

## The Decolonial Imperative in Basic Writing

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### INTRODUCTION

**T**his article extends engagement with decolonial theories within Latinx writing studies, particularly by engaging the ways literacy has been taken up within Basic Writing scholarship. In what follows, I argue that coloniality and decoloniality are crucial resources for Basic Writing and literacy scholarship under the larger umbrella of literacy/composition/rhetoric (LCR) studies, and that in a symmetrical fashion a consideration of Basic Writing and the “politics of remediation” (Soliday) cannot be neglected or ignored within LCR studies’ decolonial turn if the decolonial imperative is to be achieved. To this point, I advance the following claims:

1. The decolonial turn in LCR studies presents a potent set of resources for teachers and scholars of Basic Writing in that it provides an epistemic framework of writing and literacy which will remain permanently agonistic against the “deficit model” of Basic Writing pedagogy.
2. The decolonial turn in LCR studies additionally serves a potent set of resources for teachers and scholars of Basic Writing insofar as it opens a space for Basic Writing’s advocates to intervene in public and institutional discourses about the “politics of remediation” by showing the influence of colonial discourses on higher education’s ideologies of literacy, especially in contexts removed from LCR studies.
3. Finally, the decolonial turn in LCR studies, in examining the histories and historiographies of Basic Writing (at the institutional and national level), can both update these histories and historiographies from an explicitly decolonial perspective and additionally augment decolonial efforts in the present by learning from struggles of the past.

At present, decolonization at the level of theory takes on two primary currents. The first is concerned with real political relations in the world, specifically those between Indigenous people and nations and the states and corporations seeking to dispossess them of life, land, resources, and so on. The latter, emanating from one side of a schism in the Latin American Subaltern Studies group

around the turn of the twenty-first century, considers decoloniality and decolonial work primarily at the level of architectures of knowledge, epistemologies, and the like. Without dismissing the value and crucial importance of the former (or even entirely accepting such a hard and fast distinction), my work here primarily engages the latter definition, in which I pursue, as Romeo García puts it, “efforts to break from terms (concepts) and contents (histories) tied to coloniality/modernity” and shifts “toward an-other epistemic reconstruction” (304).

Readers will notice that in reference to decolonial projects and turns in LCR scholarship, I use the term “decolonial imperative,” as opposed to “decolonial option,” Walter D. Mignolo’s term that is often cited as such. I embrace the phrase “decolonial imperative” in citation of Roberto Hernández’s *Coloniality of the US/Mexico Border: Power, Violence, and the Decolonial Imperative*; Hernández argues that decoloniality and decolonial projects are a set of ethical and political obligations to each other and the planet itself, one which recognizes the interdependence of all things; embodies a spirit of generosity and reciprocity in one another; and ultimately the “seeking of a horizon that attempts to evade the very structuring logic itself,” the logic in question being the coloniality of power (190).

Within LCR, decoloniality is an ongoing project, beginning in 2008 with Damián Baca’s *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*. Baca’s project at that time was multifaceted, seeking to establish within the field of LCR a decolonized conception of the history of rhetoric and writing that centered on the writing systems and meaning-making practices of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, specifically pre-Columbian Mesoamerican scripts found, among other places, in what is now called the Southwestern United States. That is, rather than locating the origins of rhetoric and writing in ancient Greece, Baca moves that we consider the history of alphabetic systems and rhetorical practices of the Americas.

Baca’s groundbreaking study additionally aims to introduce a pedagogical model which will serve the composition classrooms of the Southwestern United States, and beyond, where the upcoming majority of undergraduate-aged people are racialized as Latinx. I understand this study as a continuation of Baca’s undertaking and its subsequent extensions, taking my point of departure as one key observation from his introduction for *Mestiz@ Scripts*. Noting that the consideration of Latinx students in the disciplinary history of English Composition (LCR) had begun relatively late, Baca explains that “Mestiz@s appear only recently as unnamed linguistic ‘problems’ in remedial or standard first-year writing seminars” (xv). My study, then, takes Baca’s observation of Latinx students as an occasion to consider the “politics of remediation” (Soliday) from a decolonial perspective.

## BASIC WRITING HISTORY

At the beginning of this section, I find it important to note that the study at hand is essentially a reconsideration of previously considered subjects, albeit through a slightly different lens. While the connection between race and remediation in LCR studies is well documented and established, it is my contention that a decolonial lens may provide a slightly finer cut to questions of remediation, particularly the epistemologies in place that position different groups of students and literate practices within, outside of, and on the margins of the university. This is to say that while the politics

of remediation do indeed have a racial bent, as documented by Steve Lamos, Carmen Kynard, and others, echoes of coloniality remain unexamined in the a priori assumptions structuring theories of academic literacy and home literacy. Additionally, while scholars of Latinx writing studies have pointed to demographic shifts in student populations as the exigence to consider concepts of Latinx inclusion and identity within LCR studies, what Romeo García and José Cortez have termed the “biopolitical argument,” such arguments have yet to account for a previous shift in student demographics and its influence on the developing epistemic frameworks of LCR studies, namely the “counterhegemonic struggles waged around access to higher education” (Parks 13, 20), which brought us both open admissions policies and the creation of Ethnic Studies programs, including Chicana/o Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, Latinx and Latin American Studies programs, and so on. Thus, from my perspective as a theorist and scholar of the historiography of Basic Writing as a knowledge-producing enterprise, I argue that the decolonial research paradigm offers several helpful analytical tools to make sense of our current moment.

