

CHAPTER 5: DESIGNING ANTIRACIST WRITING ASSESSMENT ECOLOGIES

In this final chapter, I offer a heuristic for building antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies. I assume that when designing any writing course, a teacher must think very carefully about the ways that writing will be assessed in the course, from rubric activities, feedback, and peer responses on drafts to assessing in-class impromptu writing, and grading. This thinking through one's assessments comes before (or at least simultaneously with) thinking through one's pedagogy and curriculum. In fact, as I hope my example in Chapter 4 illustrates, it may be most productive to think about one's classroom writing assessment ecology as one's pedagogy. Writing assessment in its fullest sense as an ecology, is pedagogy.

Thus a large part of designing a writing course is considering how the assessment of writing creates the ecology of the classroom in which students and teacher interact and learn together. An assessment ecology is the heart of any Freirean problem-posing pedagogy, which I've articulated in this book as the central practice in antiracist writing assessment ecologies. Learning in writing courses is driven by assessment if that learning is understood as a product of the ecology. In one sense, the assessment of writing completes the cycle that drafting begins. It forms the audience, their purposes for reading, and that audience's responses to writing, which provide information to the writer. But writing assessment as ecology is more than reading and providing feedback, it's also thinking privately and publically about expectations for writing, about the nature of judgment, about the nature of discourse itself, about one's own existential writing assessment situation, one's relation to the dominant discourse expected in the classroom or academy, and one's own *habitus* that informs one's judgments of texts. Thus a writing classroom that purports to "teach" writing cannot fully do so without interrogating the nature of judging and valuing language, the nature of dominant discourses (e.g., local SEAEs or white racial *habitus*), and the students' relations to these phenomena.

Antiracist writing assessment ecologies explicitly pay close attention to relationships that make up the ecology, relationships among people, discourses, judgments, artifacts created and circulated. They ask students to reflect upon them, negotiate them, and construct them. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies also self-consciously (re)produce power arrangements in order to exam-

ine and perhaps change them. When designing an antiracist writing assessment ecology, a teacher can focus students' attention on a few of the ecological elements discussed in Chapter 3, which inter-are. This means addressing and negotiating one element, say the part of a rubric, means you are addressing others, such as power relations and the ecological places where students problematize their existential writing assessment situations.

When designing the foundations for an antiracist writing assessment ecology, I offer the following heuristic, a set of questions that can be used to guide a teacher's thinking and planning. I have reordered the elements in a way that makes sense to me when designing a course from scratch, but I see no reason why a teacher couldn't begin in the heuristic where she wishes. I begin with purposes and processes, thinking about them together, because my own orientation as a teacher is to think first about what I want my students to do, what I envision they will be doing each week, and why they might want or need to do that labor. The heuristic is not meant to be exhaustive, but generative. There are surely other ways to ask the questions below or consider each element in an ecology. The heuristic is aimed at helping teachers begin to think about the ways their classrooms are antiracist writing assessment ecologies, and ways to invent such ecologies. Furthermore, these questions may offer ways to prompt students to investigate and negotiate each element as well.

- **Purposes.** *What various purposes for learning are made explicit about the assessment of students' writing, and how well do they articulate a problematizing of the students' existential writing situations?* Why are you or your students reading or judging any particular piece of writing or a draft in the way you are? Does each assessment process have its own unique purpose? How do you ensure that students are not penalized because they are not white and middle class, yet still guarantee that they develop as readers and writers in meaningful and productive ways? In what ways are you asking students to problematize their existential writing assessment situations, or asking them to see their own *habitus* next to ideal ones that assignments imagine or other readers imagine? How are students' various relations to the dominant discourse expected in the course, which is usually based on a white racial *habitus* and a local SEAE, accounted for in the purposes of assessment in the course? How are the purposes for assessing writing helping students critique the white racial *habitus* and local SEAE that they may still have to approximate?
- *Course/Teacher Purposes.* Is there a larger antiracist purpose for the assessment of writing in general in the course? Is that larger purpose made clear to students and is it consistently maintained across all the

activities in the course? Is there a formal moment when students can reflect upon this larger purpose, and connect it to their own practices and experiences?

