

# CHAPTER 2: ANTIRACIST WRITING ASSESSMENT ECOLOGIES

It is not hard to think of a classroom as an ecology or to think of writing as ecological. Others have discussed it already, and I'll draw on them in this chapter (Coe, 1975; Cooper, 1986; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002). But what exactly is an ecology, and how might we define an ecology in order to use it as a frame for antiracist classroom writing assessments? This is the question that I'll address in this chapter. I'll do so by considering Freirean critical pedagogy, Buddhist theories of interconnection, and Marxian political theory. My goal in using these theories is to provide a structural and political understanding of ecology that doesn't abandon the inherent interconnectedness of all people and things, and maintains the importance of an antiracist agenda for writing assessments. I could easily be talking about any conventional writing assessment ecology, that is ones that do not have explicit antiracist agendas; however, my discussion will focus on understanding what a classroom writing assessment ecology is when it explicitly addresses antiracist work.

An antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology provides for the complexity and holistic nature of assessment systems, the interconnectedness of all people and things, which includes environments, without denying or eliding linguistic, cultural, or racial diversity, and the politics inherent in all uneven social formations. Consider the *OED*'s main definitions for the word, ecology:

- 1a. the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Also: the relationships themselves, esp. those of a specified organism.
- 1b. Chiefly Social. The study of the relationships between people, social groups, and their environment; (also) the system of such relationships in an area of human settlement. Freq. with modifying word, as cultural ecology, social ecology, urban ecology.
- 1c. In extended use: the interrelationship between any system and its environment; the product of this.
2. The study of or concern for the effect of human activity on the environment; advocacy of restrictions on industrial and

agricultural development as a political movement; (also) a political movement dedicated to this. (ecology, 2015)

Several themes from the above definition are instructive. First, the term “ecology” refers to relationships between biological people and their environments. The classrooms, dorm rooms, homes, workplaces, coffee shops, computer labs, libraries, and other environments where students do the work of a writing course have relationships to those students as they work. When the desks in a classroom are bolted to the floor, immovable, it makes for a rigid classroom environment that can seep into the attitudes and feelings of students as they work in that room. When a dorm room is loud, busy, and cluttered with voices as a student tries to write on her laptop, that environment not only can be distracting but can affect her stance as a reader and writer, keeping her from being open to new ideas, willing to entertain alternative voices or positions, or it may rush her work. The same relationships affect teachers when they read, assess, and grade student writing. The places we do writing assessment, wherever they may be in a particular course, has direct consequences to assessment and the people involved.

Furthermore, places may have important associations with particular groups of people who typically inhabit those places, identified by class, social standing, language use, religion, race, or other social dimensions. Work done in such places can be affected by these associations. For instance, work done at an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) may be done very differently by a Black male student than if that same student was asked to do similar work at a mostly white college in the same state. Being the only student of color, or one of the only, in a classroom, school, or dormitory, can be unnerving, can affect one’s ability to do the work asked, even when everyone around you is friendly. My experience as an undergraduate at a mostly white university in a mostly white state was filled with friendly teachers, eager to help, but I couldn’t escape the feeling that when I wrote, I was writing at a deficit, that I always had to make up for where I came from and who I was. It seemed obvious to me in class, a brown spot in a class of white milk. Everyone talked and wrote differently than me, it seemed. We shouldn’t forget that environments, places, are often (usually) raced, affecting how discourses are valued and judged.

Second, ecologies (re)create the living organisms and environments that constitute them through their relationships with each other. If living organisms and their environments create and recreate each other, then one cannot easily separate people from their environments and expect those people or environments to stay the same. To put this in simpler terms: we are defined by where we live, work, and commune. Places, environments, help make us who we are, and we

help make places what they are. The issue that this observation brings up for an antiracist writing assessment ecology is one about the historical relationships between particular racial formations and institutions. White, middle and upper class people have been associated more closely to those who go to college because they have been the ones who have gone to college and who have controlled those institutions. Colleges and writing classrooms have been places of white settlement and communion. And this helps us understand why the dominant discourse of the classroom is a white discourse, and informed by a white racial *habitus*.

To work against this in our writing assessments, I find it helpful to think in terms of labor, in terms of what people do. In one sense, we might think of a student as only a student because of the work she does and the associations she has to particular places, locations, or sites, like a college campus, or a writing classroom. Those locations have certain labors associated with them as much as they have certain people associated with them. A student's relationships to classrooms and a school helps constitute her as a student, and the school is constituted as a school because she and other students like her inhabit and labor in that place. As my earlier discussion of racial *habitus* explains, among other things, the ways that environments affect people are discursively, performatively, and materially, changing us as we dwell and labor because we dwell and labor in those places.

To acquire things by our labors is also seen historically as good and ethical, especially in matters of learning. After making a rousing argument for his young students' willingness to study rhetoric for civic betterment by "disdain[ing] a life of pleasure; when they might have saved expense and lived softly," as many of their contemporaries do, Isocrates argues that his students labor at their studies to know themselves and learn, to be better citizens (2000, pp. 346-347). He ends with an argument for an ethics of labor:

Pray, what is noble by nature becomes shameful and base when one attains it by effort? We shall find that there is no such thing, but that, on the contrary, we praise, at least in other fields, those who by their own devoted toil are able to acquire some good thing more than we praise those who inherit it from their ancestors. And rightly so; for it is well that in all activities, and most of all in the art of speaking, credit is won, not by gifts of fortune, but by efforts of study. (p. 347)

If our students' gifts of fortune are the racial *habitus* they bring with them, and some *habitus* provide some students an unfair inheritance in today's academy, then we must use something more ethical to assess them by, especially in writing classrooms. Isocrates suggests that we already value in learning those who work

hard to attain such learning and that in the study of rhetoric “credit is won” by “efforts of study.” While I know Isocrates has particular things in mind that students might learn, but not too particular, since his rhetorical philosophy was at its center *kairotic*, I read him at face value. What we might learn from the study and practice of rhetoric will depend on the practical things that need doing in the now. Our most important asset is the labor we do now, the effort we expend on rhetoric, not our nature gifts, or our racial *habitus*. Adjusting our assessment systems to favor labor over the gifts of racial *habitus* sets up assessment ecologies that are by their nature more ethical and fairer to all.

Thus in antiracist writing assessment ecologies, it is important to focus on labor, as we all can labor, and labor can be measured by duration, quantity, or intensity, not by so-called quality, or against a single standard. This makes for a more equitable ecology, particularly for those who may come to it with discourses or *habitus* other than the dominant ones. Thus, one important aspect of an antiracist writing assessment ecology is an attention to labor, or more precisely, a valuing of labor over so-called quality, even though often our goals may be to help students become more fluent in the dominant discourses of the academy.<sup>23</sup>

Third, ecology often references systems of relationships in areas of human settlement—that is, places people make and call home, or at least create and inhabit purposefully. Thinking in ecological terms is thinking about how we make some place livable and sustainable. The point here is that because ecologies are always in a state of flux, changing, they are in one sense a scene of settlement, a process of constantly making some place livable. If our writing assessment ecologies in our classrooms don’t pay attention to the dialectical way those ecologies affect students and the students affect them, or the way they affect and change us as teachers, they may simply be ecologies of measurement, mechanisms of pure accountability. They won’t really be doing their job, at least not in its fullest sense.