While histories (revisionist and otherwise) of Basic Writing research have typically focused on Black English Vernacular and its attending literate practices as the excluded other of academic language and literacy, a quick look at the first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* establishes that the linguistic practices of students we would now call Latinx have been construed as an object of study since its inception. In a manner consistent with Baca’s comments on the history of Latinx students in composition studies, we observe that the first issue of *JBW* contains an article about Spanish language interference in Basic Writing courses, focusing on the influx of Spanish speaking students into the CUNY systems following the 1968 protests and the resulting Open Admissions policies, and taking a primarily linguistic perspective, identifying common errors caused by Spanish language interference and offering a few best practices for the BW instructors of the day to support students in correcting said errors. While the piece is typical for BW scholarship of the time, there is a particular aspect of its argument that has a certain valence in the present as well, especially in its larger context in the journal’s inaugural issue.

This “deficit model” of language pedagogy was thoroughly critiqued at the time and has been problematized even more thoroughly in the decades since, but the question remains as to what extent the epistemic assumptions involved have continued to frame Basic Writing scholarship’s epistemic frames, and whether we can see the influence of the Great Divide theory of literacy at work in the intellectual history of Basic Writing.

## THE GREAT DIVIDE THEORY OF LITERACY

For a review of the Great Divide theory of literacy and an exploration of its valence for LCR studies, we turn to the introduction essay to a recent special issue of this journal, Antonio Byrd, Jordan Hayes, and Nicole Turnipseed’s consideration of the legacy of Brian Street. In “Against Autonomous Literacies,” Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed consider how Street’s theoretical innovations on the nature of literacy as a social practice continue to inform our current theoretical debates, and particularly how the “autonomous model” of literacy has in some ways come to reassert itself in some contexts.

The stakes of Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed's study for our present purposes are twofold: first, that they serve as an example of another effort to interrogate the epistemic assumptions underpinning how literacy is understood in LCR studies, and secondly that Byrd and co-authors draw out an explicit critique of "colonialism" that Street himself understood as central to his intellectual project.

Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed note that "Street's critique of powerful actors' deployment of self-serving constructions of literacy is consistent at points with the commitments of anti-racist and decolonial scholarship," going on to "briefly draw connections between Street's early writing and contemporary decolonial work that seeks to parse the relationships between literacy, writing, and dominant modes of power" (XI). In particular, they cite Gabriela Rios to establish that "the spread of Western literacy (as alphabetic writing and European languages) was bound by a missionary, *colonial* agenda that constructed alphabetic literacy as a sign of 'true' civilization . . . that persists into the present day," essentially noting that Street's own epistemic project was directly concerned with what we might now call "the coloniality of power" and its relation to the dominant epistemologies of literacy, academic or otherwise (Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed XII).

Among other things, what Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed accomplish for LCR studies in their introduction is an exigence to consider decolonial projects in the epistemology of literacy, particularly in the context of how we might consider and reconsider Brian Street and the New Literacy Studies in the present. Pausing for a moment to consider parallel conversations, we see similar objectives for Baca, Iris Ruiz, and others pursuing decolonial projects in terms of Latinx writing and rhetoric studies, in some cases citing from the same texts or working through the same decolonial research paradigms. Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed make this observation as well, noting that Street's work "resonates with elements of current scholarship that have come to be central to contemporary literacy studies, such as Ruiz's entry on "Race" in *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*, in which she argues for a decolonial methodology that can "delink the term race from its historical ties to Western hierarchies" (5).

In this case, what remains is to show how the currents of scholarship we have identified within Latinx writing studies and literacy studies in LCR studies today connect to ongoing debates about the "politics of remediation," extending ongoing decolonizing work in the study of literacy and its epistemologies to Basic Writing scholarship. To begin, we will briefly reconsider the assumptions at play in the early Basic Writing scholarship concerning "Spanish language" and "non-standard dialect" related language interference.

Historiographies of Basic Writing have often remarked that early BW scholars and especially administrators and (mostly literature) faculty of the time left their own biases about "correct" and "standard" writing mostly unexamined, resulting in an early version of what we now know as the "deficit model." Thus, both writers in the early issue of *JBW* position "academic writing," which they say is "coherent and free of errors," at the center of their theory of writing and literacy, attributing errors to the "nonstandard dialects" of both English and Spanish. It is important at this point to briefly note the stakes of how "non-standard dialects" are constructed, and how these stakes relate to the question of how Western systems of alphabetic literacy manifest within ideas of "'true' civilization," as Rios puts it (63). Perhaps not ironically, English and Spanish are the primary languages of colonial

societies in the Americas, and historically the “correct” or “civilized” versions of those languages are those that relate most closely to England or Spain themselves as metropolitan colonial powers, with various “pidgin” or creolized versions of English or Spanish associated with colonies and colonial populations. Standard American English itself has even come to be regarded as something of a global standard for communication, which historical linguistics have noted as co-occurring with United States global hegemony from the mid-twentieth century onward.