- *Student Purposes.* How involved are students in constructing and articulating the purposes for each assessment process? Do they have opportunities to create and act upon their own purposes for individual assessment activities? How are those individual purposes accounted for in the assessment processes and parts in the ecology?
- **Processes.** *What processes, work, or labor will students do each day or week that contribute to, feed into, or create the parts, products, or places of the ecology?* What processes do you plan for or anticipate students doing in order to read, make judgments, then articulate and disseminate those judgments to writers? What processes occur because of or after those articulations (e.g., discussions, revisions/rethinking, reflections)? How are processes or labor accounted for in the calculation of course grades?
- *Rubric-Building.* How are the codes and expectations for writing (the rubric) constructed, articulated to students, and justified to them as appropriate expectations of the course? Can your rubric(s) be an articulation of something other than standards, such as a set of dimensions worth exploring and questioning, a starting point, not end point? What role do students play in the creation or revision of the rubric and writing assignments? How does the rubric address, identify, or name the dispositions it promotes as a part of a white racial *habitus*? How are students' *habitus* made apparent and used as a critical comparative lens to critique the rubric? Is the rubric (or the course's writing expectations) set up as static or do they change during the course of the semester? Are there processes in place that help encourage and discuss those changes? Are students a part of those processes?
- *Feedback.* How do students create feedback for peers' writing? What do students do with feedback or assessments? How is difference and conflicting judgments created or manufactured in feedback processes? How do students confront difference and conflict, particularly in the judgments on their writing? How are the goals of that confrontation in processes expressed (are they about finding agreement or understanding difference and perspectives)? Do students dialogue or revise their original judgments and feedback after discussing them face to face? How do the processes of reading and judgment help students to articulate a white racial *habitus* as an arbitrary set of expectations for making meaning and communicating? How are they led to under-

- stand, then articulate their own *habitus* used to judge writing?
- *Reflection*. Are there on-going reflective processes that ask students to make sense of peer reviews, rubric building activities, or your feedback? How do the processes of reflecting help students toward a problematizing of their existential writing assessment situations? How do these reflection processes show them a way to consider their own *habitus* in reading and writing as a *habitus*, as a set of historically determined dispositions that they don't have complete control over, and that are not inherently better or worse than the dominant *habitus* of the academy or western society?
 - *Labor monitoring*. Are there ways students can keep track of their labor, its duration, frequency, and intensity? How might students reflect upon their labor practices in order to interrogate them as a part of their *habitus*? What patterns might students look for in their labor practices that might tell them something about their language practices, or their reading practices, or what they can (or are able to) read and value in texts? Are there ways to compare students' labor practices, not find ideal practices, but notice the diverse ways students attend to the course processes?
 - **Places**. *What ecological places (figurative or real) are created through the judgment of writing or the assessment processes students enact?* What attention is paid to the places created in the ecology and can students reflect on the conditions and effects of those places? Where do students inhabit or dwell in the ecology and what are the effects or consequences of dwelling in those places? What places are created by judgments of writing and how do students engage in conflict in those places? Are there ways in which the places your ecology creates become places that unconsciously or unreflectively norm students to some universal standard, such as a white racial *habitus*? Are there places in your ecology that are constructed by the presence of mostly students of color, places where mostly multilingual students inhabit, where Blacks or Latinos/as inhabit? How much control do students have in creating or changing the places created by the ecology, for naming them, critiquing them, resisting them, establishing the processes or labor that constitute them, or identifying what they get from those places? How is that control formally designed into the ecology and how much attention is paid to the ways those places are controlled?
 - *Writing groups*. Do students work in consistent writing groups, or different ones each week? How many students make up those places? How are those places composed or designed? Do you hand-pick in

order to ensure diverse writing groups? Do students have a say in their creation, or in their on-going cultivation? How much reflection is done on the dynamics of their writing groups, and what happens with those reflections afterwards? How is trust and respect built into the writing group dynamics?

- *Failure and Success.* How is failure constructed as a place in the ecology? How often can students fail at writing (either publically or privately)? How is success constructed and how often are students positioned in the place of success? Is success public or private? Are there grades? If so, how do your grading practices construct places in which students are positioned, and then become inherent to that place? Do you offer any formal moments in the course to ask students about how failure and success are created in the class, in their writing, in their labors, or how the nature of success and failure have changed for them?
- *Texts.* How are the places of texts, particularly those used as examples for discussion (either published or student texts), constructed relative to the expectations of the course, which often are a product of a white racial *habitus*? Are published texts used as model places only? How are those same textual places compared to (set against, set next to) the locally diverse *habitus* of students that organically occur in the classroom and in student writing? Is race made present in the writing and authors of published examples or “models”? Are there ways that white textual places and textual places of color might be juxtaposed so that students might problematize those places and their writer’s *ethos*?
- **Parts.** *What ecological parts (i.e., the codes, texts, documents, and artifacts that comprise writing assessment processes) are present, developed, exchanged, and manipulated?* How is each part generated and agreed upon by students and teacher? How do the ecological parts and students’ reflections on them help students consider the course’s expectations as participating in a white racial *habitus* that may be different from their own? How might students compare non-hierarchically their own writing dispositions (their own various *habitus*) next to the dominant white racial *habitus*, not to see themselves as inferior but to see the diversity of languaging and making meaning, and perhaps to critique the hegemonic? How might those insights be incorporated into the purposes, processes, and products of the ecology?
- *Rubrics.* How are the expectations of writing (e.g., assignment instructions, assignment processes, and rubrics) created and revised? Do students have a say in their creation or revisions? What does the artifact that embodies expectations in writing look like? What do students

do with it? What does the teacher do with it? How is the articulation of the rubric such that it calls attention to its own participation in a white racial *habitus*, or others?

