

Steep Houses in Basic Writing: Advocating for Latino Immigrants in a North Georgia Two-Year College

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ABSTRACT: Recounting the controversy surrounding a town hall meeting on “illegal” Latino immigration at a two-year college in North Georgia, this ethnographic narrative details the aftermath that ensued and its consequences for an ESL basic writing instructor. Fallout included the potential loss of her job, the rumored reallocation of a \$5 million earmark for the college’s student center, and a death threat phoned into the Dean’s office. Theorizing the disciplinary insularity of contemporary activist basic writing scholarship, the article calls for an expansion of conceptualizations of political engagement in relation to Generation 1.5 and, specifically, Latino immigrants’ physical access to higher education.

KEYWORDS: Dream Act; immigration; Generation 1.5; Latinos; Basic Writing

A large part of what Taylor St. John¹ did as ESL Learning Support program coordinator was to “interpret” ESL students to the faculty of Sweet Water College in Hogg Mountain, Georgia. Or, as Taylor put it, she often found herself “trying to explain to them (the faculty), in a sympathetic way, issues that they (ESL students) may have.” For example, in Spring 2006, María Jesús was having a terrible time in Psychology 101 because of the professor’s preference for un-subtitled videos that he did not allow students to check out. Taylor suspected that her colleague had lost several in the past and that he no longer trusted students to take them home. Taylor reassured María Jesús that she would talk to him. They would come to some sort of agreement—Taylor was certain.

In two-year college communities, basic writing instructors such as Taylor St. John are often called on to be advocates for transnational children of immigration—negotiating their needs with individual colleagues and the greater community and reassuring their students that others will understand

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their challenges and their potential. I have written of Taylor and her colleagues and the dilemmas that mediated their professional subjectivities as basic writing faculty. These ranged from the institution’s excruciatingly narrow understanding of what it meant to be ready for college; to the ambiguous relationship between ESL Learning Support and remediation; to the program’s torturous exit procedures; to the college’s emerging four-year aspirations; to the personal dilemmas that the instructors negotiated alongside their teaching (Salas “Roberta”; Salas “Teaching and the Dilemma of the Personal”; Salas “Something That You’re Proud of”). However, of the various tensions of being an ESL Learning Support faculty member, the highly contentious issue of immigrants’ right to access a postsecondary education in the state of Georgia was central to Taylor and her colleagues’ understandings of who they were professionally and why their work mattered.

In this “tale from the field” (Van Maanen), I recount the controversies surrounding a town hall meeting on the topic of “illegal” immigration in North Georgia. My intent in relating the events that follow is to question the insularity of some activist strands of contemporary basic writing scholarship. I argue that that a discipline historically committed to open admissions must engage more explicitly with state legislation aimed at excluding Latino immigrant youth from the opportunity structures of U.S. society. My analysis is, furthermore, grounded in the disproportionate likelihood that U.S. educated Latinos who do attend postsecondary institutions will enroll in two-year colleges where they are also very likely to be identified for basic writing coursework (Salas et al.).

With the visible emergence of a so-called “Generation 1.5” (U.S. educated first- and second-generation children of immigration), advocacy for students such as María Jesús has become an area of concern within the larger umbrella of postsecondary composition studies and practice (Roberge, Siegal and Harklau). Sweet Water College’s ESL basic writers hailed from many parts of the world and spoke a number of languages. However, U.S. educated Latinos comprised the majority of seats in Taylor’s basic writing classrooms. Some had been born in Georgia or another U.S. state. Some had come with or followed their parents at a very young age. Some had come as middle or high school students. With few exceptions, they entered Sweet Water with a U.S. high school diploma. In the context of Sweet Water College—issues surrounding immigration were without a doubt Latino-centric and talk of “Generation 1.5” more accurately about “Generación 1.5.” Yet, as my colleagues and I have speculated (Salas et al.), perhaps because of the Asian origins of the concept of Generation 1.5, and also because of the rela-

tively recent appearance of Latinos on two-year college campuses, Latinos identified for various remedial literacy coursework are often more broadly categorized as English Language Learners.