Looking at this larger historical context enables us to see how the idea of “correct” or “standard” version of languages or literacies, rather than being a description of existing literacy or language practices (those common to United States universities in this case), is in fact an ongoing political project that depends on the existence of non-standard or minoritized Others as its condition of possibility. This is to say that, in lockstep with how “standard” English and Spanish come into being as part of the larger systems of colonial domination presided over by English and Spanish speaking empires, “correct” academic literacies come into existence out of contact between twentieth century academic institutions and students from minoritized groups, particularly Black and Puerto Rican students in the case of the City University of New York. This hypothesis, were it to be true, would cast the shadow of coloniality over Basic Writing as an enterprise, and necessitate a decolonial project within the developmental courses and coursework of the present. This, indeed, is the contention of my current study: that colonial ideas of literacy frame the central research question of Basic Writing, and that decolonizing work in LCR studies writ large that fails to consider the role of remediation and developmental courses in creating and maintaining the university’s regimes of “academic literacy” will ultimately fail in that many of the very same students that decolonial pedagogies intend to serve will remain barred from entry to decolonized mainstream composition classrooms by way of having been kept at “the gate below the gate,” as Ira Shor put it at the turn of the century.

The stakes of a decolonizing project within the epistemologies of literacy at play in Basic Writing scholarship entail a reconsideration of Basic Writing’s position within the institutional cultures of higher learning, as well as, and possibly most importantly, its role within LCR studies as a disciplinary formation, the Composition Studies aspect in particular. The historiography of Basic Writing thus far has understood it to be a sub-field of Composition Studies that primarily concerns itself with remediation, specifically in the guise of an additional course (often named Basic Writing) or other institutional resources and imperatives intended to remediate or correct deficits in the literate practices of incoming students, often students who are minoritized, first generation, or non-normative in other ways. This way of thinking, as Matthew Pavesich and others have pointed out, has essentially created a double bind for Basic Writing scholars insofar as we simultaneously find ourselves questioning and rejecting the rationale for Basic Writing’s existence and fighting back against institutional or political efforts to dismantle it, on the grounds that Basic Writing and related programs are the primary means via which these students are able to access higher education (Pavesich).

I argue that this scenario is the outcome of a dynamic in which minoritized students, following waves of protests and direct action emanating from the social movements of the mid-twentieth century, have been conditionally granted access to United States higher education, the condition

being the institutionalization of the “deficit model” within Basic Writing and Composition Studies as a whole, particularly in terms of how we have taken up the concept of literacy. That literacy has additionally occupied a central role in decolonial scholarship outside of LCR studies is no accident; indeed I argue that literacy as a means of dividing cultures and individuals into those defined by their possession of literacy versus those defined by its absence—the Great Divide theory of literacy,—can be productively read as the intellectual architecture for the “deficit model” in Basic Writing. While the deficit model has been questioned and in some ways moved beyond in Basic Writing scholarship, it remains institutionalized in the larger cultures and systems of United States higher education, with the inevitable result that the “deficit model” becomes the larger context within which Basic Writing coursework takes place, creating a seemingly insurmountable contradiction for Basic Writing teachers and advocates. Scholarship in LCR studies concerning decoloniality and literacy, however, offers a way forward from these contradictions, as evidenced below.

## DECOLONIALITY AND LITERACY

In “Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics,” Gabriela Raquel Ríos takes a decolonial and community-based approach to examining the literate and rhetorical practices of farm worker activists in Central Florida, noting that these activists, many of whom are Latin@ or Mexican@ (I use the author’s terminology out of respect for their work), deploy rhetorics that respond to “ideologies of literacy have been used to construct them ” (the workers themselves) as “a-rhetorical” (Ríos 68). For Ríos, the stakes of her study are to establish an understanding of how the farm worker activists have built a “theory of social change” through what she terms “land-based literacies and rhetorics,” as opposed to literacies and rhetorics that take alphabetic text as their primary basis or means of elocution (Ríos 68).

I call attention to Ríos’s study for two primary purposes. First, I find her analysis of the ideologies of literacy that construct the farm worker activists as “a-rhetorical” instructive for how we might conceive of the ideologies of literacy framing Basic Writing, and additionally because I find her analysis of the differences between the “historical trajectory” of what she terms “Latin American Indigenous Studies” as opposed to “rhetoric and composition studies,” which in this study I have termed LCR studies (63), to be especially trenchant. Ríos goes on to note that Indigenous philosophies, those that she associates with Latin American Indigenous Studies, trouble the dichotomies that pervade rhetorical theory, such as “environment/human/mind” and “subject/object,” using the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their practice of “teatro” as an example of a rhetorical performance that moves beyond the oral-literate binary that Ríos takes as having framed the ideologies of literacy at play in LCR studies (65–66). Further, Ríos cites performance theorist Diana Taylor as arguing that “the colonial construction of an oral-literate binary that has plagued much of literacy studies can be understood more accurately as an archive/repertoire binary” in which embodied and land-based knowledges and literacies are defined by their deficit relative to print based texts and archives (Ríos 65).