- *Discourse of Assessment and Judgment.* How do you ensure student participation in developing the codes of assessment and judgment, the ways that writing is talked about, reflected upon, made sense of, and theorized in the class? In what formal ways do students reflect upon the codes and artifacts of assessment, not their drafts, but the discourse around their drafts, feedback, dialogue, rubrics, etc.? How is that reflecting informed by any pertinent literature on whiteness and race, feedback to writing, or composition theory? How is their reflecting used to help students problematize their existential writing assessment situations?
- *Texts.* What student-generated texts are expected? How are students involved in creating the general expectations for their texts? What are those texts expected to look like? What are readers expected to do with them, or how do students read in order to make judgments? What assessment texts (or texts that articulate judgments of peers' writing) are students expected to produce and what do they look like? How are they produced? Will the teacher produce the same kind of assessment texts? What do students do with their assessment texts? How do they function in writing groups or in class discussions? How much freedom do students have in deviating in form, format, or content of the texts they are asked to produce? Are there discussions that set up those conversations if and when students do deviate from expected forms, formats, or content?
- **Power.** *What power relations are produced in the ecology and what are the most effective or preferable ones for students' individual learning goals and the course's overall learning goals?* How much control and decision-making do students have in the creation and implementation of all assessment processes and parts? How are vulnerable students (e.g., quiet students, introverted students, students of color, multilingual students, students with disabilities, etc.) respectfully and conscientiously encouraged to participate in the creation, monitoring, and revision of the assessment ecology?
- *Monitoring.* How might the teacher and students monitor power and its movements in the class in ways that can help make sense of judgments, processes, and parts? How might observations be made about the way particular *habitus* carry with them or assume more power in communication contexts, say in past writing classes or in the present

one? How is that power embodied? Are there racial aspects to it? Are there trends that seem racialized?

- *Student Participation*. How are students involved in the assessment ecology generally? Do students get to create or control any aspects of the ecology? Do they have any say in what is assessed, how that writing is assessed, who assesses it, and what those assessments mean to the calculation of their course grades? Do students get to negotiate the way their grades or any evaluations of their writing is done?
- *Difference (from the white racial norm)*. How will power relations be affected by various students who come with different *habitus* from the dominant white racial *habitus* that informs the expectations of the classroom? How will students interactions with you or with each other be mediated so that power relations can be explicitly discussed with students and equalized (realizing they are never made equal)? How do you plan to discuss and get students to listen to each other, to listen for difference in productive ways, to engage in what Trimbur (1989) calls “dissensus,” or what Ratcliffe (2005) calls “rhetorical listening”?
- *Teacher Power*. How do you mediate your own power as the teacher in the ecology? How do you plan to get students to avoid seeing your position in the ecology as someone who will tell them what to do or fix in their writing? What control of the ecology does the teacher have that she might reasonably and explicitly give up or share with students?
- **People**. *How are the various people involved in writing assessment (students, teacher, outside readers or experts) defined in the ecology and what are their roles?* How are their various literacy histories and dispositions with English acknowledged, reflected upon, and used to help judge writing and think about writing as (counter)hegemonic?
- *Interconnection*. How are the people of the ecology (i.e., students, teacher) interconnected in explicit ways? How is any individual’s success or failure in any activity connected explicitly to his peers’ success or failure? How are students encouraged to see or explore the ways assessment is a diverse ecology that is about cultivating a livable and sustainable place together for everyone?
- *Local Diversity*. How are the locally diverse students and teacher in the ecology used to understand the local white racial *habitus*? In what ways might the local diversity help construct difference in writing as more than the expectations, and help link that value added to writers and readers? What methods or processes are in place to help students understand their own *habitus* and ways of judging and valuing writing,

reflect upon those *habitus*, and discuss them as a part of the dispositions used in the assessment processes of the course?