Antiracist ecological writing assessment references a fuller purpose defined through a set of relationships that form settlement and create sustainable places that depend on local diversity for critical examination of writing and the *habitus* that produce that writing and readers’ expectations. I’ll explain this set of practices below through Freire’s problem-posing methods, a set of practices and priorities that I call *problematizing one’s existential writing assessment situation*. In order for a classroom assessment ecology to be sustainable, fair, and resist racism, it needs to question critically the structures and assumptions that make up the reading and judging of all students and teachers in the classroom. To do this, it requires that the assessment ecology is one of settlement, one in which everyone has a stake in making it livable, fair, and sustainable. It doesn’t mean the ecology is one that values consensus, or even agreement, about what is “good writing.”

It means the ecology's politics continually struggles through disagreement and dissensus, in the way Trimbur (1989) discusses it. The ecology struggles through the ways language comes to mean and be valued and how our bodies and environments affect that meaning and valuing. I'll say more about this below.

Fourth, ecology refers to the actions, effects, and consequences of human and environmental activity. Ecology implies action, or doing things and things being done. It assumes activity and change. The idea that ecologies are fundamentally systems of change and action agrees with the way many have understood language as a system too. Arguing against Saussure's conception of language as understood as either *langue* (a language system) or *parole* (individual, unique utterances of language), V. N. Volosinov (1986) says that there is no such thing as *langue*, only *parole*, that language is a "ceaseless flow of becoming" (p. 66). Volosinov's conception of language as a constantly changing, unstable set of linguistic norms seems a good metaphor for assessment ecologies. Ecologies also are constantly becoming. And if the ecology is in constant flux, so are the people, places, and relationships that form them. Intuitively, this makes sense. From our assessments and feedback on student writing, through peer-review activities and revisions, we hope that our students (and maybe even us as teachers) change, develop, become fuller. This feature of writing assessment ecologies can be turned to antiracist purposes. First, it provides us with at least one rationale for why using a single, static standard to measure student writing performances is unproductive in writing classrooms. Second, in antiracist assessment ecologies, it may mean that we must consider other, larger purposes for our ecology, purposes beyond or instead of measuring or ranking students. For instance, one might see a purpose that aligns with Freirean critical pedagogy that demands the ecology produce some output, some product(s) that demonstrate or observe the ceaseless flow of each students' language practices as it becomes something else. This kind of descriptive assessment process has been promoted in various ways by many already, although none have an explicit antiracist purpose (Bleich, 1997; Broad, 2003; Broad et al., 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Huot, 2002; Inoue, 2004).

Fifth and finally, the last definition listed above refers to the way all ecologies are associated with political activities, with the ways that people and environments affect each other and the interests that particular groups may have to change or maintain a given environment or place. And so, ecology is always a reference to the political (or power) relations between people and their environments, between people in environments. This directly connects racial *habitus* and racial formations to writing assessment ecologies, since both are centrally defined by power relations. In fact, this last definition makes racial politics, as relations of power that change the environment of the classroom, central to the activities and purposes of a writing assessment. In simpler terms, all writing

assessment ecologies are about consciously noticing and perhaps changing the power relations involved so that a more sustainable and equitable ecology is created. Thus antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies are explicit about their politics, explicit about their attention to reconstructing hierarchical racial power arrangements that are (re)produced through students' performances, their material conditions in which they labor and that affect who they are, and the languages they use.

Putting these five important features together, we might initially think of *an antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology as a complex political system of people, environments, actions, and relations of power that produce consciously understood relationships between and among people and their environments that help students problematize their existential writing assessment situations, which in turn changes or (re)creates the ecology so that it is fairer, more livable, and sustainable for everyone.* This definition is still incomplete however. It doesn't explain the nature of the ecology's complexity as a system, nor how the relationships among elements work. While this definition explains the political purposes for any antiracist writing assessment ecology, it doesn't explain the nature of those politics as constitutive features of the ecology.

In the following sections of this chapter, I'll fill in these gaps in this definition by discussing the way antiracist writing assessment ecologies are "more than" their features or elements, making them complex systems through their holistic natures, and systems that can produce critical or antiracist products and consequences. I'll explain how the interconnectedness of people and environments help writing classrooms understand the importance and necessity of antiracist agendas in writing assessment, and how interconnectedness is vital to the use of difference in discourses, values, and judging. Finally, I'll show how it is best to see antiracist writing assessment ecologies as Marxian ecologies, which reveals the ways power relations work both historically and from the classical Marxian dialectic. Seeing writing assessment ecologies as explicitly Marxian ecologies provides students with language to understand the way all assessment ecologies determine our desires and expectations for discourse, and the evaluations of our writing, and perhaps offers some ways to counter that determining.

What should be clear in the discussion so far is that all classroom writing assessment ecologies are by necessity political, are by necessity racial in orientation, even when we try hard not to consider race in our designs or implementation. Therefore an antiracist project or agenda is crucial to all classroom writing assessment ecologies. To engage in antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies is a revolutionary or transformative agenda, one akin to Freire's (1970) problem-posing pedagogy described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which my definition above references. In fact, Freire's description of the process of data

collection in the community and its analysis by that community and his literacy workers (1970, p. 112) is strikingly similar to Guba and Lincoln's famous fourth-generation evaluation process that uses a hermeneutic dialectic circle to acquire various judgments (what they call "constructions") by stakeholders in order for a socially constructed evaluation to emerge (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 152). Their process produces a collaborative description that takes into account as many of the stakeholders involved as possible. While they don't focus on it, this process allows for an evaluation to work with the locally diverse people involved and the inherent differences in language and judgment that those people will produce. Freire's pedagogy is very similar. The lens I am asking us to place on Guba and Lincoln's and Freire's processes is an attention to the way language practices participate in larger racialized discourses and *habitus*.

Freire's pedagogy is assessment at just about every level. He says that the dialogical teacher's role is primarily to "re-present" the "thematic universe" uncovered by the team of researchers (which includes community members) as a problem (1970, p. 109), which the community (or students) must take on or use to pose their own problems. This is the heart of what Guba and Lincoln attempt to offer in their assessment model, and at the heart of antiracist writing assessment ecologies. The central work of problem-posing for students in an antiracist writing assessment ecology is to assess and make judgments on language, to re-present colleagues' texts to them from whatever subject position that student inhabits, and to do so self-consciously, calling attention to their own *habitus*, all of which leads to other questions that require more assessments by readers and writers. This makes the assessments more important than the drafts and documents being assessed. Students don't have to label the differences they notice in language practices as racialized, but they can strive to understand the differences as more than idiosyncrasies, more than individual differences unconnected to larger discursive fields, larger social and cultural practices in their lives.