Of concern here for my study is how Rios draws out the colonial binaries framing the ideologies of literacy in composition studies, how they arise from the colonial encounter with the minoritized Other, nevertheless assigning an important role to such others as the farm worker activists and other Latinx or Indigenous people and communities, a position Cortez and García name elsewhere as the “sovereign exclusion” of Western writing systems. This system of dichotomies, I argue, frames the distinction between academic and “home literacies,” as well as the distinction between academic literacies and community literacies. Further, I argue that we might more productively collapse the distinction, noting that literacies we might otherwise name as community literacies become “home literacies” in the case that members of minoritized communities matriculate into institutions of higher learning, an area for further inquiry. Rios then lends an important analytic to our consideration of Basic Writing insofar as she makes explicit the connection between colonial paradigms of knowledge production and the ideologies of literacy active within LCR studies, following Amy Wan in noting that the association of literacy with citizenship within said disciplinary formation occludes the “contradictoriness of literacy as a tool for empowerment” due to its “uncritical uptake of citizenship production” (Rios 68). When we consider these observations in the context of Basic Writing, we see that the deficit model that frames the epistemology and ideology of literacy within that institutional project is an emanation of the same “colonial binaries” that construct the CIW activists as “a-rhetorical” (Rios 60).

For another instance of how colonial structures frame the deficit models which inhere to many literacy theories and pedagogies, we consider Michael T. MacDonald’s “‘My Little English’: A Case Study of Decolonial Perspectives on Discourse in an After-School Program for Refugee Youth,” which reflects on the author’s experience teaching in the named after-school program. MacDonald’s study develops Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship, reading literacy sponsorship via Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s observation that literacy “has been a primary medium of imperial rationality” and functioned as an “artificial measure of development” which works against the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and the valuation of Indigenous ways of knowing (MacDonald 17).

In the case of the refugee students who MacDonald tutored in the aforementioned after-school program, he identifies them as at risk of being “constructed according to colonial discourse” due to the prevailing imperialist view of literacy underpinning the ideas guiding the program and programs like it. That is, the African refugee students who MacDonald surveyed for his study, in a way that they themselves point out in his anecdotes, find ways to make use of the English language that counter or circumvent the ideologies of literacy which would “construct them as a-rhetorical,” as Rios puts it in her study in reference to the CIW workers in central Florida (60). I refer to MacDonald’s study primarily to note a similarity between his argument and that of Rios, namely that in both cases we see a minoritized or multiply marginalized group responding to ideologies of literacy that have produced them as a-rhetorical, illiterate, incapable of abstract or hypotactic thought, and so on. The ideologies of literacy in question are chiefly produced and maintained by academic institutions, and to an extent the (primarily research-focused, if also concerned with pedagogy) objectives of both Rios and MacDonald are in some way to make those institutions more responsive to these groups of people, engage them on more ethical or reciprocal terms, or at the very least understand their

own colonial biases. To loop back to the central objective of this study, I again reiterate the point that the same colonial models of literacy underpinning both literacy sponsorship in McDonald's study and academic ideologies of literacy in Ríos's article form the basis of the deficit model that pervades the intellectual architecture of Basic Writing studies, which has historically functioned as both guarantor of access to higher education by students from minoritized groups and internal checkpoint regulating and standardizing their rhetorical and literate practices, moving them from an "a-rhetorical" or "little English" stage to what we might call "college readiness."

Additionally, in both studies examined in this section, we see the adoption of a decolonial approach to research projects that primarily center on literacies and rhetorics which take place outside of the boundaries of the university, even as they work counter to the university's ideology of literacy. To continue our study of the decolonial imperative in Basic Writing, we now turn to a survey of recent decolonial moves *within* the university's ideologies and epistemologies of literacy.

## DECOLONIALITY AND PEDAGOGY

Thus far, the ongoing engagement with decoloniality in LCR studies, the decolonial research paradigm in particular, has been organized around three texts: Damián Baca's *Mestiz@ Scripts*, *Digital Migrations and the Territories of Writing*, Baca and Victor Villanueva's edited collection *Rhetorics of the Americas*, and Iris D. Ruiz and Raul Sanchez's edited collection *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*. While an exhaustive account of the work contained in the above listed texts is outside the scope of this study, it is necessary to briefly take stock of their larger goals, which are twofold. First, all three books take it as a central objective to excavate the logics of coloniality underpinning LCR studies. Second, the books seek to gesture toward a decolonial turn within LCR studies that looks to Indigenous, Latinx, and otherwise marginalized knowledges and ways of meaning making as productive resources for LCR studies. Thus, the decolonial move within LCR studies is both critical and affirmative, interested in both uncovering and negating one framework for theorizing writing theory and pedagogy and generating new paradigms and practices for LCR studies as a disciplinary formation.