- *Inter-being as Problem-Posing.* How do various people participate in the assessment processes and the construction of the ecological parts, purposes, and products? How might the ecology help students experience the interconnected nature of all the elements in the ecology so that the lessons learned are ones about one's own existential writing assessment situation in a socially structured and hegemonic historic bloc? In other words, how do you help students see that lessons about what a rubric (a part) means are also lessons about their own individual reading and writing practices, lessons about choices and degrees of consent to larger structural forces, to the hegemonic? How do you help students see their own ways of judging language as determined (both constrained and pressured) in particular directions?
- **Products.** *What products or consequences do you reasonably foresee the ecology producing?* What direct products are there? Will there be a course grade, or even individual grades on drafts? Will there be decisions about proficiency, placement, learning, development, or passing that must be made at the end of the course? What indirect products might there be and how might these products change given different locally diverse students? In what ways are those products fair and unfair to produce?
- *Discussion.* How is the subject position of the writer discussed in or around student texts? How is learning and development discussed? How is that learning or development compared to formal expectations of the course? Are those expectations explicitly associated with a white racial *habitus* as such? In feedback activities (with the teacher or among students) what responses to feedback might student-writers reasonably have? What opportunities do writers have to respond back to readers or assessors of their writing? How are those responses fed into students' articulations of learning?
- *Products of Other Ecological Elements.* What effects or consequences might the kind of ecological part used to articulate judgments on students' writing have on various locally diverse writers, or in writing groups that may discuss them? How might those ecological parts or processes have historically racialized consequences for your students, patterns that students intuitively have accepted or not questioned? Could some racial formations in your classroom have different experiences than what you reasonably hope for or expect, and thus learn something very different from the same ecology? How might

the class monitor these differences? How can this alternative learning be acknowledged? How would you measure these unintended consequences (learning) or observe them? How might students be involved in measuring or observing them (e.g., reflections that ask about their learning and its relation to their past ways of learning)?

In the above heuristic, I move between a macro sense of the course as a large ecology that is most characterized by the way a writing assessment ecology creates the course and the experiences of students moving through the course to micro ecologies that are characterized by individual activities, assignments, and processes, which ultimately make up the larger classroom writing assessment ecology. When designing beforehand, a teacher should think in terms of the macro ecology of the course that evolves throughout the semester, an ecology in which every element inter-is the others. This will help maintain consistency and reduce contradictory processes, parts, or other elements.

An antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology, then, is interconnected at all levels. All elements inter-are. And so, in each category above, I blend elements, prompting teachers for instance to consider issues of power when considering processes. This means that one could think about a rubric as an articulation of expectations (part) which is used in the processes of feedback, a set of activities and labor that constructs evolving expectations (process), or an articulation of learning, of what students have been getting out of the ecology (product). This inter-being is intentional. While we can talk about ecological elements as distinct and separate entities, when we design them into a course we must keep in mind the way they exist in the material world as interconnected and dynamic elements.

This interconnectedness of the elements makes designing antiracist assessment ecologies complex. When you consider a part, you should consider the ways it becomes a place or a product at some point or for some reason. A feedback activity with peers feeds into, informs, inter-is with the larger classroom writing assessment ecology that produces a course grade (product). A rubric (part) inter-is the people that designed it, or the place of the writing classroom or group that uses it. It may even be an on-going process that gives power to students, which in turn provides indirect learning products. This interconnectedness of ecological elements shows why a teacher designing an assessment ecology can begin anywhere in the system, begin with the element that seems most important or salient to her. They all lead to each other. In fact, much like Burke's (1969) dramatic Pentad, the key to making the ecology critical is seeing the interconnected nature of the elements, seeing their consubstantiality. Burke discusses this by thinking about ratios in the pentad. In a similar way, I'm suggesting that a teacher begin where she feels most comfortable thinking about writing

assessment in her course, then discover (perhaps with her students) the ways that ecological element inter-is the others.

However, there is a caveat to this method. The ecological element you begin designing, say processes, will likely be more primary than what those processes become. In my ecologies, I'm usually thinking first about process, since my larger purposes for most activities are the same, so each week's activities often are a variation on the same purpose. So the process, the labor, that students engage in is where we spend most of our time making decisions and discussing, not on the parts. For instance, the rubric building processes in my class discussed in Chapter 4 do produce a part, a rubric, but the experience of students tends to be a process, to be the laboring they do. I doubt many remember the items on our rubric after the course is over, but it is clear from their end of semester reflections and assessments that the labor and processes of building the rubric, testing it, revising it, reflecting upon it, using it in reading peers' drafts had a lasting impression. The rubric process inter-was a part (the rubric) as much as it inter-was a set of learning products (lessons about writing), but primarily it was a set of processes (labors). And this was a big part of my larger purpose in the ecology. I cared more about students laboring with words and judgment in meaningful ways than forming them in particular ways in ideal products. This is due to the fact that the other half of my larger purpose was to have students confront their own existential writing assessment situations, and the only way they could do that is over time, through laboring, writing, reflecting, assessing, and being conscious of these processes as processes structured by their *habitus* and the white racial *habitus* that informed our rubric.