These judgments about language judgments that students exchange in antiracist writing assessment ecologies are focused not on what is right or wrong, conventional or not, but on comparisons between a white racial *habitus* and other *habitus* that students take on. The white racial *habitus* is not a standard by which students must write up to or be judged against, but is understood as a direction everyone heads toward at their own pace and in their own ways. Most important, it is the heading toward, the movement, the "flow of becoming," that is the basis of measuring and grading in antiracist writing assessment ecologies. Because ecologies are fundamentally about change, movement, and actions, judgments about student labor (the engine of movement and change) might best be used to determine things like grades and define expectations for work. This means that it is important not to use measurements of students' approximations

to a dominant discourse to determine grades (measures of so-called “quality”). Labor is a more equitable and fair measure. Everyone has 24 hours in every day.<sup>24</sup>

I’ll illustrate what this problematizing can look like in an imperfect way in Chapter 4 and offer some ideas toward assessment activities in Chapter 5 that help students problematize their writing assessment situations. For now, this short description is what I mean when I say that the larger goal of any antiracist writing assessment ecology is to encourage students to problematize their existential writing assessment situations. To problematize means students must pose questions about their colleagues’ and their own drafts, then investigate those questions, which essentially are ones about the nature of judgment and language, leading students to understanding their own *habitus* and the white racial *habitus* of the academy. This moves discussions and the work of the ecology away from the drafts and into the nature of judgment itself. While I did not use it in the course I describe in Chapter 4, I include in Appendix B an explicit problematizing assignment (a problem-posing letter), which I have used since the course. The problem-posing letter explicitly asks students to problematize their existential writing assessment situations by using the feedback they and their colleagues have written.

I realize the problems with transplanting a pedagogy designed to help illiterate peasants gain language and power in developing countries to a post-industrialized context like U.S. writing classrooms, where our students, even the poorest of them, are not remotely in need of the kind of liberation that Freire is thinking of. Our students are not oppressed in the ways Freire’s Brazilian peasants were; however, most U.S. students can be a part of an antiracist, liberatory agenda in the writing classroom. They might help us liberate ourselves from conventional assessment ecologies that keep (re)producing racism through an uncritical promotion of a white racial *habitus*. I’m not saying we know what our students need to know, and that we just have to get them to see things our way. I’m not even saying we need to liberate our students. I’m saying, our classroom writing assessment ecologies themselves need liberating. And our students must do this work with us.

In other words, healthy writing assessment ecologies have at their core dialogue about what students and teachers know, how students and teachers judge language differently, so that students are also agents in the ecology, not simply objects to be measured. I realize that this statement may set up a troubling role for the teacher, the role of liberator or savior, but like Freire’s account, the writing teacher in an antiracist writing assessment ecology simply does not have that power, cannot liberate her students. They must do that themselves (Freire, 1970, pp. 93-94). This is an essential part of Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy, and



any healthy antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology.

Freire's pedagogy works from an important assumption about language. Words offer humans both action and reflection. Language provides us with a mode by which we can transform our world. He explains, "[t]o exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (1970, p. 88). Naming, for Freire, happens in dialogue with others. The act of naming alludes to action and work and material environments that change through our word-acts, or what he calls "praxis," which is "reflection and action which truly transform reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 100). But it's not any dialogue that transforms reality, but a dialogue that engages in critical thinking:

true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (Freire, 1970, p. 92)

Words as actions. Language as action. Action as reflection and reflection as action. To liberate oneself, a student must engage in such labor. And when focusing attention on one's own *habitus* next to a white racial *habitus* expected of students in classrooms, the labor creates the potential for an antiracist praxis. They problematize their existential writing assessment situations. Thus, labor seems the most antiracist measure for any writing assessment ecology because we really don't know what our students can or should ultimately learn.

This brief account of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy offers a way to see Freire's account of language learning as similar to antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies. Both are defined as a set of relationships and critical dialogue among people, and between people and their environment; as transformative processes that change people and their environments by posing problems through word-acts that name the world, which changes the world and begets more naming; as a scene of settlement in which the ecological transformative processes that occur are always at some level about making a place sustainable and livable, as problem-posing events that liberate the ecology; as action, motion, and processes of becoming something else, as praxis; and as political in nature, or as containing and dealing with power relations among people and their discourses, or the cultivation of liberation and being fully human among

others who are doing the same.

## AS “MORE THAN”

Antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies are in one sense complex systems. Understanding this can help teachers and students engage more self-consciously in all their mutual work. Dobrin (2012) and Cooper (2011) discuss the ideas of “complex ecology” and complex systems (respectively), which explains writing as a complex system through theorists like George Van Dyne, Bernard C. Patten, Humberto Maturana, and Francisco Varela. Complex ecologies, like writing assessments, are “holistic” in nature, accounting for the whole as more than an assemblage of parts, yet maintaining a sense of the parts and their mutual interactions. Thus, for Dobrin (and me), there is a “need to address the complex relationships between parts in order to develop more holistic concepts of writing while understating that we will never be able to fully understand all of the complexities and fluctuations of the system” (2012, p. 144). So while an ecology may have aspects we can label and separate out for discussion and design, these aspects and other elements do not account for writing assessment ecologies in total. There is always a bit of mystery, some unknown variables in the system. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies are always more than their elements, more than what they may appear to be. They are always *more than*.

The idea that the teaching and understanding of the process of writing as more than its parts isn't new. While he doesn't speak about writing assessment, Richard Coe (1975) makes a very similar point when arguing for an “eco-logic” for the teaching of writing. He offers this definition of eco-logic:

[from the modern English, *ecology*; from the Greek *oikos*, house or habitation, as in *oikonomia*, economy; the prefix *eco-* connotes wholeness] 1. A logic designed for complex wholes. 2. Any logic which considers wholes as wholes, not by analyzing them into their component parts. 3. *Esp.*, a logical model appropriate for ecological phenomena. (p. 232)

In a footnote, Coe explains that the Greek notions for household was of the “smallest self-sufficient unit in the Greek economy,” thus “*oiko-* had a connotation of wholeness” (1975, p. 232). Teaching rhetoric this way, as an eco-logic, means for Coe that we not break up the art into smaller units that aren't whole, such as in the case of teaching modes. I doubt today we need to make an argument against teaching writing as modes for many reasons, but for Coe it is because rhetoric in the contemporary writing classroom deals with more complex contemporary phenomena, phenomena less apt to being understood

adequately by breaking it up for analysis or practice. From this, he argues that one central eco-logical principle is that “meaning is relative to context” (1975, p. 233). Language gains its meaning and significance only in the context in which it is uttered or used. Most critical in Coe’s eco-logical rendering of teaching writing is that we teach it as a socially contextualized activity, something others argue after him (Berlin, 1987). For him, context and relativity mean social context and social relativity. Coe does not make any connection to the judging of writing, but when we think in terms of classroom writing assessment ecologies, the contextual, relative, and contingent nature of language and meaning, at its core, comes from the fact that meaning is derived from people judging and assessing it. To say that language is meaningful because it is contextual and social by nature, because judgments about language can only be made contextually, is to say that the nature of writing assessment is ecological. And to say this is to say that writing assessment ecologies are more than the elements we might list that constitute them.

Dobrin, however, recognizes how limited a biological and organic concept, which Coe stays close to, has been in the past to writing theory (2011, p. 132-33). In part, Dobrin identifies this problem as one of “anthropocentric ecology, focusing on the human agent’s relationship with environment, both the agent’s influence on the environment and the environment’s affect [sic] on the agent.” While Coe places his interest in people interacting in ecologies, Dobrin’s critique is still applicable, as Coe is anthropocentric, centering only on people and their interactions, disregarding their material environment, the classroom, or other structural factors such as power differentials (i.e., race, gender, etc.). This anthropocentric influence, says Dobrin, is usually “one tied more directly with concepts of social interaction than with ecological relationships” (2011, p. 126). I agree with Dobrin’s criticism of older versions of ecological theories of writing, and attempt to focus my attention both on social interaction among students and teacher, and ecological relationships among other elements in the complex systems of writing assessment ecologies, such as processes, the places (physical and figurative) that students and teachers create and inhabit, and the discourses of judgment, all of which I’ll look at more closely in Chapter 3.