Thus far, my study has focused a critical lens on the basic assumptions of Basic Writing, one formation located within LCR studies, arguing that it is the means via which LCR studies institutionalizes the "deficit model" and locates "basic writers" at the periphery of the institutional geographies of post-secondary writing pedagogy. In the section that follows, I endeavor to extend the work of the scholars mentioned above, noting that their studies are, perhaps not in error, concerned with LCR theory and pedagogy overall as a disciplinary formation, as opposed to specific sub-sets of theories and pedagogies that relate to different spaces within United States higher education's "geographies of writing" (Grego and Thompson). My claim, then, is that extending the ongoing decolonial trajectory within LCR studies requires a consideration of how coloniality is directly implicated within said institutional geographies. LCR's decolonial turn, then, must directly engage questions of remediation and literacy at the post-secondary level.

As referenced earlier, Damián Baca begins his *Mestiz@ Scripts* with the observation that *Mestiz@*

students appear “only recently” in English Composition (author’s term), specifically as “unnamed linguistic ‘problems’ in remedial or standard first-year writing seminars” (xv). In my reading, Baca accomplishes two moves with this observation. First, he notes that the students he names *Mestiz@* are primarily positioned within LCR studies in terms of their supposed deficits relative to their proficiency with written English, and second that LCR studies has been primarily concerned with *Mestiz@* students in terms of their capacity (or not) to pass through First Year Writing, the mechanism by which institutions of higher learning mediate the boundary (or border) between “home/”community/ minoritized literacies and literate practices as opposed to their own, what has been termed “academic literacy” (Baca).

Baca’s intervention, then, is to regard these students and their home communities, rather than as sources or markers of problems or deficits, as subjects who carry with them valuable resources for knowledge creation and rhetorical/literacy inquiry. His proposed means for this pursuit, as he reveals in the following chapters, is to rewrite the histories and historiographies of LCR studies so that they begin in the Americas, viewing the history of writing in the Western Hemisphere as beginning there with Indigenous meaning making systems, as opposed to beginning with the ancient Greeks and Romans. This is to say that Baca frames his intervention (a reconsideration of the history of rhetoric and writing in the Americas) as an alternative to and direct critique of what we have previously termed the Great Divide theory of literacy, a theory that he engages rather explicitly throughout *Mestiz@ Scripts*, noting that prevailing notions of literacy have been focused on a linear teleology suggesting that “all writing systems progress towards the letter” and that “alphabetic literacy is the pinnacle of all other systems of recorded knowledge” (Baca 7). Baca’s move to call attention to a temporal aspect of the colonial “Great Divide” view of literacy, one in which all systems of recorded knowledge and meaning making ultimately terminate in alphabetic literacy, is especially important for our analysis insofar as it provides a useful theoretical lens for thinking about Basic Writing and the politics of remediation.

To some extent, all university pedagogy, LCR studies included, does depend on a linear and teleological conception of learning, insofar as we assume that students will begin from a certain level of understanding and progress through different, presumably higher levels of understanding as they approach graduation. We also assume that students, at the university level especially, are exiting adolescence and entering adulthood, and we often base our view of pedagogy on the cultural assumptions we hold concerning the attributes and attitudes of people in this stage of life. This is all to say that in some ways, we might not necessarily object to an ideal of pedagogy which takes as a given that students will, at the end of a course, course sequence, or degree program, arrive at a similar understanding. In the case of LCR studies, to some extent our own *raison d’être* is predicated on this construction, and while problematizing or critically reconsidering this disposition may be worthwhile, this question is outside the scope of the present study..

It is not my aim, then, to question our goal of helping students acquire and use certain literate and rhetorical practices, but rather to consider how Baca’s observations on the temporal nature of the Great Divide theory of literacy can be a helpful analytic for thinking about the larger ideologies and epistemologies of literacy underpinning Basic Writing and the politics of remediation. Baca

notes at the outset of his study that Mestiz@ students arrive in LCR studies as “unnamed linguistic ‘problems,’” astutely observing that throughout much of the history of LCR as a disciplinary formation such students are considered as an object of study due to their need for linguistic remediation, and how the “deficit model” of pedagogy arises from the university’s contact with these students (in the guise of open admissions and related programs). To some extent, as Kelly Ritter, Mary Soliday, and others have noted, the initial purpose of English Composition was itself remedial, and additional layers of remediation also existed prior to the formation of Basic Writing as a knowledge-producing disciplinary project. The difference, as noted explicitly by Victor Villanueva and others, is that Basic Writing arises in response to an influx of minoritized students, as a consequence of intentional activist struggles for access to United States higher education.

