INTRODUCTION: Reunion: Public Access and Writing Today

CCCC 2013: March 14, 2103 in Las Vegas, Nevada

1. Idea of panel: reunion of culture wars from the 1990s and emerging culture wars today.

2. Explanation of participants: Elizabeth Losh and Kurt Spellmeyer, and Michael Bérubé's absence.

Jessica Yood: The Writing Studies Panacea and the New Culture Wars

This year's conference theme, "The Public Work of Composition" and Michael Bérubés 1994 book *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* prompted me to reconsider two terms central to the 1990s culture wars and to our work in writing today: public and access.[1]

As you may remember from writing your proposals, Howard Tinberg, Chair of the conference, begins his "Call for Papers" quite enthusiastically. He references examples of triumphant "public works" in municipal projects like the Hoover Dam and in literacy initiative like the open admissions basic writing programs at my home institution, The City University of New York.

But he moves quickly to describing some pretty bad news about the state of higher education. He explains how public higher education is threatened both from the outside—budget cuts and mounting tuition rates—and the inside—a "race to the top" climate that promotes complex, advanced, networked learning. The promoters come largely from the academy—scholars with data showing what the U.S. student lacks in critical skills and thinking for the 21st century.[2] This kind of learning marginalizes or, increasingly, excludes courses that have traditionally been the terrain of our field: basic writing and first year composition says Tinberg. He calls the students who are being shut out of this new culture of higher education the

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[1] Michael Bérubé. *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics.* New York: Verso, 1994.

[2] Richard Arum and Josipa Roska. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. Michael Carter. "A Process for Establishing Outcomes-Based Assessment: Plans for Writing and Speaking in the Disciplines." *Assessing Writing: A Critical Casebook.* Ed. Brian Huot and Peggy O'Neill. Boston: Bedord/St. Martin's, 2009. Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh. *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking Higher Education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

"most vulnerable" of our population. Right before he offers questions to inspire proposals, he suggests that our field may not be "innocent" in these changes. He asks a question that, to me, reads like a declaration of a culture wars for our time:

> In its bid to achieve prestige as a discipline, has composition put too much of its intellectual stock in other areas of inquiry at the expense of basic writing and first-year composition?"

Tinberg doesn't name names, just a cryptic reference to new "intellectual stock." But we can surmise what he means: the study of complex, advanced, networked communications—the new world of writing theory.

Two decades ago, Michael Bérubé did name names. *Public Access* called out particular politicians and the press for mounting what he labeled a "smear campaign" on the humanities in general and literary theory in particular. But while Berube championed cultural criticism for its attempt to "underwrite politics" through dissent and interpretation, he also found the critics themselves a problem. He came to define that problem in terms of limited literacy. More on that later. But for now, I want to remember the stated purpose of *Public Access:* "to describe the relations between literary theory and American cultural politics." Those relations were key to engaging a changing public. The best critical race theory or feminist take on the canon or Marxist account of media won't matter much if theorists don't use that media to make cultural criticism readable and useable to "the new public of the 1990s."

This panel starts with the premise that the "race to the top" educational climate that Tinberg describes has everything to do with the relationship between

theory and American cultural politics that Bérubé outlined in *Public Access.* The players may have changed but the fate of a changing public is still at stake.

If we have a relationship status at all between theory and the public, we might label it "post." Theory has turned to describing the posthuman network—the systemic mix of human and nonhuman connections that define communication—and understandably so. But the current moment of transition in higher education demands that we set up, even temporarily, a reunion between writing and public access. That reunion is what follows.

Yet anyone who has ever attended, or in my case, evaded, high school reunions knows, we could be in for something awkward. Reunions are often uncomfortable and unsettling or, in the case of Seinfeld, just plain weird. That's because reunions *assume* a prior or continued connection among people, places, professions. That is the idea displayed just down the hall for here, at a table where a group of my colleagues are showcasing their amazing digital project, "The Writing Studies Tree." They are advertising their booth with this slogan: "The 4Cs is a Reunion. Discover Your Roots."