Thus in any ecology, the material aspects of environments and people in writing assessments must be preserved and understood explicitly. We do not live in conditions of pure theory or discourse. In any writing classroom, we have never, nor could we, simply read and judge words as words that only matter on the page or on a computer screen. Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy in both philosophy and method, exemplify this attachment to the material world. Furthermore, the writing our students engage in and submit to be judged in some fashion contains the shadows of labor done, traces of work, references to a

body in motion, as well as to places and scenes of writing that produced drafts. Because of this, when we read student writing, we read all of these things simultaneously. We read more than words, more than our students. In fact, as others have discussed in various ways (Brannon & Knoblach, 1982; Sommers, 1982), teachers usually think of their students as they read their writing anyway.

Thinking more intuitively about the scene of reading and responding to student writing (a place in the ecology), teachers have their material students in mind to help them respond effectively. When we formulate feedback, an evaluation, or a grade, we implicitly or explicitly consider that material student, her possible reactions, what she needs, how she needs to hear advice, even nonacademic aspects of her life (e.g., Is she a student-athlete? Does she work, take care of a family, children, etc.? How many future drafts are expected in the course?). And this doesn't include other constraints that a teacher considers that will affect her feedback, such as the amount of time she has to respond to her students' writing, where she can do that reading and writing, the technologies she has available to read and write her feedback, etc.

David Bartholomae's (1985) influential account of students "inventing the university" every time they sit down to write is also an essay that invents those material students, racializing and norming them to a white racial *habitus* through the promotion of a dominant white discourse, as he reads through the excerpts he offers. In fact, Bartholomae's essay can be read as an early primer for inventing types of students through the reading and evaluating of their work. And before Bartholomae, Wayne Booth's (1963) *The Rhetorical Stance* provides an explicit discussion on how to read and construct three types of students by reading their writing, again against a white racial *habitus*. This phenomenon is nowhere clearer stated than in Chris Anson's (2000) discussion of teachers' responses and their relationship to the social construction of error as teachers read student texts. Anson shows how writing teachers construct the severity of the same errors differently depending on the student's ethos created by the teacher-reader (2000, p. 10). While he doesn't say it, the factors Anson mentions, such as the level of neutrality or objectivity of the writer and the writer's perceived bias and "fair-mindedness," are closely wedded to a white racial *habitus*, fitting cleanly into the rubric of whiteness discussed by Barnett (2000), Myser (2002), Brookhiser (1997), and others I discussed in Chapter 1.

While Bartholomae, Booth, and Anson are mostly textual in the ways they suggest teachers invent such students behind their texts, folks like Sommers (1982), Elizabeth Flynn (1989), Edgington (2005), and Scott (2009) in various ways are more explicit about the act of reading being one that is an interaction between reader, text, and student, and they imply actions and decisions by flesh-and-blood writers in the world who work under material conditions that affect

that work. Thus, at least in terms of feedback and response to student writing, there is a tradition in composition studies that sees as important the presence of the material student when the teacher is reading, providing feedback, or evaluating. However, if we see these assessment scenes as ecologies, then they are more than the disembodied reading of texts, more than the material conditions that make up students, teachers, and the environments in which they work. What produces the judgments that Bartholomae, Booth, and Anson identify is more than what seems to literally constitute a text and its reading.

What makes up this *more than* attribute of the assessment ecology? Coe might call it rhetorical context. Faigley might say it was historically evolving cultural and disciplinary tastes that affect readers' judgments. Bartholomae and Booth might argue it is the product of students trying to approximate the conventions of discourse communities. Anson might say it is a part of readers' individual idiosyncratic constructions of writers. All of these scholars have at the center of any writing assessment scene judgment and the text being judged. The discourse itself, the writing in our classrooms, including the teacher's discourse of judgment, is an obvious part of the ecology. In short, all these accounts reveal the ways that the social, cultural, disciplinary, and racial *habitus* of writers and readers, with a white racial *habitus* as the standard, clash to form judgments on student writing. This is nowhere clearer seen than in my previous discussion of the EPT sample essay in which I argue it is being read through narratives of a global imaginary of sentimental education that produces particular judgments of the text as remedial and a student in need of help.

This theorizing of assessment agrees with "discursive ecology," a pedagogical approach to writing that argues that writing in the classroom should be seen as such systems. Dobrin and Weisser (2002) explain this pedagogy: "discursive ecology examines the relationships of various acts and forms of discourse ... see[s] writing as an ecological process, to explore writing and writing processes as systems of interaction, economy, and interconnectedness" (p. 581). In a broader sense, this kind of ecocomposition, Dobrin and Weisser say, allows writing theorists and teachers (and perhaps their students), to ask: "[w]hat effects do local environments have on any kind of writing, any kind of writer?" (2002, p. 577). I would add: What effects do local environments, which include the discourses of judgment circulating in those environments, have on the assessment of writing? Thus the substance of the *more than* in an assessment ecology changes and is elusive depending on who is present and where they are when they read and judge.

Thus, environments, like larger ecologies, are more than what they seem. In their own defining of ecocomposition, which mimics Freire's assumptions about language and the world (although they do not cite Freire), Dobrin and Weisser state that "environment is an idea that is created through discourse ... it is

through language that we give these things or places [mountains, rivers, oceans] particular meanings” (2002, p. 573). I agree. Our material environments that we live and interact in are more than material. They are also made up of discourse, of language. As Kenneth Burke (1966, 1969) reminds us about image and idea, about the relationship between the symbolic and the material, people do not live in worlds of words alone. Our world constructs our words as much as our words construct our world. Thus each is more than the other. This is also the essence of Freire’s critical pedagogy, only he emphasizes that words and the world constantly change because of each other. However, the link between the world and the word is reflection that is action, which is labor, the engine of becoming and change, the engine of ecologies. In antiracist writing assessment ecologies, the *more than* in the ecology is also the evolving critical consciousness about language and *habitus* that the ecology produces.

What shouldn’t be lost in antiracist writing assessment ecologies is the way they help students focus on a fuller range of phenomena for assessing language. Dobrin and Weisser explain that people make meaning out of their environments as a response to that environment. The mountain or river is the occasion for discourse. So our lives and relationships with each other and to the environment are connected materially as much as they are connected through our words. But we are connected to our world in a number of other ways, each of which helps us experience and create meaning, helps us assess. We make judgments through emotion and sensation, through analytic and spiritual logics, through kinaesthetic movement (e.g., Kroll, 2013), through felt senses and intuition. But we build and articulate judgments through language. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies are more than word-acts. They are emotional and sensual labor, bodily labor that occurs in time and space. These aspects of the ecology teachers cannot control, and often our students cannot either, but they should be accounted for. We can experience them, take note, and articulate.