Baca’s temporal perspective, then, is helpful for our purposes insofar as it enables us to see that the deficit model, which places a student’s acquisition of “academic literacy” as its ultimate goal, maps onto colonial “Great Divide” theories of literacy that construct the literate and rhetorical practices of non-Western cultures as backward, primitive, of the past, and unable to construct meaning. An additional resource that Baca, Ruiz, Steven Alvarez, and other contemporaries lend to our analysis is the way in which their decolonial critique of the “Great Divide” theory of literacy both develops and troubles the dichotomy between autonomous and ideological models of literacy. The key distinction, one I alluded to at the outset of my study and will repeat here, is the distinction between autonomous vs ideological models of literacy as a question of theoretical or epistemic error versus the distinction between decolonial and Great Divide conceptions of literacy as a question with political and ethical valence far beyond the strictly academic notion of error. As an example, we would consider Gabriela Ríos’s study of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their practice of “teatro” as a gesture of advocacy for the workers and their communities as an observation that their literate and rhetorical practices have been misunderstood by academics.

This precise shift, the move from a value-neutral or objective assessment of the epistemic errors in writing pedagogy and assessment to a values-based and politically charged intervention on behalf of minoritized students and communities, is the shift that animates my proposal for the exploration of decolonial imperatives and projects within the field of Basic Writing studies, for two key reasons I will explore in the space remaining. First and foremost, the decolonial lens, Ríos’s study of the CIW for example, connects questions of Basic Writing and the politics of remediation to larger political struggles and questions across and beyond higher education. In public scholarship and debate, discussion of the politics of remediation in university level writing instruction has been a rather arcane subject in recent years, reaching its peak as an object of public concern in the 1990s. Issues of representation, equity, and access in higher education, however, are hugely contentious and ongoing in the present climate. Thus, a connection between Basic Writing and decolonial struggles and activism will open a space for teachers of Basic Writing and advocates for access and equity within LCR studies more broadly to link our efforts to larger and more visible public debates.

The second benefit, which I have sketched in some detail and earlier pages and will reiterate in my conclusion, is that attention to the politics of remediation within the decolonial turn underway in LCR studies will both broaden and deepen that project’s engagement with questions of literacy,

pedagogy, and the influence of coloniality on the higher education's geographies of writing. To be explicit, I suggest that decolonial studies in LCR consider Basic Writing to be itself a means of policing the borders of academic and minoritized literate practices, rather than a race-neutral or value-neutral institutional system. To take my argument a step further, I would repeat my suggestion that a decolonial project within LCR studies that does not take into account the extent to which Basic Writing has already served a sorting function in response to the university's contact with minoritized students and communities will ultimately reify the same structures it seeks to undo, by failing to grapple with the ways in which remediation has positioned particular students within higher education's geographies of writing.

## DECOLONIZING THE GEOGRAPHIES OF BASIC WRITING

To begin our discussion of the benefits a decolonial lens could bring to Basic Writing scholarship and its ideologies of literacy, we will turn to the Studio model of writing pedagogy, a project relevant to our purposes for two reasons. First, Studio, as noted by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson in a number of venues including the monograph *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*, arose as an institutional response to revanchist attacks on developmental writing courses in the state of South Carolina, in particular a piece of legislation that banned remediation in any of the state's publicly funded four-year institutions. Thus, Studio scholarship is particularly well suited as a resource for any politicized view of Basic Writing insofar as it takes its own political and public context into account as its own condition of possibility. Second, the Studio model of pedagogy, out of all the models that have arisen in response to the sustained attack on Basic Writing and other "high risk" programs (see Lamos) from the 1980s onward, is the model that most explicitly engages the question of how students are positioned at the margins and borders of university pedagogy by virtue of their supposedly deficient or aberrant literate practices.

In their consideration of how academic structures position "remedial" students at their borders, Thompson and Grego continue the spatial turn in LCR studies centered around Nedra Reynolds' *Geographies of Writing*, in which Reynolds takes up Edward Soja's theory of postmodern geographies as a means of making sense of the material and place-based aspects of writing in the context of higher education. Before we move further into Thompson and Grego's argument, it is important here to note the emphasis on spatial and geographic concerns in decolonial theory, both within and outside of LCR studies. Baca's *Mestiz@ Scripts* dedicates an entire section to Spatialization, wherein Baca argues for a focus on the geographies of literacy, writing, and rhetoric. Specifically, Baca seeks to trouble a hierarchical and teleological conception of writing and rhetoric that terminates in European alphabetic writing systems, a conception which implicitly marks all other symbolic systems and practices as deficient or unfinished. For Baca and others, considering the spatial aspects of literacy and rhetoric theory and pedagogy displaces a temporal focus that marks non-Western literacies and rhetorics as somehow less literate or rhetorical than their counterparts. Recalling our earlier reading of Rios on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and MacDonald on refugee students in a literacy program, we see spatial terms in play as well, especially in the guise of how colonial

ideologies of literacy police the boundaries between academic/home literate practices as well as academic/community literate practices. Thus, my claim here is that the spatial logics of coloniality and the ways in which they inhere to academic ideologies of literacy, particularly those which animate the politics of remediation.