But we don't always want, or feel the need to, discover or rediscover our roots. Maybe we felt like they were never there in the first place. Maybe we feel like they don't connect us to who we are today. Certainly this is true of a reunion between the 1990s culture wars and today.

Why return to those days when the assumption was that literary theory or cultural studies were the pipelines to the most pressing matters of society? At the dawn of our new moment in Writing Studies, when vital questions about new

networks of knowing are often bypassed by literary theorists but central to writing theory, why you may ask: why go there?

The short answer: it's personal, and critical. The longer answer (maybe 15 minutes…) is that it's essential, in Bruno Latour's phrase to the "collective" work of higher education. [3]

CULTURE WARS THEN AND NOW

Here's a quick re-run of the 1990s culture wars. The 1990s was a decade that historian Phillip Wegner calls "the life between two deaths," coming at he end of the cold war and the moment before September 11th, the rise of the internet, and mass globalization.[4] Bérubé's *Public Access* was written in the early years of this decade, when controversy over the literary canon led to what Gerald Graff called "mass hysteria" about the future of the academy. Higher education was "under fire," and the "university was in ruins"—with the right claiming a value-less, theory-laden curriculum and the left calling out a conservative media for anti-intellectual and, often racist accusations on academics.[5] It seemed like everyone, from *New Yorker* film critic David Denby to then *Wall Street Journal* writer David Brooks had something to say about the apocalyptic condition of higher education.[6] It's hard to imagine now, but at the height of the culture wars, presidential candidates worried about what college students read in literature classes and journalists debated whether Derrida was fair game in freshman comp.

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[3] Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004.
[4] Phillip Wegner. *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2011: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*. North Carolina: Duke UP, 2009.
[5] Gerald Graff. *Beyond the Culture Wars.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.
[6] David Brooks, "From Western Lit to Westerns as Lit." *Wall Street Journal* (February 2, 1988): 36. David Denby. *Great Books.* New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996.

Today's climate of crisis shares some of the hysteria of the earlier culture wars. Again it seems like everyone is newly interested in the fate of college—from CEO's to computer scientists to, again literary critics. "What should higher education be in this global, digital, complex age?" This is the question a new crop of polemics asks.

Answers span the spectrum, from the mundane and measurable to the majestic and sublime. Some critics claim that the academy has been too soft on standards, because colleges focus on "non-academic" values like community instead of higher skills like computing. This is the argument found in a book like *We're Losing Our Minds.*

Another camp waxes eloquent about, the "coming revolution" in learning, brought on by data, the digital. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* straddles both worlds, in calling for such a revolution *because,* as he puts it, we live in "a competency-based world" where "mastery" gets monitored with greater and greater data-proven accuracy.[7]

The culture wars today draw a line, with "basic" on one side, "complex" on the other.

I've painted a crude snapshot; there are innovators, many from our own field, who offer educational pictures that include the practices (though not always the people) of basic writing classes.[8] But the story we hear most does not, by and large,

[7] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/opinion/friedman-the-professors-big-stage.html. Accessed 7 March 2013.
[8] Cathy Davidson, Alex Reid, Cheryl Ball are three such scholars.

include how beginners are part of what Friedman names tomorrow's "networked complex learning environments."

It's not as if Judith Butler or Stuart Hall for that matter worried about the vulnerable public Tinberg refers to. But cultural theorists did try to root writing and reading to a public. Now we may want to return to those roots, but expand their reach.

In making the thesis of *Public Access* a description of "the relations between literary theory and American cultural politics in the 1990s" (ix) Bérubé was arguing that *there was* a relation, a deep-rooted union between the promise of cultural criticism and an engaged American public. That public, he argued was being cheated by false claims of values on the right and lack of access to cultural criticism on the left. "The PC scandals" he writes "swept through the press so easily because so few of our 'traditional' intellectuals and mainstream journalists are capable of reading interpretively, reading intelligently, or (in some cases) reading at all" (264).

