly, that discourse leads Gray-Rosendale to detach a clause in my review lamenting what I take to be the unpromising current political climate from its syntactic position as conditional modifier—“while I am not sanguine about the potential of Gray-Rosendale’s study to sway public opinion on the legitimacy of the work accomplished in ‘basic writing’ and ‘remedial’ college writing programs”—so that it can be read as a statement attacking her and her book, as if I were to expect or demand that her writing of her book, or anyone’s writing of any book, might by itself be held responsible for altering that climate. That Gray-Rosendale, the author of the book reviewed, should persist in a reading of the review that effectively transforms it into one condemning her and her book speaks to the discouraging power of that discourse. It is especially discouraging to see it operating in a discussion of basic writing, because this same discourse is one used to justify abandoning basic writing students by identifying them as autonomous individuals whose work as writers is unrelated to the material social conditions in which that work takes place and in which it is received. And so, despite Gray-Rosendale’s response, or rather, because of the discourse that pervades it, I am even more committed to my statements that—though her book is “suggestive,” “interesting to many teachers,” “welcome,” “provid[ing] some rare and useful glimpses of student work”—“I am not sanguine about the potential of Gray-Rosendale’s study to sway public opinion on the legitimacy of the work accomplished in ‘basic writing’ and ‘remedial’ college writing programs.”

However, to address Gray-Rosendale’s expressed concern that reviewers not rewrite and
decontextualize the texts to which they are responding, let me cite the full, concluding paragraph in which the statement appears on which Gray-Rosendale’s response focuses:

Despite these reservations [that some readers may have], while I am not sanguine about the potential of Gray-Rosendale’s study to sway public opinion on the legitimacy of the work accomplished in “basic writing” and “remedial” college writing programs, it should prove useful to teachers as a demonstration of the specific means by which some of that work is, or can be, accomplished. It challenges us to reconsider the role conversation analysis might play in scholars’ attempts to understand that work. And, finally, it may provoke further exploration of the interrelationships between the immediate site of that work and the mediating pedagogical, institutional, and other social historical conditions in which it takes place.

I share Gray-Rosendale’s expressed concern about the current state of scholarly exchange. Her own response illustrates the power of a dominant discourse to effectively disable her reading of a review recommending important work in basic writing scholarship.

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