Additionally, my larger antiracist purpose is threaded into the above heuristic. In one sense, I'm suggesting that it be a part of any antiracist writing assessment ecology. Consider again my rubric-building activity, where students inductively created a rubric they used to judge each other's drafts by finding models in their research then distilling from those models a set of expectations they all wished to develop in their drafts. If the processes of reading, discussion, agreement-building, and articulation of the rubric are pointed back toward the student as an element in the ecology, which I tried to do, then the student can see the interconnection between the rubric as a part and herself as a person in the same ecology. This illustrates how they inter-are for the student. This could be done in reflections that ask the student to consider the rubric as a set of dominant dispositions (a *habitus*) that the class agrees upon that is similar and different from her own dispositions to judge and write. Or she might reflect upon the challenges she thinks she'll have when she writes from the rubric, or when she reads and uses it to judge her peers' papers. Or she might reflect after using

the rubric in a reading process, discussing the problems she had with making it work, or agreeing with it, or its inadequacies, or the way it could not account for important or valuable aspects of her peers' papers and why.

Let me reiterate for emphasis. My tendency is to have a larger ecological purpose-product established in the ecology, one that fits my antiracist agenda. In order to confront any racism, students should experience a problematizing of their existential writing assessment situations as racialized situations (at least in part). I begin this through rubric-building processes. The problem posed, then, is one that must ask students to consider carefully a white racial *habitus*, say in a rubric, and the local SEAE we may be promoting in the course, say in models or published writing discussed in class. This means we need some additional theory or information that helps us think in productive ways about our own racialized subject positions in language next to the social, disciplinary, and racial structures that form expectations of English language communication in college, in the world, in our families, in churches, in other affinity groups.

My class didn't provide this literature. I should have offered some of the readings I list in Chapter 3. This also means that my references to race (in the heuristic and in my classroom) are really references to power, references to particular groups' relations to power, to the hegemonic, to whiteness, to a white racial *habitus*. And the language of power (or lack of it) is often how I begin in some classes that seem resistant to discussing race. However, an antiracist writing assessment ecology would encourage students to confront race in language in ways connected to the personal, the *habitus* of the individual student as a person who participates in larger racial formations in society. Frankie Condon's (2013), Catherine Myser's (2002), Maurice Berger's (1999), and Victor Villanueva's (1993) discussions seems most accessible as a way into such discussions with students.

In many ways, what I've been attempting in this book is an extension of what I've tried to do my entire life, first as a boy, then a student in schools, then as a teacher. So I end this book with a few perhaps self-indulgent, personal stories about me as a writer and assessor, stories that illustrate the problems that classroom writing assessment ecologies reveal to me when I see them as antiracist projects, good problems that should not be ignored, but racial problems that go beyond the classroom and words on the page. I should warn you. My stories of writing assessment ecologies in my childhood and early adulthood are not school stories, not really, which should suggest things about the problems that writing classrooms have with creating healthy, sustainable, engaging ecologies for students of color or multilingual students. Creating healthier, fairer, more

sustainable assessment ecologies in classrooms is not always about the classroom.

FINAL STORIES OF WRITING ASSESSMENT ECOLOGIES

When I was eleven or twelve years old, my identical twin brother and I would often type stories to one another on my mom's old manual typewriter, a Signature 440T Montgomery Ward's model that typed in black and red ink. We lived in Las Vegas and attended year-around schools, so there were significant periods of time in elementary and junior high in which we were "latchkey" kids, confined to inside our apartment, curtains drawn, doors locked. "Don't answer the door for anyone," my mom would say, "and be quiet—no one can know you're here." So typing stories to my brother was a silent escape in which we could go anywhere, be anyone, and do almost anything. I can still feel the plastic of the keys that felt almost like cold bone, feel their tension when pressed, and the snap of the type bars when they hit the old-fashioned typing paper. The paper was crisp, like a thin skin of dried onion, but more durable. Typing on it and holding the paper in my hands made my words feel real, feel important. I found joy and engagement in both writing to my brother and discussing with him my stories. The discussions always ended up as collaborative sessions in which by the end it was hard to tell who was the writer and who the reader.