Contemporary discussions about second language learners in postsecondary coursework (or aspiring to postsecondary coursework) have included, among other things, the need for better informed placement assessment practices (Di Gennaro), alternative grammar instruction (Rustick), support services (Goldschmidt, Notzold and Ziemba Miller; Miele; Thonus); and, access to academic cultures and writing (Williams and Garcia; Zamel and Spack). In contrast, critically poised efforts rejecting the “linguistic innocence” (Lu) of better-practice-paradigms have worked to expose and dismantle the complex and layered histories of monolingual English developmental writing instruction (Horner and Trimbur), deficit representations of U.S. educated children of immigrants in postsecondary education (Harklau; Ortmeier-Hooper); ideologies of normalization (Canagarajah; Crisco; Gutierrez, Hunter Jevon and Arzubiaga; Portes, Delgado-Romero and Salas), and under-funded public education driven by state-mandated testing (Bernstein). Indeed, since Lu’s landmark reproof of “linguistic innocence,” the field has shifted from a relatively narrow focus on pedagogical concerns to engagement with “questions of literacy from rhetorical, philosophical, sociocultural, political, gender studies, and historical perspectives, sometimes all in the same study” (Durst 78). Or, as Canagarajah has argued, “Since everything that is taught already comes with values and ideologies that have implications for students’ social and ethical lives, teaching is always problematic” (16).

Here I recount how, in the setting of a two-year college in North Georgia in the spring of 2006, Taylor St. John’s advocacy for the Latino immigrant students she served was complicated not only by existential questions of literacy but also by SB 529—a far-reaching legislative proposal that would have, among other things, denied all undocumented immigrants in Georgia access to public postsecondary education. In the sections that follow, I recount how Taylor’s personal commitment to her students morphed into something exceedingly public in the form of a town hall meeting organized around the proposed legislation. My analysis of the meeting’s aftermath suggests that, given the proliferation of legislative attempts to block immigrant Latino youth’s access to the opportunity structures of postsecondary education, there is an urgent need for a disciplinary re-framing of the parameters of advocacy in basic writing.

COMING TO KNOW TAYLOR ST. JOHN

My entry to Sweet Water College was the happy coincidence of my running into a graduate school classmate of mine shortly after the 2004 New Year. The coordinator of Sweet Water’s ESL program, Meredith had been working at the College since Fall 1997. I took advantage of our acquaintance to ask if she might know of an ESL classroom that I might observe. After a few phone calls, she had arranged for me to meet with Taylor, a Sweet Water ESL instructor who, Meredith explained, was “used to” having strangers in her classroom and sympathetic to graduate students in search of a field site. By mid-January 2004, I had made my first visit to the college, met with Taylor, and arranged for my participant observation of her ESL Advanced Grammar and Writing course. My travels to Sweet Water continued, and that initial forty hours of fieldwork grew into a dissertation study—five academic semesters of participant observation distributed over three years.

Although one motivation for doing my graduate study in Georgia had been the dynamic of its new Latino settlement and the research opportunities the phenomenon afforded, I had thought little of the public two-year college as a research site. Community colleges were, nonetheless, familiar childhood landmarks. In the mid-90’s, I too had taken a handful of courses at the Annandale Campus of Northern Virginia Community College, or “NOVA,” to complete various undergraduate deficiencies for teacher certification. Ten years later, I found myself once again on the campus of a public two-year college—this time in Georgia. The ease with which I received approval from my own university’s institutional review board for the Sweet Water pilot combined with the rapport I established with the participants during the pilot led me to commit to the site.