This "reading crisis" was caused, in part, by a writing crisis—the inaccessibility of what was once called "high" theory. One way to think about *Public Access* is as central chronicle of, and proposal to redirect, the culture wars. Another is as a textbook for critics. Midway through the book he charges the reader: "Profession: revise thyself!" Revision of our work towards broad critical and theoretical literacy would yield nothing short of a more perfect union: what Bérubé called the "radical imperatives" of "full participation" in democracy (172, 34)

We can debate, as many have, Bérubé's faith in the Shelleyan power of criticism in a world dominated by corporations and moneyed power. But I think the

way Berube presents the culture wars, as a kind of rhetorical triangle—or, really, an extended writing prompt—tells us something about the potential to relate writing, and writing studies to emerging and vulnerable publics.

That potential can't be met by thinking in triangles. Today, the image that best defines these relations is not a triangle, but a web.

At the forefront of describing what many call the "complex networks" of this web stands Writing Studies. And writing *theory*—investigations of how writing works in and as this environment—is at the nexus of the web. What Sidney Dobrin calls "the revolutionary potential" of our field is defined as the "intellectual work of writing theory" (24).[9] In some circles of Writing Studies, intellectual work is distinguished from almost every other kind of work associated with Composition, including the beginning writing course. A focus on, as editors of the collection *Beyond Postprocess* put it, "writing qua writing sans subject" (17) contributes to a turning *into* theory and away from subjects and subjectivity. Today first-year comp is out and, in an almost Seinfeld-ian twist of irony, theory qua writing, is in.

Taking a stand against freshman composition is nothing new. Calls for the abolition of the course are, as David Fleming showed us, as old as the class itself. [10] And reasons for critique are well-warranted—its staffing by contingent labor is an especially relevant and systemic problem with these courses.

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[9] Sidney I. Dobrin, J.A. Rice, and Michael Vastola. *Beyond Postprocess*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2011. Sidney I. Dobrin. *Postcomposition*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011.

[10] David Fleming. *From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixites, 1957-1974.* Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh UP, 2011.

But in one strand of Writing Studies, political calls for abolition become theoretical calls of obsolescence. Underwritten by complexity theory—research *in* and philosophies *of* self-organizing systems—first-year composition's end becomes the natural, Roland Barthes would say "mythologicial," evolutionary step in a move towards a more networked world.

Along with many in Writing Studies, I agree that an anti-theory bias limits the scope of our field. But a definition of theory as happening outside of first-year writing courses is as intellectually stunted and politically shortsighted as an anti-theory bias. And, also, paradoxically, self-destructive. Because an attack on first year writing classes *is* an attack on theory.

For the remainder of the talk I offer a view of these writing classes that is rooted in theory, but more importantly, is a space that collects theories and practices. These "collections" (again Latour's word) challenge a view of the "coming revolution," even as they are part of it. To help describe this kind of class, I will briefly call on Bérubé's more recent work and refer to my yearlong study of beginning writers, a study I call "The Complexity of Beginning."

When I contacted Michael Bérubé about participating in this panel, I thought he could reprise the advocacy work that was a hallmark of his MLA presidency. Indeed the theme of the MLA this year was "Avenues of Access." But for this panel, he offered a paper about public possibilities of criticism, specifically about "personal criticism'—a genre that he cites as one movement the theory revolution missed. He argues that memoirs, academic biographies and ethnographies, and, eventually blogging, didn't just "access" a public, it "complicated it." Although we "know the

personal can be the political," he wrote in his paper abstract, " we need to understand also how the personal can be public."

Berube was referring to scholarly writing that crossed over, in message and medium, into issues that could not be housed in cultural studies, or traditional media. That work is alive today in our field. Liz and Kurt's writings are two excellent examples.[11] But I want to suggest that this kind of criticism can also be *housed in a class*, in the beginning writing class. And though the residents of this house are beginners, this does not mean they are not theorists.