Through all this, we shouldn’t forget the writer or the reader/assessor and their relationship. In Marilyn Cooper’s (1986) discussion of writing in the classroom as an ecology, she explains that it can be seen as a collection of “social activities, dependent social structures and processes” (p. 366). She focuses her eye, like many writing scholars at the time, on people and their interactions, saying that “writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (1986, p. 367). These “dynamic and interlocking” social systems are “made and remade by writers in the act of writing” (Cooper, 1986, p. 368). The larger environment that she accounts for in her ecological theory of writing hints at systemic things, but stays close to the writer, making it vulnerable to Dobrin’s anthropocentric critique. However, Cooper explains that “writing encompasses much more than the individual

writer and her immediate context” (1986, p. 368). It is an interaction with other writers and readers, an interaction with at least five systems that people circulate in (Cooper, 1986, pp. 369-370). The details of her systems are less important to my discussion, except that in each case, she discusses them in social terms, in terms of people interacting and exchanging.

While she speaks only of writing and revision, Cooper’s early articulation of writing as ecology can be translated to a theorizing of writing assessment as ecology. In fact, in her example of how an ecological model of writing changes the way we think of and discuss writing in the classroom, she is really discussing classroom writing assessment as ecology. After summarizing Ede and Lunsford (1984), Ong (1975), Park (1982), and Kroll (1984) on audience, she says:

As should be obvious, the perspective of the ecological model offers a salutary correction of vision on the question of audience. By focusing our attention on the real social context of writing, it enables us to see that writers not only analyze or invent audiences, they, more significantly, communicate with and know their audiences. They learn to employ the devices of audience-adapted writing by handing their texts to colleagues to read and respond to, by revising articles or memos or reports guided by comments from editors or superiors, by reading others’ summaries or critiques of their own writing. Just as the ecological model transforms authors (people who have produced texts) into writers (people engaged in writing), it transforms the abstract “general audience” into real readers. (1986, pp. 371-372)

Her example is one of material writers writing and material readers reading, of exchanging drafts, providing feedback to peers, interpreting feedback writers received from others, then revising. It is a more holistic view of most typical classroom writing assessment activities. And what is learned about writing as ecology is that writers learn to write in “real social context[s],” with real people in mind as their audience, from real people’s words about their words and worlds, from material action and exchange in material environments. And while she mostly ignores the material classroom and other spaces where students do the labors of reading and writing, the ecology of the writing classroom, according to Cooper, makes students into writers because the ecology calls them to write to real people, exchange ideas about that writing, and continue the process. People and the places they read and write not only become important to the system, but as Dobrin (2012) explains, they are the system. Writers in a writing ecology become assessors, readers of others’ texts and makers of judgments, making writers

more than writers, and readers more than readers. In fact, if we accept Cooper's account as one also of writing assessment, and I don't see why we wouldn't, then writing assessment ecologies make writers and assessors of writing through their interactions. Without the ecology, you don't have writers or readers. The difference in an antiracist writing assessment ecology is that all this is made explicit, reflected upon, and used to understand the discourses of judgment as indicators of students' *habitus* and the dominant white racial *habitus*.

Cooper's and Coe's early renditions of writing as ecology, while limited to mostly generic (white?) people's interactions and speaking only about writing (not assessing), are still useful precursors to a theory of writing assessment ecology as an antiracist project. None of the composition theorists I've cited so far, however, discuss the ways in which the social, racial, and institutional contexts and histories that follow students and teachers affect ecologies that those people are a part of. How do we account for various racial formations, discourses, and *habitus* in our reading and judging practices, or the privileging of a white racial *habitus* that informs dominant discourses? Cooper and Coe do not make note of the way all students are not simply the same kinds of writers or readers, that where they come from, what languages and backgrounds they bring, what their economic and other social factors are in their lives, affects their abilities to do the work we ask of them in the writing classroom, which has implications to the ways we might assess that writing or the ways they might judge their colleagues' work. Their material conditions while taking the course also affect students' various and uneven chances of doing the work we ask of them.

And yet, the locally diverse student-readers and teacher help any student-writer by being diverse, by essentially posing different problems about their writing to the writer in their own ways, from their own perspectives, through their own problem-posing about the writer's writing. This should allow assessment to reveal judgment as more than meeting an approximation of a white racial *habitus* found in a dominant discourse. In order for the assessment ecology to construct that feedback as antiracist, problem-posing assessment can be the focus. Problem-posing by peers and teacher can help all involved see the local dominant discourse as a part of a local white racial *habitus*, a part of the hegemonic. Thus power and privilege are seen in the ecology as not evenly distributed and as the subject of assessment processes and problems posed.

Thus, an antiracist ecology works differently to some degree for each student and teacher. As Stephanie Kerschbaum (2014) emphasizes in her discussion of the rhetoric of difference and diversity, noticing and using difference, say in a problem-posing assessment activity, isn't about a priori notions of difference but differences that emerge through interactions. The substance of these interactions, I argue, should be about the nature of judgment itself, about the word-acts of



assessment. When this happens, when the ecology turns back onto itself, making it the subject of assessment processes, of feedback activities, of reflections on drafting and revisions, the writing assessment ecology takes advantage of the local diversity in the classroom. The local diversity of ideas, languages, judgments, and material contexts that students bring to bear on a text allows for the writing assessment ecology to be more than helping writers improve drafts. It becomes an ecology in which students liberate themselves from conventional assessment.

## AS INTERCONNECTED

Understanding explicitly interconnection is important in antiracist writing assessment ecologies, because seeing the ways all aspects of the ecology are interconnected (including students, teacher, and their discourses) helps everyone pose problems about language and judgment through their differences, through the local diversity revealed in writing, assessing, and the material bodies in the classroom. A white racial *habitus* that informs the dominant discourses expected of Fresno State students, for instance, is interconnected to, depends on, local Hmong, Latino/a, and African-American *habitus*. Seeing interconnection helps students understand how dominant discourses need subaltern ones, how we all need everyone and everything around us, how disagreeing with each other can be a critical act of compassion and love.

In another more obvious way, interconnection is a social phenomenon integral to all classrooms. It takes the entire class to have a successful peer review activity, for instance. It takes at least one reader in order for a writer to write and receive feedback. It takes a school to dedicate material classroom space, or virtual space on computer servers, for a writing class to function at all. It takes time and labor on the part of students to do the writing and reading required for a writing class's activities to work. Any student's success is determined by the labors and actions of her colleagues around her in the classroom, by the commitments of institutions and people she may never know, by available space and materials. Conversely, when any student is left behind or fails in some way, the rest of the class fails to some degree, and an integral part of the ecology withers. We all have experienced those classrooms where almost everyone is rowing in the same direction, getting it, engaging in the course's activities in the same spirit, and everything seems to always work. I would argue that when this happens, what we experience in the course is a tangible interconnectedness. In antiracist writing assessment ecologies, this interconnectedness is made explicit, reflected upon and discussed, then used toward problem-posing ends, helping create a sustainable writing assessment ecology.