In its first iteration, the project was designed as an examination of English Learners’ apprenticeship into academic writing. As the study and theoretical framework evolved, my focus shifted from teaching and learning the five-paragraph essay to understanding how teachers navigated an institutional environment where they were compelled to assume multiple, if not conflicting, roles and constituencies—advocates for the English learners they taught, and gatekeepers for the college that employed them. In sum, data generation totaled 250 hours of fieldwork, documented in 300 + pages of field notes and 500 + pages of instructional notes. The final semester of data collection was punctuated by a schedule of structured interviews and participant observation aimed at understanding how Taylor and her colleagues navigated the complexity of their institutional environment. It was

during this semester and within this rich research context that the town hall meeting I describe here occurred.

STUDENTS FOR A PROGRESSIVE SOCIETY

A white Southern woman in her early 40s and a self-described free-thinker, Taylor lived in “the city” (Atlanta) with her equally freethinking Danish husband and two young children. She had been disturbed by the overall conservative/pro-Bush feeling of the campus—one that had grown more pronounced in the first years of the war in Iraq:

You know I felt that I was around a bunch of redneck right wing Republicans and I wanted to try to find some people that maybe felt a little bit more like I did and uh [laughing] I was just—I don't know—I was just a little bit surprised. Well, what surprised me was just the conversations I would overhear like a couple of years ago the buildup to the war in Iraq I would overhear faculty and staff laughing about it saying how we were going to go over and kick Sadaam's ass. And—you know—the Iraqis would drop their guns before we even set foot there. And just really, really ignorant kinds of rhetoric about A-merica A-merica A-merica's so great. And it frightened me. And I thought, “God there has to be some progressive thinking people up here.”

For Taylor, the vast majority of student-centered organizations at Sweet Water were more focused on socializing than social issues. In fact, Taylor explained, she had been thinking of starting up something of a progressive club herself. By pure serendipity, somebody else had had the same idea, and in April 2005, an email appeared announcing the club. Taylor attended the first meeting and those thereafter. She was no longer alone.

When the club's official faculty sponsor needed to step down, Taylor accepted an invitation to replace her. In Fall 2005, Taylor and the Students for a Progressive Society (SPS) organized a 10-day fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina survivors that included a concert by a student punk rock band, “Horrible Idea,” whose lead singer was the SPS President and veteran of the war in Iraq. On October 18, the club and the Colloquium Series Committee hosted a Nobel Peace Prize winner's talk about “The New Nuclear Danger”; on October 26, another invited lecturer described his view of how the U.S. had squandered the immediate compassion that the tragedy of 9/11 had gener-

ated in the Muslim world. On Veteran's Day, SPS and its more conservative student-led counterpart, the Politically Incorrect Club, co-sponsored a panel discussion of veterans who had served in Afghanistan or Iraq. Taylor was proud to share the Students for a Progressive Society's vision and mission, “To be socially and politically active; to promote tolerance and critical thinking; to raise awareness of important social issues; to donate time and resources to worthy causes; and to make the world a better place in which to live.” The club was, from Taylor's point of view, all about creating dialogue in an area of the country that needed it desperately—dialogue about the ongoing war in Iraq and about other issues such as Latino immigration.

“HE'S UNDOCUMENTED; HE HAS TO PAY OUT OF STATE TUITION”

In the 90's, several hundreds of thousands of Latinos had settled in North Georgia communities (National Council of La Raza). The poultry plants and carpet mills for which the state was famous had especially benefited from the influx of cheap labor; and the region's billboards and storefronts announcing a mega flea-market or a gun dealership competed for the new settlers' attention. In North Georgia, however, the appearance of Spanish-language billboards on I-85 was complicated by the state's historical alignment with white supremacist ideology. Sweet Water College was a short Sunday drive from Stone Mountain, the site of the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan in 1915 (MacLean). Local and regional newspapers documented increasingly common hate crimes aimed at Latino communities and individuals. Furthermore, with the 2006 elections on the horizon, Latino immigration had emerged as a pivotal issue for both sides of state and national aisles. Pro-labor CNN commentator, Lou Dobbs, spoke of working middle class outrage and of self-styled “cultural warriors” (O'Reilly) securing the southern border. In Fall 2005, legislation was proposed that would eventually become SB 529-Georgia Security/Immigration Compliance Act (Georgia General Assembly). As introduced, SB 529 was a far-reaching proposal that would have denied all undocumented immigrants in the state of Georgia access to public services including the state's colleges and universities.