Now, my brother and I were always very rhetorically savvy, good with words on the block, quick-witted, fast with a snappy comeback. Our momma was well-defended. But writing in school was always a difficult task because I was never rewarded for it, and no one really took my ideas seriously, at least not as seriously as my errors. In fact, I was in remedial reading classes until about the eighth grade, yet I won reading contests—you know the ones: how many books can you read in a semester? But for some reason, despite my interests in language and books, I didn't like writing for school, or rather, I didn't like turning in my writing to a teacher. The feedback I got on all my writing in school was lots of marks, often on every sentence I wrote. Writing for school was usually about finding out how bad or wrong I was in putting sentences together. It was about being measured, not communicating or dialoguing with someone else. It was always about submission, submitting to power, losing power, being measured, graded. And it was always, always, without fail, a submission to a white racial authority figure. What I experienced in school, even into college, were writing experiences that separated, and often ignored, three important aspects of any meaningful writing activity to me: (1) the importance of my labor in writing, (2) the importance of the material conditions in which I labored to read and write and that allowed me to read and write the way I did, and (3) the importance of the way all my writing participated in an ecology of assessment, which meant

that what I wrote inter-was who I was. My words were me. A teacher never was just reading my paper. That paper inter-was me, my labor, my context for writing at home or in the classroom. No matter what they said, my teachers were always grading me, not simply my papers.

Let me explain the third aspect, the one I'm guessing is the most confusing to readers, a sense that all my early joyful and engaging writing participated in ecologies of assessment. I wouldn't have voiced things this way back then. My typing experiences with my brother were ecologies themselves, organically produced by one of us simply saying, "let's write stories. You can read mine and tell me what you think, and I'll read yours and tell you what I think." We certainly knew the paradigm of correction and grading from school, but our ecology didn't mimic that. We were not in school. We were on break, trapped in a trailer, unable to go outside. It was just us, a typewriter, and paper. Those school ecologies, those grading and correcting ecologies, didn't seem appropriate because we weren't looking to be corrected or meet some idealized standard. That wasn't our purpose at all. We were looking for an experience of writing with each other. We wanted to labor in particular ways because it was enjoyable to do so. We constructed our ecology by first thinking about the two people, the writers who would also be readers, and what they wanted to experience and do alone in a trailer in Las Vegas.

And now that I think about it, our stories, the parts created, inter-were us. My story was me, and that is how my brother talked about it, responded to it, and talked to me about it. The two of us sitting cross-legged on our bed (one we shared) in front of the typewriter was the ecological place created by our labor of writing, and the typewriter, and us, and the discourse we created over those stories. It didn't matter that we were poor. It didn't matter that our language wasn't the standard expected in school. It didn't matter that we had few friends, or that our neighbor would yell racist slurs at us as we walked past his house almost every day. It didn't matter what anyone else thought or did. It only mattered that we did this thing together, that we played with words together. Our purpose was simple, even simpler than to communicate to an audience. It was to create words and share those words with the only person in the world who was as consubstantial to oneself as another can be, an identical twin brother.

Power in this situation flowed from our control over everything, the purpose, process, the writing as an artifact, the responses (the products), the typewriter and material conditions (place), and our time, our laboring in time. There were no teachers or adults to tell us what to do, or how well we did it. I don't even think anyone knew we wrote those stories. We embodied power in all that it could be, and we did so equally. Being a twin can be the most democratic and equal relationship one can possibly experience, more so than a partner or spouse.

As a twin, you feel your inter-being with your sibling most acutely. For me, my interconnectedness to my twin brother defined me growing up.

This inter-being, this sameness, is not only something a twin can feel but something that is placed onto you as a twin by everyone around you. My mom always made sure that everything was equal, that what I got my brother also got, from clothes to toys to food to space in the bedroom. She made a point to say so: “you get what your brother gets,” “you both will get the same,” “you are both equally special and wonderful.” And being identical, you confront on a daily basis how much the same you are to your twin, how equal you are and are perceived to be by others around you every day. People constantly compare you. “Look how similar they are.” “Do you think the same things?” “Can you read each other’s minds?” “Wow, you two look exactly alike.” “You sound exactly like your brother. You talk just like him.”

The discourse and practices of inter-being around us as identical twins constructed an equal power relationship, even to this day. Thus there were no power plays in our language games as kids. My language could be interrogated and judged by my brother, and I could take those judgments as they were, not as rule or law, but as my brother telling me his perspective of my text, as me interrogating myself. It was as pure as any judgment and dialogue could be.

“I don’t understand this. Why is he jumping into the water here? It would be better if he”

“He’s jumping because he wants to get over to the island. He wants to get to her.”

“I know but he could take the boat.”

“How is that exciting?”

“Maybe he takes the boat, maybe he gets into trouble on the way, maybe”

“Maybe the boat has a leak, and”

“Yeah, maybe there are sharks in the water?”

“And he has to paddle faster and faster.”