Robert Yagelski (2011) offers a powerful articulation of both interconnected-

ness and the ecological nature of writing and its assessment in *Writing As A Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*. Yagelski argues for writing to be taught as an ontological practice that is opposed to conventional process pedagogies that teach it as a purely transactional act, one based on the Cartesian duality of mind vs. body. He calls this old view of writing the “Cartesian view of writing,” in which students act as if they are autonomous beings, separated from their environments (2011, p. 47), and from their peers as well who are a part of their environments. In his chapter, “The Crisis of Sustainability,” Yagelski explains:

The basic lesson of conventional schooling, then, is less a matter of learning *what* is outside us than learning *that* there is something outside us that we can see, describe, and understand, a something that is fundamentally separate from our selves. To put it in simpler terms, in school we teach separateness rather than interconnectedness; we see a world defined by duality rather than unity. As a result we promote an idea of community as a collection of discrete, autonomous individuals rather than a complex network of beings who are inherently interconnected and inextricably part of the ecosystems on which all life depends. (2011, p. 17)

And where is the most obvious example in schools of this separateness from each other and our environments in education? According to Yagelski, writing assessment. He says accurately that “students are almost always assessed as individuals” (2011, p. 17). Grades and scores point to this Cartesian way of writing when they define students as only “an intellectual entity, a collection of certain cognitive abilities and/or sanctioned bodies of knowledge,” as a “disembodied intellect” (Yagelski, 2011, p. 18). Ultimately, he concludes, “[a]ssessment becomes a process of disembodiment that both reflects and reinforces the Cartesian self” (2011, p. 18). In Yagelski’s view, the Cartesian self in school, exemplified in Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”), is opposed to an interconnected self, one that sees himself and his education as a part of all that is around him, his colleagues, the teacher, the classroom, the desks, the campus, the buildings, the decisions made in last week’s city council meeting, the nearby reservoir, everything.

Although he does not discuss whiteness in his critique, we might hear in Yagelski’s criticism of conventional assessment and classroom process pedagogies as a criticism of a white racial *habitus*. The *cogito* is a typical logic in whiteness. It is the logic of hyperindividualism that tends to be the rationale for assessing students individually. Furthermore, the disembodiment of rhetoric from the

person speaking (or writing) is not only a denial of our relationship to the material world and our words, but denies that rationality and logic are intimately a part of thinking, feeling, breathing people. Whiteness as a discourse uses this assumption too, one that says logic and rationality can be “objective,” are outside of people. In fact, people taint logic and the rational.

While Yagelski isn't making an argument for ecomposition in the way Dobrin and Weisser or Cooper do, he is assuming a wider net of relationships and actions that make up writing and how we might define it and teach it. He also reminds us that we write from and with our bodies. I'm extending his argument to include the fact that we read, judge, and assess writing in and outside of classrooms from and with our bodies. Our bodies connect us to the earth and each other. Thus, Yagelski sees writing as an ontological act, as “a way of being in the world” (2011, p. 3), which allows us to teach from the interconnectedness of all people and their environments. He draws on post-process theorists, most notably Thomas Kent (1993), to explain that while language is essential to knowing, “it isn't the sole ground for knowing or meaning-making” (Yagelski, 2011, p. 64). In effect, knowing is a three-way exchange among at least two people communicating to each other and a “phenomenal world” that they both experience and interpret together. Thus, communication is “inherently nondualistic,” according to Yagelski. He explains, “writing does not demarcate boundaries between the writer and others, because we cannot make meaning without others; furthermore, it begins to erase the boundary between writer as subject and the world as object, because the world is integral to meaning making” (2011, p. 65). While he isn't saying it directly, Yagelski defines writing, through post-process theory, as an ecology, as a holistically experienced process of meaning making. It takes many people, their interactions, a world and its motions to create a single student paper, and equally as many interconnected relations to assess it.

Additionally, one can hear a problem-posing assessment strategy in Yagelski's theory of language. To assess writing ecologically means we pose problems to the writer about what her words mean to the world and how the writer herself is connected to that world being made through words, or we ask what problems appear in her writing when we see it as a part of a white racial *habitus*, or as opposed to one, or as one different from the *habitus* of the reader. In antiracist writing assessment ecologies, local diversity is necessary for critical assessments that ask such questions of writers and their texts. Difference between readers and writers is used to form critical judgments on the reader's and the writer's dispositions in writing and reading. Difference is used to see the white racial *habitus* as such, as just one discursive node in a larger network of interconnected nodes. This antiracist agenda doesn't just examine differences, but examines the ways we interconnect, the ways an individual writer may have connections to—may de-

pend upon—her world, the reader, opposing arguments and ideas. In this way, problem-posing as an antiracist strategy for response or assessment of writing is a process of reading for interconnectedness from various perspectives as much as it is a process of seeing difference.

To give an example, consider two excerpts from student essays, one from Lester Faigley's (1989) "Judging Writing, Judging Selves," a reprint of Rebecca Faery's submission to Coles and Vopat's (1985) *What Makes Writing Good*, and a similar kind of essay from a writing course of mine a few years ago. Faery's student essay comes from Lindsey Lankford, an advanced writing student, who writes about communicating through letters to her family while she spends a year in Paris. Faigley explains that Lindsey "shows awareness of the essay form, beginning with phone bills and check stubs as images of writing in our culture, juxtaposing scenes of intercontinental letter writing, then deftly returning to the empty post office box at the end" (1989, pp. 407-408). Like myself, Faigley says he is "touched by this essay" because of the ideas and images it invokes, familiar ones of Paris and Lindsey as "teacher/critic" of the letters her family writes to her (1989, p. 408). In the middle of the essay, Lindsey writes:

I loved their letters to me, too. They were never filled with earthshattering news, but they revealed a lot. Actually, most people's lives are dull; it's the way they perceive their lives that is interesting. My sister Allison lives in the Negev Desert, in a tiny trailer. Her world consists of her husband, their two small children, and very little else. Her letters were always wrinkled, smeared with something sticky, covered in crayons and written over extended periods of time. They were a mess: descriptions of the gingerbread village Allison had made for the Christmas party, their plans for moving back to the States, Lauren's latest word, and details of Elizabeth's third birthday party. Allison's letters were disjointed, but ebullient. Living on an army base in the Israeli desert would seem a barren existence, yet Allison's letters describe a busy and happy, if somewhat chaotic, life. (Faigley, 1989, p. 407)

Lindsey knows how to approximate the academic discourse well. In fact, her essay offers a clear picture of a white racial *habitus* that informs her discursive choices and the subject of her essay. She never mentions her own racial or class subjectivity, but like all whiteness, she assumes it as a natural position that her readers will align with and recognize. It is the voice of objective reasoning that she invokes in her essay. Her analysis and voice are the epitome of hyperindividualism and the Cartesian *cogito* that separates Lindsey from her world and even

her sister and family. She thinks in conventionally rational and logical ways on the page that fit with the dominant discourse of the academy, allowing her an objective stance that makes observations on her family. Her discussion of her sister's letters and life in an "Israeli desert" makes a stark contrast, one that pits a romantic European city with cafes and wine-fueled discussions of philosophy against a more "disjointed, but ebullient" and "chaotic" life in a "tiny trailer" in a Middle Eastern desert.

It is hard not to read racial undertones in this comparison, one that creates Lindsey as authoritative critic, one who makes interesting insights that construct her as authoritative and detached from her family she discusses, such as "most people's lives are dull; it's the way they perceive their lives that is interesting." Lindsey is outside her sister's life, looking objectively at it, finding it "interesting." Laced in this white racial *habitus* is a posture that is reminiscent of an Orientalist vision that Said (1979) and Klein (2003) theorize. From her topic choice to the way she treats her examples (the letters from her family) to the vision she has of those examples (what they mean), a white racial *habitus* informs Lindsey's writing. This doesn't make Lindsey a bad writer or her essay a bad one. On the contrary, it approximates an academic discourse well, and comes to some interesting conclusions. But an antiracist writing assessment ecology is not about simply measuring how well a student approximates a dominant discourse. The ecology is about problematizing the existential writing assessment situation of writers and readers like Lindsey.