Taylor and the Students for a Progressive Society followed the legislation as it passed from one chamber to the next and back to committee again. At a January 2006 progressive summit, the President of GALEO (Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials) encouraged the organization of town hall meetings about SB 529. In mid-February, the club organized three

screenings of “Wetback: The Undocumented Documentary.” By the end of the month, the club announced its own town hall meeting on illegal immigration for Monday, March 6th, 7-9 p.m. with campus flyers promising “civil discourse on one of the most contentious topics facing our state and nation today: illegal immigration.”

“They Look Like My Students”

In the weeks leading up to the town hall on illegal immigration, Taylor steadily grew more excited—busily planning the event between teaching classes and administrating the ESL program. However, Taylor’s concern about the postsecondary opportunities of immigrants and immigrant children was something that she had expressed early on in data collection—a concern that begun even before I began visiting Sweet Water.

Notably, ESL Learning Support was potentially costly with in-state tuition and fees for the complete 10-course/34 credit ESL sequence totaling \$2,600 and nearly \$10,000 for non-residents. Taylor explained that in her second semester at the college, one of her students did not return—“one of our best students.” A faculty colleague explained, “Oh he can’t afford tuition because you know he’s undocumented. He has to pay out of state tuition.” What it meant to be an “illegal immigrant” was suddenly less abstract for Taylor. She explained her “awakening” in one of our interviews:

I started translating in my mind, “Oh, illegal immigrant—That’s what that means.” And then . . . I said, “Oh, so this is what illegal immigrants look like. They look like my students.” And that’s when I became interested; but I was more interested at that time about how much tuition they had to pay. Then when all these laws all these bills started being presented last year that would impact them and keep them out of schools altogether then I felt that I had to speak out who else was going to they weren’t going to speak for themselves cause they’re scared. I think the “Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!—We’ve got undocumented students!”—and—“Let’s not really talk about it”—and—“We don’t really know who they are”—I don’t think that’s helping anybody.

The proposed legislations repulsed her as did the lack of an institutional stance on the issue. Organizing the town hall was, she felt, her duty, “You know I—I had no choice any teacher would do that for his or her students.”

THE TOWN HALL MEETING

By 7:10 p.m., all 300 seats in the Sweet Water College auditorium were taken. Breathless, Taylor stood at the door surveying the crowd. Parents had come with their small children, students with their friends, faculty with their colleagues, and members of the greater Sweet Water community. The afternoon had been particularly stressful. Only a few hours earlier, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) legal counsel had called to say that she was double-booked and would try to make it—but would be late. The Latino Senator, a Democrat, had pulled out as well because of a double booking. The six-person panel had shrunk to four: a Methodist minister, the former mayor of Sweet Water, a local radio talk show host, and the State Senator from Woodstock, whose proposed legislation was, implicitly, the focus of the forum.

Speaking to the auditorium’s full capacity, Taylor welcomed the crowd, saying, “We’ve come to have a respectful dialogue which defines us as an institution and a nation. We have a distinguished panel of experts who will inform us and an extraordinary moderator by whom our civil discourse will be facilitated [Applause].”

The moderator, a veteran Sweet Water professor of Spanish, took the microphone to explain that each panelist would have two-minutes for opening remarks after which she would address questions generated by the audience to the panel as a whole or to an individual panelist. These questions were to be written on the yellow index cards that the Students for a Progressive Society were busy distributing at that moment. Responses would be limited to three minutes per person per question.