Our discussions, as I remember them, always were like this. We were one organism. His ideas inter-were my ideas. Our unique power relations allowed us to engage in a collaborative process that was both judgment and drafting, that was assessing and writing. That’s literally what I remember about our exchanges, not a lot of details, just emotions and feelings, just images of the typewriter, of the onion paper and its feel between my fingers, of the feeling of creating words and

seeing them on the page—a clean text on paper—of talking to my brother about his words and mine, of the excitement of creating and recreating together, of playing with words with myself who was my brother, of feeling like a real writer who writes, of writing and judging text as joy. In short, what I recall most is the ecology of writing assessment as an embodiment of inter-being, yet more than that, more than just stories, more than just talk about words, more than just an escape from the racist conditions of our lives.

Part of what made this private ecology with my brother so special is that it could escape all the problems that plagued us outside the trailer, on the block and in school. And these problems were dictated by our racial subject position next to our white, working-class neighbors, who all—just about to the very last one—disliked us. In short, my private twin ecology escaped racism in the only way one can escape racism today. The people in it, my brother and I, were not diverse. We were the same, linguistically, racially, culturally, age-wise, all of it. This isn't the answer to racism in the classroom. I point this out because it seems clear to me now that I needed this democratic, monolingual ecology in order to find joy and love for the written word since there were few places outside this ecology that offered joy or love in language to me, and that joy and love was a direct consequence, a product, of the private twin ecology of assessment. I needed to write to myself, a raced body, and not to a white teacher.

But outside this ecology were other ecologies that were more complicated, less equal, more hurtful to me as a person of color in mostly white, working-class schools. During this period, we lived in Pecos Trailer Park. It seemed a step up from the last place we lived, a government subsidized apartment on Stats Street in the Black ghetto, North Las Vegas. It was a strange transition for a brown boy like me. I was the lightest skinned kid on Stats, but at Pecos, I was the darkest. And it mattered to everyone, recall the letter written to my family threatening our eviction. I was loud and boisterous on Stats but at Pecos I was quiet, especially around adults, all of whom didn't want me near their children. For most of my childhood in order to play with anyone my age, I had to sneak around parents, hide behind trailers, waiting for friends to sneak out and play. None of the kids in the trailer park, not one, were allowed to be around us or play with us. If they were caught being seen with my brother or me, they would get grounded, punished.

And the ironies of my situation didn't escape me. One of our neighbors, whose daughter I liked quite a bit (her name was Heather), was adamant about how "bad" my brother and I were. He was vocal to me about my negative influence on his daughter. I was a troublemaker. I can still see him standing on his porch, looking down at me, glaring at me with eyes that said, "Get away from my daughter, you dirty spic." He banned his daughter and son from associating

with my brother and me. It hurt. But within a year after they moved into the park, he was arrested and sent to a federal prison. The family wouldn't say what happened, except that he'd done some bad things at work in Arizona, where they had most recently lived, perhaps some embezzling or skimming. Even then, I remember thinking to myself, "And I'm the bad influence?"

Another neighbor kid was arrested for stealing in a department store. Her sister smoked weed, starting in junior high (and their father was a police officer). Another kid on my street, the park manger's grandson, was constantly in trouble for destroying property and fighting. Another kid, the assistant manager's son, was a bully in school and out, fought all the time, got bad grades, flunked out and was held back one year. All these kids were white, and clearly possessed the privilege of whiteness. None were banned for being "bad kids" or "bad influences" on anyone else. None were given a warning of eviction. I saw the irony in this every day, and I saw it connected to my perceived racial subjectivity. And I wrote in this context, from this *habitus*.

Flash forward. I moved to Oregon my senior year of high school. While expected of me by my family, college didn't seem realistic in my mind. I wasn't good enough. I didn't read the right things. I didn't have any money, nor did my mom. My writing wasn't very good. I wasn't smart enough. I was still that troublemaker, somehow. I could still feel my poverty in my skin. I could feel the judgments on me from my past. I was the dirty spic. Forget that by high school I was almost a straight-A student. The A's ceased to matter. It was the real judgments of me that mattered by people around me. It was the looks, the comments, the racial slurs. It was a general assessment that no matter what I did, what I said—no matter what—I wasn't good enough.

The army seemed a good delay. When I enlisted into the army national guard and spent nine months training in New Jersey and Missouri, I turned again to writing. Writing was a kind of escape for me, and it proved deeply enjoyable, mostly because of the way response and assessment were a natural part of the labor of writing. You see, it was the first time I was away from family and friends, alone with strangers, doing something I was not that thrilled about, but had made a commitment. I was eighteen. And while we never agreed to do it, never made any plans up front, my brother and I wrote each other letters every day I was gone, every day for the entire nine months. Not a day went by that I wasn't deeply engaged in reading my brother's words, hand-written for me so far away in Oregon. And I never let a day go by in which I didn't write and reply back to him. The reading and writing of letters to my brother that I did each night in my bunk in an army barracks far from home was the most meaningful literacy experience of my life. It felt like it saved my life, saved me from feeling isolated and alone, reminded me that my twin brother was out there, far away, thinking

about me and only me, writing to me, showing me that our life, friends, college, were all still going on. One could say my brother and his letters gave me freedom to write, freedom to reflect upon my choices, and freedom to see myself as a twin far from his brother, far from his real self. And all this freedom came from words and their affirmations, my brother's responses to them.