In an antiracist writing assessment ecology, this essay would be read in order to understand the ways Lindsey takes on a white racial *habitus*, then through assessments compares her *habitus* to her colleagues' *habitus*. The comparison would be one in which first interconnection is interrogated. How is Lindsey's leisure, middle-class life in Paris connected to her sister's chaotic life that has fewer signs of middle-classness? How does Lindsey's romantic, intellectual ethos in Paris, exchanging letters in French to her father, need the chaotic, working-class, darker, non-white example of her sister to be meaningful? How does Lindsey's discussion and its insights depend on her performing whiteness?<sup>25</sup> Faigley's discussion of this essay hints at such an assessment when he asks about whether Lindsey could have written a similarly successful essay if she'd "visited a place unfamiliar to us," say the immigrant families from Mexico who temporarily live in storm sewers near Austin, Texas (1989, p. 408). Faigley's example is loaded with implicit questions about racism, class, and capitalism that Lindsey might explore, but in the antiracist assessment ecology I'm suggesting, racism would be placed in the forefront of assessments, and to get at it, we pose questions about her language, her assumptions and conclusions, and the nature of her discourse.

For example, as an Asian-American reader sensitive to issues of Orientalism,

like associations of Asian locations and bodies as chaotic, exotic, and hoarde-ish, I might pose questions that reveal such things to Lindsey, not to suggest that her observations are wrong or inaccurate about her sister or the location or manner in which she lives, but to reveal first the dispositions toward such bodies and locations I hear in Lindsey's words, how they work on me as an Asian-American reader in order that Lindsey can pose versions of the questions to herself. How might she tacitly need such Orientalist assumptions when thinking about civil communication and letter writing. In her text, this Orientalist vision of the Israeli desert home of her sister is in contrast to the serene, calm, intellectual place of Paris, a white geographic location that I'd also want to ask about. We can ask explicitly about Lindsey's racial *habitus* that she performs in this essay. How is it connected historically to larger discursive formations in other texts and discourses that may have influenced her, such as Bret Harte's "The Heathen Chineese" (1870), Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden" (1899), or Disney's films like *Aladdin* (1992) and *Mulan* (1998), or films like *300* (2006). So Lindsey's locally diverse colleagues are necessary to help her see her own *habitus*, and she is needed to help her colleagues see their *habitus*. They are needed together to form a critical position toward the dominant discourse expected of everyone in the academy. And the questions posed in assessments come directly from students' own racialized lives, their own material conditions that help them read and judge language. And perhaps the best initial way toward comparing such things in drafts is by working from the interconnection of students, their material lives, and their discourses, by investigating the ways our discourses and texts need one another to be more fully meaningful and critical. So interconnection as a tenant of an antiracist agenda for assessment becomes another way to say that we always, out of necessity, live in and need diversity.

Now, consider Adam's essay on a similar kind of research question that he submitted in a junior-level writing in the major course for me a few years ago. Adam's paper is a research paper, so it's different in scope from Lindsey's, but similar in the kind of question he asks about language and communication. While I don't claim that this course enacted an explicitly antiracist writing assessment ecology, it came close. And race and racism were topics that came up in most students' drafts and assessments of their peers' drafts because that's how I designed the assessment activities. Adam begins his essay:

Growing up in California, I didn't take much notice of what other people thought of me or what they thought I would be capable of doing. My neighborhood was comprised of mostly low-income families but I didn't recognize that because we always had food to eat and clothes to wear. I remember

learning to read and write at a young age; I was able to read before starting grade school and was also capable of writing a few words. I didn't love reading but I did so when I was told. When I started school I could already read pretty well but I was very shy. I was a "mixed kid" who was considered black to the white kids and not really black to the black kids. I didn't enjoy reading out loud to the teacher or to the class. There was one other black kid in the class, and he wouldn't even attempt to speak out loud in the classroom. When I was in front of the class everyone looked at me with such confusion, this was the first glimpse of black people for many of my classmates. I was becoming a nervous wreck when it came my turn to read or compose sentences aloud. I was so hesitant to participate that my first grade teacher told my Mom that she thought I needed more help with my reading. This talk with my mother precipitated many afterschool reading programs. I have seen my reading and writing skills develop over time but I still have many questions about what lead me to where I am today. This leads me to ask: Does race play a role in written communication? I will review data spanning the past few years, and review what others have published relating to this topic.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference in Adam's approximation of the white academic discourse is his focus on himself as a political entity that stems from his racialized experiences with reading in school. Unlike Lindsey, Adam doesn't begin his inquiry with abstract ideas or details that represent ideas, instead he begins with himself as a poor, "mixed" race kid, located in California. The tensions in his reading practices come from his embodied *habitus*, one that places him in different racial positions (racial projections) depending on who is perceiving him. Adam's research question ("Does race play a role in written communication?") stems from his own racialized subject position in school as a reader, and he doesn't avoid this implication. In fact, it is interconnected with the white racial *habitus* he knows he's expected to take on in school, and the Black racial *habitus* he is expected to take on around Blacks (in fact, he cites Vershawn A. Young (2007) later in his essay). Adam's discourse calls attention to his own racial position, a contextualized and racialized body in time and space, as one connected to his languaging. This is not the same as Lindsey's discourse, which is a white one, and focuses on where she is (location), and what others say to her (others' logos), not how others see her racially. In fact, Lindsey's discourse

divorces her physical, racialized body from the ideas and things she discusses. Adam's cannot. Adam reveals others' racialized perceptions of him that form the exigency for Adam's inquiries about race and language use. But for Lindsey it is the rumination on the page itself, one that begins with thinking about an empty mailbox and the labor and care it takes for one to write letters to others, a ruminating that is disconnected from material, racialized bodies in time and space, yet connected by her logos, the vignettes she offers of her mother, father, and sister writing to her. Lindsey's discourse is abstract, rational in the way a white *habitus* tends to articulate things. Adam's is contextualized, social in nature, and focused on his own subjective meaning making, which centers on racial projections and communication. While there are aspects of Adam's discourse that shares in a white *habitus* (he uses a local SEAE), the nature of his question and its exigency are not.

Adam's discourse isn't better than Lindsey's, only different. And in an antiracist assessment ecology, the assessments that occur around these texts can use the texts to compare *habitus*. For instance, Adam brings different things to bear on his inquiry than Lindsey, such as others' contradictory perceptions of his racial subject position, which seems to have an effect on his reading practices. Lindsey's discourse seems to assume that any student could have such thoughts as she presents, that others might come to similar conclusions if they found themselves in the same places, doing the same things. Adam's discourse suggests the contrary, that only he can ask this question from this position. These two essays and writers can offer a lot to each other, just by reading and posing questions to each other, just by explicitly comparing their methods, if the assumption is that they are interconnected. Lindsey needs Adam's discourse as much as Adam needs Lindsey's. Lindsey's *habitus* is one that favors telling details that might help Adam see ways his discourse lacks this disposition. Adam's *habitus* is one that places importance on revealing the writer's subjectivity and its connection to others' racial projections of him to his reading practices, which Lindsey avoids but might do well to consider. In Chapter 5, I offer a heuristic and an example assessment process that may shed light on how a classroom might take advantage of such interconnectedness in order to form critical insights. For now, I hope you can see that I'm not favoring one discourse over the other, but instead looking to show their differences as *habitus* and how those *habitus* are interconnected. This interconnection is important to make explicit and tangible for students, if they are to help each other in assessment ecologies that do not simply promote one racial *habitus* over others.