Opening the forum, the talk show host, a white Southern woman, explained that her own grandmother had come to the U.S. in 1903 and again in 1907—arriving at Ellis Island with only \$2.00 in her pocket. The difference, she explained, was that her grandmother, like millions of others, had obtained their citizenship legally. The white Republican author of the bill jokingly explained that had Taylor not been “so doggone persistent,” he probably would not have come that evening. He clarified to the audience that he was not going to share his own opinion about how he thought things ought to be in a perfect world. Rather, his job was to uphold the law. Once in America, individuals legally here could change the law through political engagement. The round-robin continued with the former mayor, an African-American woman, remarking on her inadequacy of being on a panel of such distinguished individuals and thanking the college for the invitation; and,

finally, the reverend minister, a Latino, described the contested legislation as a convenient wedge issue for the 2006 elections.

As the moderator read the yellow cards to the panelists, the audience listened attentively—applauding politely at the end of every response. Had the town hall meeting ended then, it would never have made the news. The Senator made his points eloquently. The talk show host enjoyed herself. The minister raised some points. The former mayor pretty much kept quiet. Then it all changed.

A Late Arrival

More than an hour into the forum, the Southeast Regional counsel for MALDEF arrived. The moderator stopped the questions and invited the counsel to give her opening two-minutes remarks, reproduced here from a video transcript of the event:

The attendance here today is a perfect sentiment of that...SB 529 is something that is not new. We debated it 20 years ago; and, we defeated it in court. That was Proposition 187. It similarly sought to deny public benefits to undocumented residents—but of the state of California. My organization was an integral part in ensuring that that was found unconstitutional. But, unfortunately, because 20 years later we have people who are still resisting the contribution—the economic and the labor contribution—of our undocumented immigrants, we are seeing the same anti-immigrant legislation being introduced and to some certain small extent successfully in the state of Georgia. It's not what we want for the state of Georgia. And I urge you all to oppose it [Applause].

With the town hall suddenly falling into the MALDEF counsel's hands, the talk show host angrily accused the lawyer of fear mongering, of incendiary talk, and of calling people names!

Talk Show: —And for waltzing in a half hour late on an otherwise perfectly civil discussion. [Applause]

Lawyer: Oh, really? What name did I call you?

The moderator asked the talk show host to address the question rather than the other panelist—“Do us the honor of speaking to the audience rather than

to the other panelist.” The talk show host abruptly pulled herself out of her chair and stormed out of the packed auditorium. [Wild applause and catcalls]

This was North Georgia, after all, and when a (white) Southern woman—a locally celebrated one at that—walked out of a full house because she felt she was being disrespected, it was a big deal. The moderator, also a (white) Southern woman, remained, nevertheless, admirably composed:

Moderator: We would of course rather have you return.

Talk Show: [Walking up the padded aisle and then turning] Well, I mean really this was not what the lawyer wanted to achieve here! She came in with an agenda! She called people racist! And she called racial profiling—

Moderator: [Nodding her head and smiling] Thank you, nonetheless, for attending.

The former mayor, also a (black) Southern woman, stepped in to save the day. In a soft calming voice, she gently asked if she could “just plain old talk.” The moderator nodded. Whispering, the mayor began:

I think arguing about illegals and [pause] all of this —it doesn't really accomplish much. What we need to be doing tonight is brainstorming about the solutions of what we'd like to see done [pause]. Somehow, we've got to work through—this is an issue. No matter who we are, it is an issue. So all of us please need to do constructive discussions tonight, please. Thank you. [Grateful applause]

The lawyer apologized for her late arrival, the Senator jumped back in and the debate continued between them. In the sequence of closing remarks, the lawyer spoke last; and, yes, she concluded, SB 529 was about race. This was the South; it was always about race. [Thank you, thank you. Applause and handshakes] The town hall was officially over.

TROUBLE IN SWEET WATER

A day after the event, SB 529 passed the Republican-controlled Senate chamber 40-13. That debate also lasted two hours. On 23 March, the House passed it. On 14 April, the Governor signed SB 529 into law. As originally proposed, the Georgia Security/Immigration Compliance Act would have

denied access to public services to all illegal immigrants in the state. It would have denied undocumented young men and women entry into the state university system. It would have required law enforcement officials to check the immigration status of anyone they arrested. In its final, heavily negotiated version, children would receive state health services regardless of their residency status; emergency care and treatment of communicable diseases would be available to everyone. All could attend college. Finally, only those individuals arrested on felony charges would be checked for their legal status (Georgia General Assembly, 2006).