In *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*, Thompson and Grego are explicit in their discussion of how “social and institutional histories” mediate access to knowledge creation, noting that “at the upper undergraduate and graduate levels” of the “idealized university,” “knowledge is admitted to be an ‘open system’ in which the relationships between researchers and subjects and the relative rawness of data are issues for discussion and debate” (99). This is to say that, at the “higher levels” of the university’s institutional hierarchy, knowledge is increasingly understood as rhetorical, constructed, or produced. In turn, students present at these levels (advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and so on) are presented with knowledge along these terms. Conversely for Thompson and Grego, students who “enter the university at lower levels,” along with students who are “associated with those of a race, gender, or class more typically found at such levels,” encounter coursework which “pare down skills to the basics,” such as Basic Writing. These courses end up positioning student writers “further from discussion of those institutional rhetorical contexts that have influenced their writing development and continue to influence their writing choices”.

Consequently, Thompson and Grego suggest that “it as though our higher education institutional hierarchy can admit that the boundaries of internal and external pentadic analyses of life are less than clear in front of only the most advanced student-participants,” nothing in parentheses that these student-participants are “by then winnowed down and homogenized” (Thompson 99). At the risk of stating the obvious, one of the primary means of “winnowing down and homogenizing” students in United States higher education is general education writing courses, Basic Writing especially. To draw out Thompson and Grego’s implication, we can recall how colonial ideologies of literacy, for Gabriela Ríos, Damián Baca, etc. divide people and communities into a-rhetorical or il-literate, marginalizing rhetorical or literate practices other than Western alphabetic literacy into the margins of “academic literacy.” If we understand Basic Writing to be a primary means of filtering students in terms of their “basic skills,” a “gate below the gate” as Ira Shor put it, we can see that the traditional Basic Writing curriculum indeed serves a colonial function as a border or “checkpoint” within higher education’s geographies of writing.

There is, however, an additional layer of complication to the debate about Basic Writing. Similar critiques to that sketched above have appeared in Basic Writing scholarship since at least the 1980s, and yet the original paradigm of Basic Writing has continued to exist in many ways, and many of its strongest critiques have cautioned against its abolition.

The reason for this contradiction will be familiar to most Basic Writing instructors and advocates, but it still must be made explicit. Namely, Basic Writing is, in many cases, the primary institutional mechanism that continues to serve as a guarantor for access to higher education on the part of minoritized students and communities at all, especially after more explicit programs intended for this purpose (what Steve Lamos has termed high risk programs) have been dismantled, outlawed, attacked, or at the very least severely defunded. Thus, to eliminate Basic Writing and other

developmental programs is often to bar the students those programs are intended to serve from accessing higher education at all. Indeed, it is this occasion that gave rise to Studio pedagogies in the first instance, insofar as they were developed as a means of supporting “underprepared students” while remaining compliant with legislation in the state of South Carolina which banned remedial coursework.

While Studio pedagogies, Stretch, and other new and alternative systems of Basic Writing pedagogy, as well as traditional Basic Writing courses, can and do support students in the development of their own literate and rhetorical practices, they are also united in how they all carry an important flaw: they cannot independently resolve the contradictions which animate their own existence. These contradictions create the simultaneous imperative both to support Basic Writing in practice and critique it in theory (what Matthew Pavesich terms “the liberal reflex”), and to attempt to promote access and inclusion within a larger social project that defines itself in many ways in terms of selectiveness and exclusion, namely United States higher education. These contradictions, I claim, can be overcome, among other means, via a turn to a decolonial imperative within Basic Writing scholarship and pedagogical praxis.

## CONCLUSION: DECOLONIZING BASIC WRITING

I began this exercise considering an aporia between the extant literature on Basic Writing pedagogy and the decolonial turn in Rhetoric and Composition studies, noting that these intellectual projects have come to occupy the same grounds, consider the same questions, and particularly raise critical questions about the status minoritized global majority students in the United States university system. These are, of course, the students who have been present in United States higher education since the desegregation projects of the mid-twentieth century, those of the global majority, many of whom are indeed Indigenous to this continent. Thus, the basic set of questions considered by early Basic Writing scholars (how best to serve students which the university system and at times a hostile dominant society regarded as forced upon United States higher education externally as an outcome of political struggles) found themselves taken up later on by decolonial scholars.

Initially, I regarded this “gap in the literature” as a thought problem to be taken up by Rhetoric and Composition scholars, but at the present juncture I have come to view it as the inevitable conclusion of real material conditions being investigated and interrogated by scholars working from different intellectual positions and carrying different assumptions. Therefore, the aporia in question is not actually a gap in the literature, but the specter of real political struggles reflecting themselves downstream within our discipline’s scholarly production. Thus, the knowledge problem I posed cannot in fact be resolved within my own scholarly practice, rather its conclusion will come as the outcome of struggles outside the realm of pure thought.