This long-distance ecology we created, much like our more intimate typing of stories on the Signature typewriter, was ironically an embodiment of freedom in a place and time I felt the least free in my life. The letters created a figurative place that was free, free from my obligations to the army, free from the daily labors of training, free from the company of strangers, free from the green of army uniforms, free from marching and marching and marching, free from weapons ranges and classrooms. The ecology of letters was an ecology of freedom to be me with me, with my brother.

Freedom, though, is a tricky word. It is a powerful word. It is yoked closely to race in U.S. history. In the U.S. whites have always been free in most aspects of their lives, so much so that freedom of choice and doing and being are often taken for granted. We call it white privilege. This isn't the case for Blacks, or Japanese, for instance, especially before the end of WWII. It isn't true for Latinos/as who are always suspected to some degree of being "illegal aliens" in public, especially if they speak with an accent or speak Spanish (a language that reminds me of their history of colonization). And it isn't true for Native Americans, who live with the legacy of the slaughter and genocide of their ancestors, customs, and their languages.

Freedom is also a theme that many Fresno State Hmong students voice in reflections and exit survey responses in the FYW program each year (Inoue, 2012a). They are the only racial formation that articulates this theme. When I read such reflections by Hmong students, I cannot help but think of the well know book of testimonies by Hmong refugees, *Hmong Means Free*, published in 1994 by Sucheng Chan, which recounts several families fleeing Laos from oppression and massacre, emigrating to the U.S. around 1976. Or John Duffy's (2007) historical account in *Writing from These Roots* of Hmong literacy practices and school experiences, which were filled with "loneliness, racism, and physical abuse" (p. 139). Or the powerful memoir by Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer* (2008). The lack of freedom in the lives of Hmong punctuate their migrations: they flee from the Yellow River Valley to the jungles of China, then to Indochina, then to northern Laos. After the war, they are hunted and slaughtered by the North Vietnamese. Even when they escape, they're herded into refugee camps with armed guards. Several groups have attempted to colonize them, the Chinese, the French, the Japanese. It appears that freedom to do anything, to live and prosper, let alone to write or read, is crucial to many Hmong's sense of

well-being, learning, progress, and development. Freedom appears often to be a racial condition.

Furthermore, what makes a sense of freedom important to writing assessment ecologies, what makes it important to antiracist ones, is the way in which it signifies a sense of racial equality, or liberation. Freedom has usually been the purpose, the goal for most racial movements. The feeling that one is free, free to choose, free to speak, free to act, free to labor in the ways one is most accustomed, free to be, inter-is agency. I know this is too simple of an equation for agency. It seems to erase the degrees of choice in agency, the complications, particularly those I've pointed out around the hegemonic and Marxian determination. But I'm only talking about a feeling of freedom in the writing classroom, not actual freedom. I wonder how many writing assessment ecologies possess the character of freedom in students' experiences, and if that character is evenly distributed across the various racial formations that exist within the ecology? I wonder what freedom feels like to various racialized students in a writing assessment ecology that promotes blindly or uncritically a white racial *habitus*?

My mom used to say that my twin brother and I spoke a special language only to each other for the first few years of our speaking lives. I only vaguely recall the language, but do remember using it. And perhaps the writing assessment ecologies I recall were us trying to escape the confines of our lives, to be free in language, free from racism, to reinvent our lost twin language, a pure and organic, non-judgmental language of consubstantiality, a twin language of inter-being.

I think over the years as a teacher and scholar of writing, I have tried unconsciously to understand and recreate my writing experiences with my brother in my classes for my students, tried to find ways to cultivate ecologies that conceive of the inevitable and scary assessment of writing *as* writing and the writing of "primary texts," essays and such, *as* feedback or dialogue, as the student's own urge to communicate and identify with others. Reading and writing are just other ways to say assess, judge. I have tried to construct ecologies that work as sustainable, livable, fair ecologies that address racism by not avoiding it in the language we write or speak. Perhaps mostly though, my stories I hope demonstrate that even a remedial student like me from the ghettos of North Las Vegas, from a poor, single-parent home, can find freedom and power through writing assessment ecologies, but to do so means one must confront racism himself in his own language, in school, on the block, and in the nature of judgments on him and from him.