Although the town hall did not prevent SB 529 from passing, many at the college thought, as did Taylor, that the meeting had been, overall, a great achievement. The moderator had been extremely level-headed. The questions from the audience had been thoughtful. The Students for a Progressive Society had learned an awful lot about how a bill became a law. Sweet Water had reached out into the community. Of course, it had been unfortunate and unintended that the talk show host had stormed out—but that had been the talk show host's prerogative. From Taylor's perspective, all these things were good.

An “Often-Tense Debate”

The city's newspaper ran an article about the “often-tense debate” on 7 March. On 12 March, a second story ran about the “immigration enigma”—again citing the town hall at Sweet Water as an example of the emotional public debate in Georgia over illegal immigration. On 1 April, the same local newspaper reported that the forum had not gone over as well with some unnamed members of the state legislature. The town hall—reportedly—had nearly cost Sweet Water a \$5 million addition to its student center. The paper reported the rumor that funds, earmarked for the college, had almost been redirected to more deserving, i.e. conservative, units of the University System that did not treat guest panelists rudely.

The President of Sweet Water, unaware of the appropriations committee's concerns, was quoted as saying: “It's unfortunate that there would be any kind of sign that we should not explore ideas in a civil discourse on a college campus.” A member of the faculty wrote a letter to the editor asking if anyone else in Sweet Water had mistaken the 1 April article for an April Fool's joke.

Livid, Taylor left for the weekend to attend the statewide annual Learning Support Conference. She would present a paper, “Educating the

Undocumented.” Friends that she trusted, such as the Director of Learning Support, had warned her over the weekend to be very careful:

I was talking about this pretty much non-stop for the first couple days of the convention because I was soooooo angry—she was like, “Taylor, okay you have to take a deep breath. You have to relax. You have to you”—you know she's a—she's a Southern woman and she's very diplomatic. And she's, “Okay, you know, you have to be very careful that it doesn't jeopardize your position.”

For the time being, Taylor explained that she was just trying to take a couple of days before she did anything more—before she sent, for example, her own editorial to the paper.

On 18 April, another article appeared in the same paper revealing that 17 illegal immigrants had received in-state tuition at Sweet Water State. In response, the President of the college issued a candid written statement explaining that, yes, 17 undocumented students had indeed received in-state waivers. On the other hand, the President argued, all seventeen were Georgia residents. All had graduated from the state's high schools. All showed great academic promise. Furthermore, no law had been broken. The waivers had been in accord with University System policies. The President reasoned that it would be better, after all, if those seventeen young adults stayed in school.

The Death Threat

Not long after the 18 April article appeared, a death threat was phoned into the Dean's office. No one was there to answer it. He left a message. The Dean had Taylor come to his office to hear it:

—And he was using the f word over and over again—and, you know, they considered it a serious threat. It was almost like a death threat: “All the faculty—everybody up there—needs to be shot. You're just fucking giving away these—this free education to these fucking illegals and I fuck, fuck,” and on and on and on . . . He called the dean's office, his secretary—yeah and—and he sounded like a Caucasian—maybe, thirty-something. He sounded a little bit thick-tongued like he might be drinking or doing drugs, but he sounded outraged and scary—and people up here have guns, Spencer.

The Dean and the others told Taylor to cool it. Were any of the media to call, she should refer them to the President's office. Taylor was scared.