As I worked on this study, a newly invigorated and energetic Palestine solidarity struggle has erupted across United States college campuses, one that finds the student activists of the present locked in conflict not only with university administrators but also with external actors and organizations and in some cases the state itself. Perhaps paradoxically, a wide range of institutions that canonize

and valorize the student protest struggles of their pasts have roundly condemned this year's protests, and some campuses began to call in state security forces to quell them, violating decades-old taboos. At the center of this struggle are questions of the meaning and value of speech, literate practices, and rhetorical performances, particularly in terms of how they are implicated in or resist colonial domination and other systems of power. The state, in concert with a wide range of non-state actors, has in the last instance assumed the power to dictate the boundaries of legitimate speech by its own fiat. In this context, the line between legitimate protest and unacceptable incitement to violence finds itself imposed externally by university administrators, thus generating a Great Divide in discourses of Palestine which reproduces the fundamental boundary of colonization itself. In this context, we can see clearly a bipartite division of literacy practices, slogans, and terms which reifies the Great Divide theory of literacy and calls to memory Fanon's teaching that the colony is "a world divided."

As such, the status of colonial power as a means of apprehending modern political struggles is now hotly contested. I view this not as history repeating itself, but rather an ongoing power struggle at the heart of modernity rising to the fever pitch necessary to be visible within our scholarly communities. Decolonization itself as a concept has come under attack, linked by right wing actors to terrorism, prejudice, and calls for violence. This struggle has been conceptualized as new, emergent, or unprecedented, when in fact it is the continuation of the conflicts inaugurated in the 1960s' "counterhegemonic struggles waged around access to higher education" to which Stephen Parks attributes the rise of our discipline, which remains the case whether or not our discipline takes heed (13, 20). What does this mean for a turn to a decolonial imperative within Basic Writing and a turn to the politics of remediation within decolonial scholarship?

My own students have been candid in their disappointment with how many faculty members who openly celebrate 1968-era student occupations have been silent about or even hostile to the student protests of today. It is easy to characterize this as hypocrisy, a lack of familiarity with the real history, or simply cowardice. I argue, however, that this would be a mischaracterization of this rhetorical dynamic. In my view, the cause of this apparent contradiction is the ways in which student protest of the past have been historicized and commemorated: primarily in terms of how their effects benefitted institutions themselves, Basic Writing programs, Composition Studies, and English studies more broadly. Thus, the history of the student struggles of the past has been written from the perspective of the university professionals who benefitted most thoroughly from them, a far cry from the anti-colonial motivations of the 1960s-era students themselves and the larger movements they constituted. Carmen Kynard has roundly criticized this dynamic as a discourse of "white innocence" in Basic Writing studies, which I choose to read as an elision, on the part of Basic Writing scholarship, of its own complicity in coloniality.

It is here that Basic Writing scholars seeking to grapple with the aporias between Basic Writing scholarship and the emergent discourse on decoloniality in LCR studies should look, the critical reappraisal of our own historiography and the ways in which histories of Basic Writing, SEEK, open admissions, and remediation have been rhetorically produced in ways that ultimately benefit our own professional ethos and elide the real dynamics of power and hierarchy underpinning the entire intellectual enterprise of LCR studies. In the years following 1990s and 2000s attacks on remediation

writ large and Basic Writing programs and courses in particular, I argue that Basic Writing scholars have fallen into a melancholic disposition which harkens back to an imagined past of comparatively well-funded Basic Writing programs and courses, in tandem with their ostensible social benefits.

However, a critical reappraisal of this trend has begun within Basic Writing studies as well. Tessa Brown's "Let the People Rap: Cultural Rhetorics Pedagogy and Practices Under CUNY's Open Admissions, 1968–1978," revisits the historical connections between the history of Open Admissions and the rise of hip hop culture and literate practices, arguing that racist backlash against Open Admissions and SEEK was itself generative of counter-hegemonic literate practices in Black and Puerto Rican communities in New York City, removing Basic Writing historiography from a triumphant teleological narrative that centers the professional success of White Basic Writing scholars and placing it back into the history of twentieth century counter-hegemonic social movements (Brown 2019). Sean Molloy and Alexis Bennett follow Brown in reconsidering Basic Writing's historiography, noting that defenses of existing Basic Writing courses and programs have largely performed a rhetoric of "white innocence," at bottom centering the professional ethos and continued success of White BW faculty and scholars at the expense of a more thorough analysis of the underlying divisions and hierarchies structuring higher education's geographies of literacy (2022). A turn to decoloniality, especially its relation to the social movements so closely linked to the history of Basic Writing, will supplement this important work and continue the work of revising LCR's history such that it can serve as a resource for the challenges confronting the field at present.

Given that Basic Writing programs were ultimately the result of external political struggles, and in many ways constituted a compromise which retained colonial logics in the university system which have found themselves under pressure in various ways since, it is there that we should focus our attention. Thus, the decolonial turn in LCR studies certainly does offer a robust set of theoretical resources and perspectives for invigorating the core questions at the heart of Basic Writing studies, albeit not when distilled from their broader political valence.

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