Beginning writing classes practice the kind of theory that many in cultural studies professed but failed to do. That is, analyzing, interpreting, and opening up the public sphere to a diversity of participants. This theory may look different than the writing of Judith Butler or the results of experiments at an Artificial Intelligence lab at the Sante Fe Institute. But they are related nonetheless. I think it's time for a reunion.

For the last six months, while on a sabbatical, I have become a student of freshman composition at the college where I teach. I have not only observed, so far, two classes of 110 and 120, I have taken these classes and done the work. While I have collected a wide variety of data, the most profound, and surprising, finding from the year is just how political and theoretical the personal work of these classes are. Week after week I squirmed as instructors and course platforms tried try to steer all writing and conversation towards the text or the issue or the outcome. But

[11] Alex Reid, http://www.alex-reid.net, Carmen Kynard, http://carmenkynard.org, and Chris Leary, http://99chapters.com/site/

students inevitably would bring their subjectivities into the text, or the argument paper, or the research. At some point I too couldn't resist the pull of the personal.

This does not mean I am advocating some version of feel-good expressivism as empowerment (though I am plugging my blog a little).[12] What I am arguing for here is not personal writing as a genre for class but personal criticism as an activity that can be connected to and collected as chronicles of an emerging public. This activity happens in the unique space of the beginning writing classroom. This space refuses to conform—no matter how many rubrics and outcome statements we write—to a version of what Barthes called the "good public" prescribed by the dominating discourses of power.

In 2013, those discourses come not only conservative politicians or corporations. They also come from a new kind of canonical literature that promotes a version of innovation in the mode of Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckenberg or Malcolm Gladwell—Big Inventors with big ideas that will revolutionize the world. But in the first year comp classroom, there are often more personal revolutions, what Jeff Rice, in another context, recently called "suggestions."[13] Taken together, these suggestions critique and create the "complex network" writing studies theorists talk about.

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[12] Important feminist critics in composition have done this work, see especially Susan W. Jarratt and Lynn Worsham, eds. *Feminism and Composition Studies.* New York, MLA, 1998.

[13] Jeff Rice. "Occupying the Digital Humanities." *College English* 75.4 (March 2013): 360-78. Print. Also http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CE/0754-mar2013/CE0754Occupying.pdf.

In week four of my hybrid English 120 class, we were assigned two write a "descriptive essay" about an influential teacher. This is just the kind of assignment that gets mocked as a dumbing down of our discipline. I normally would agree with this assessment. Except than I did the paper. The writing was awkward at times and had its share of simplistic reasoning. But I am now looking at our work in the aggregate. (I am mapping my work with all of the work collected over a year's time in two first-year writing classes.) Collectively, the writing's relations to each other, to complexity theory—philosophies of interconnected systems like those found on the internet or in the brain—to personal cultural theory, are illuminating. In one piece, a student described her first day in this country, placed in a basic writing class after having been a nurse in Ghana for nine years. She wrote a lot about nursing and not too much about her teacher. We asked her why. So she wrote another essay, about the fate of science education. In my own B+ version of the assignment, I waxed nostalgic about one of my old-school professors of literary criticism, only to be asked by a classmate, "what does literary criticism do?" I could not answer it in a descriptive essay, so I sent them a draft of this talk. Then I mapped my writing problem with my classmate's. Both of us, and seven others from the class, were straddling a system with our subjectivity; we were navigating the network, even as we acknowledged how it was navigating us.

This is "personal criticism" as public access. It combines critique—analysis, dissent, and a direction for reading a culture—with craft and subjectivity—recognizing change and negotiating it. That this writing rarely is named "theory" does not discount *our* naming it as such. That, too, are our public works.

Perhaps this view sounds naïve, even nostalgic. And nostalgia, like reunions, reeks of vulnerability: *not* an asset in the age of vital networks. But by theorizing the rich complexity of beginning writing—of inserting a self into what can become a quicksand of systems—we reunite with our roots in criticism while reigniting our connection to and collective action with the emerging public, of which we are a part.