In our final interview that semester, Taylor explained that although it had been her intention to shake things up, she had never wanted it to get to the point where people would be worried about their lives. Admittedly, Taylor had been somewhat naïve in thinking that her public activism on behalf of undocumented Latino residents would not possibly entail unpleasant consequences—including becoming visible, being made a target, and possibly attracting dangers upon allies such as her colleagues at Sweet Water and upon those very students and students' families for whom she was advocating. Just as Taylor had "translated" her students' situations to faculty in the past, she had trusted that people would be reasonable—that they would understand her students just as her colleague had eventually come around to Maria Jesus' request to borrow the un-subtitled videos earlier that semester. The town hall meeting had been an extension of her teacherly role—an intensely public explanation to the larger community of who her students were and the issues that concerned them and their families.

Taylor worried about the death threat. She worried about the elections and the wedge that immigration had created. She worried about a fence being built across the border. She worried that the Board of Regents would interpret SB 549 as meaning that the University System could no longer offer in-state tuition to non-residents—not anywhere. She worried how students were going to be able to pay out-of-state-tuition. Taylor hoped that the town hall and its fallout had not affected her teaching. She explained, "I know that I was pulled in a lot of different directions this semester whereas in the past—before I took on the role of coordinator and also, um, faculty advisor for the progressive club—I really just focused on teaching." She had been distracted—maybe. No, she did not think that her teaching had suffered, although she could not really say either way. She hoped not. What was true was that it had been a tough semester. She had gotten personally involved. By the end of that semester, she had become less confident.

A summer later, in Fall 2006, Taylor still had her job. The Students for a Progressive Society were still programming events in preparation for the upcoming November elections. The college had not lost its \$5 million for a new student activity center. No one had come to Sweet Water to shoot the faculty. For another semester, a dozen undocumented students would keep their in-state tuition waivers while the University System waited for the Board of Regents to set a definitive policy. How SB 529 was to play out was still unclear. What was certain was that the town hall meeting and its

aftermath created a momentary sense of instability in a public two-year college in North Georgia where nothing much ever happened and wasn't supposed to—beyond the day to day, semester to semester, year to year routine I had seen play out over five semesters.

ADVOCACY AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A TENUOUS CLIMB

Thinking about Taylor's seemingly assimilationist pedagogy cum grassroots political activism, I turn to Holland et al.'s notion of "improvisation" and "figured worlds." Bringing Vygotskian understandings of the liberatory and seemingly limitless possibilities of the semiotic mediation of children's play to Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic self, Holland et al. theorize a human propensity "to figure worlds, play at them, act them out, and then make them socially, culturally, and thus materially consequential" (280). Accordingly, Holland et al. propose the construct of "figured worlds"—worlds that women and men collectively write and rewrite in practice.

Sweet Water ESL Learning Support was one such figured world—a blueprint of what constituted a "fully" educated person and who has the right to be/become one. Taylor St. John was not completely comfortable with the five-paragraph essay as the be-all and end-all of Learning Support coursework. Yet, Taylor taught to the test that she did and didn't believe in because that was how she understood it had to be; and, because, after years of practice, she had become very good at doing so. That was her advocacy (see, Salas "Roberta"; Salas "Something That You're Proud of"); but that was not all of it. What the town hall meeting and its aftermath created for Taylor and her colleagues was the sense that their professional identities as ESL instructors were potentially variable and interactive. Taylor herself was capable of improvising her subject position—i.e., finding spaces to re-describe herself in the figured world to which she had been recruited as a participant. Illustrating their concept of "improvisation" with an anecdote from their study in a Nepalese village, Holland et al. tell the story of Maya—an "untouchable." Arriving for an interview, Maya's caste status prohibited her from entering the researchers' temporary home through the front door lest she "pollute" the cooking area. Intent on keeping the meeting, Maya climbed up the side of the house and into Holland and Skinner's office. Climbing up the side of a stone house in rural Nepal was Maya's non-scripted improvised alternative to the subject positions afforded to her at that moment—"Led by hope, desperation, or even playfulness, but certainly by no rational plan" (6).

In the figured world of ESL Basic Writing in North Georgia, Taylor and her colleagues, in large part, perceived their own agency through institutional measures of what it meant to be ready for college-level coursework and their success in preparing their students for such measures. The sorts of errors on a hand-written, timed five-paragraph essay that had categorized her students as “basic writers” would continue to categorize them as such were she not to teach her students what those errors were and how they might avoid them. For Taylor, teaching to the tests was an issue of access. It was the most obvious sort of agency available to her; and, she had become exceedingly good at doing so. In the spring of 2006, standing up against anti-Latino immigration was also about fighting for her students’ access to the institution—this time physical. Granted, there were inconsistencies in Taylor St. John’s professional subjectivities. She did not challenge the curriculum. However, Taylor did challenge proposed legislation that would have quite literally exclude undocumented students from attending Sweet Water or, for that matter, any tertiary institution in the state. The town hall meeting had been Taylor’s public climb up the side of a house. In its aftermath, she mobilized a college.

Taylor’s politicalization of her professional identity was an improvisation mediated by the contexts and circumstances of teaching Generación 1.5 basic writers in North Georgia. Durst described the most common depiction of the college composition instructor in published work spanning the previous 15 years as “A critical teacher, shaping students’ literacy, intellectual and cultural development through pedagogies of social justice and political analysis” (92). Taylor was not the sort of teacher Durst described—at least not in the way she trained the young women and men who entered her classroom to navigate the labyrinth of assessments that would determine their academic trajectories. Taylor never overtly challenged her institution’s conceptualization of what it meant to be ready for college—despite a vast body of literature for the profession exposing the exclusivity of such paradigms and their potentially noxious effects on students from outside the heterosexual, white, North American, middle class. That said, whatever sort of teacher Taylor was or was not, her professional identity was shaped in Spring 2006 by the highly political nature of teaching transnational children of immigrants—a politic intensified by fears of limited resources, reverse discrimination, and an unstable national identity (Sanchez). In its most radical versions, new American nativists have framed post-1965 immigration as preternatural Aryan retribution for the destruction of Nazi Germany (Brimelow 254). In the face of such rhetoric, I suspect that basic writing faculty such as Taylor

do a lot of interpreting on behalf of their students—helping colleagues understand their challenges and their potential. I have told Taylor’s story for a number of reasons not the least of which was that Taylor herself asked me to tell it so that people would know what had happened—or what had almost happened—in a two-year college in North Georgia that semester. It has taken me several years to process the events of the town hall meeting and to articulate my understandings of Taylor St. John, her complexity and contradictions, and the inconsistent but intensely literal way in which she re-framed her own advocacy that spring. In the early 1980’s, Lu wrote of “linguistic innocence”—exposing the essentialist underpinnings of pedagogies that framed language as a politically innocent vehicle of meaning. However, as I finish this manuscript—some six years after the town hall meeting and more than 11 years after Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Richard Durbin (D-IL) first proposed DREAM Act legislation to the U.S. Senate—I am unable to find via an EBSCO Discovery search a single manuscript in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, *Teaching English at the Two-year College*, or *College Composition and Communication* that has ever made mention of the term. A similar search for “Dream Act” resulted in one instance in the *Journal of Second Language Writing* (see, Fránquiz and Salinas) and zero hits in *TESOL Quarterly*. This too reveals a sort of innocence. Granted, there were inconsistencies in Taylor St. John’s professional subjectivities. But what is also troubling is that strands of activist basic writing scholarship continue to not conceptualize and not write about contemporary legislative attempts to block Latino immigrants’ physical access to public higher education.

In the shadow of Stone Mountain, Taylor St. John led a charge up the side of the figured world of Sweet Water College. Perhaps in the aftermath of a town hall meeting, a discipline historically committed to being socially, culturally, and, thus, materially consequential might also recognize and move up the side of its own disciplinary insularity to engage more explicitly with contemporary political issues surrounding Generación 1.5’s physical access to the opportunity portal of basic writing.

Notes

1. Taylor St. John, Sweet Water College, Hogg Mountain, and other such identifiers are pseudonyms. Any real world counterparts are purely coincidental.

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