In a crude way, then, Yagelski's explanation of the post-process theory of Kent says that any act of meaning-making, any languaging that we do, is connected not only to our audience but to the world we experience around us in the



act of writing or talking. This interconnectedness of all people and environments is also taught by the Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh. In *Peace Is Every Step*, Hanh (1991) explains the concept of “interbeing” as one centrally about interconnectedness. He asks his reader to consider the sheet of paper in front of him. If one looks deep enough, one can see the trees, a cloud, rain, and sunshine required to make the paper, but if one looks even deeper, one can see the logger who cut the tree and the wheat needed for his meals. In this material way, through the materials of writing, through a sheet of paper itself, Hanh sees everything connected. But he goes further:

Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. (1991, pp. 95-96)

Thus, for Hanh, like Kent and Yagelski, writing is an act that shows us just how interconnected we are, not just to each other but to the material environments we live in. Furthermore, in contrast to the Cartesian self in which mind and body are separate, Hanh sees one’s mind and body as connected in the material of the paper. Your mind and body are in this paper together. In order for anything or anyone to exist, everything and everyone else must also. So Lindsey’s *habitus* is just as much a part of Adam’s paper as Adam’s *habitus* is to hers.

Hanh’s example is particularly salient for my discussion of writing assessment ecologies. For Hanh, it is the materials, the paper, by which we can enact writing, connecting us to our environment and each other, including our minds. For Kent and Yagelski, it is larger, more abstract connections they are thinking of, yet ones with sensual, material, and phenomenological groundings. In fact, Yagelski draws heavily on Couture’s (1998) phenomenological rhetoric (Yagelski, pp. 114-115, 132-134), as well as Merleau-Ponty’s (2002). What Hanh offers us is a way to see how ecologies are more than environments, more than people, more than what and who is present at hand. And this more than quality of ecologies also inter-is with the quality of interconnectedness. Our writing assessment ecologies stretch out to other classrooms, places, people, activities,

labor, all beyond the immediate paper in our hands that needs to be read because everything and everyone inter-is.

Hanh also offers a way to see inter-being as more than an individual experience, and this is important to my conception of antiracist writing assessment ecologies since much of my thinking about writing assessment has little to do with the individual student working or acting alone. Writing assessment ecologies are a way to see writing assessment holistically, as a larger set of people, environments, relations, labor, and exchanges. Those with antiracist agendas need this social dimension since racism is structural—we seek to change the rule, rather than focus on individuals and exceptions. In *Being Peace* (1987), Hanh explains the *Sangha* which provides a good way to see classroom writing assessment ecologies as harmonious communities:

The Sangha is the community that lives in harmony and awareness. Sanghakaya is a new Sanskrit term. The Sangha needs a body also. When you are with your family and you practice smiling, breathing, recognizing the Buddha body in yourself and your children, then your family becomes a Sangha. If you have a bell in your home, the bell becomes part of your Sanghakaya, because the bell helps you to practice . . . . Many things help us practice. The air, for breathing. If you have a park or a river bank near your home, you are very fortunate because you can enjoy practicing walking meditation. You have to discover your Sanghakaya, inviting a friend to come and practice with you, have tea meditation, sit with you, join you for walking meditation. All those efforts are to establish your Sanghakaya at home. Practice is easier if you have a Sanghakaya. (1987, pp. 26-27)

There are three things to notice in this description of a Sangha, or an ecology of practice. First, similar to post-process ideas of writing as communicative exchange, the Sangha works best when more than one person is there practicing. It is social. I think it is safe to say that as humans we thrive emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally when we are together. Sangha as a community or family acknowledges this, but it does so because people are interconnected. The Sangha is a way to see this interconnectedness among people in a tangible way, in our daily practices. For example, according to Hanh, when we practice mindfulness with our family members, our family becomes an ecology, a Sangha who are interconnected. I believe, the same can be said for students and teacher in a writing course. We all have the experience of feeling differently about our students after we've gone through a semester in a course with them, after we've

sat in conferences with them, exchanged ideas in class with them, read their writing, responded to it, etc. And they too feel differently about each other, feel more connected to one another because they've been with each other in the Sangha-class, the Sangha-ecology.

Thus through assessment practices, the class can become a Sangha if explicitly identified as such and discussed. The benefit is not in the new label for a classroom community. The benefit is in the discussions of what it means to be a locally diverse community of interconnected people and practices. What does it mean to think and act upon the idea that one's colleagues inter-are with oneself, that their reading and writing practices, their reflections, their labors in and out of class inter-are with one's own practices and labors? Identifying and discussing the class and its practices as a Sangha allows for such discussions and reflections. It is not easy, and takes repeated efforts at reflection and discussion, but it helps students feel interconnected because they are.

The second thing to note in Hahn's description is the assumption of inter-being of people and their environments. The home, river bank, and park are all environments that harmonize with the practitioner, and through her practice, the inter-being of these environments with herself and family members becomes apparent. For instance, the bell one might use to signal the start of a mindful practice each day *is* because we *are*. The bell inter-is with the Sangha, and is a symbol of inter-being itself when used to initiate meditation together. The bell symbolically and literally harmonizes one's material environment with the group. Practitioners inter-are the ecology they create with the bell. Classrooms and other learning spaces form similar interconnected relationships with students and teachers through practices like freewriting and weekly group work. But again, students must pause and explicitly reflect and discuss this inter-being of their working environments.

Perhaps the best recent example of how a class might be a sangha is in Barry Kroll's (2013) discussion of his writing classroom, in which they take field trips to a nearby Japanese Zen garden and practice modified Aikido techniques that illustrate ways to argue respectfully with others. Kroll's classroom space not only is extended to other spaces, other environments, offering a wider net of interconnection with the natural world, but inside the classroom the typical activities of learning to write are expanded to include kinesthetic movements and examining the proximity of bodies. Students learn principles of argumentation by physically grappling (and avoiding conflict) with each other in non-violent ways. Kroll's interesting and wonderful class shows how writing and its assessment are labors that are interconnected with our bodies, those around us, and our environments. And when we pay attention to this interconnectedness, we can enhance the assessment of writing, the making of meaning, by understanding how we make value and

meaning in and through contexts, how our bodies and environments inter-are by feeling, moving, interacting through our differences in a number of ways.

Third, for Hanh the practice of Buddhism and the Sangha are both practices, rituals and things done each day. They are labor done together with others. We invite friends to join us in walking meditation. We have a family of others whom we engage with and see the Buddha body through. We mediate, practice breathing and smiling. We labor and notice our laboring. Throughout Hanh's description of the Sangha, the Sangha itself is synonymous with practices, acts, doing things, and noticing that one is doing them. Much like the OED's definition of ecology, through the doing of these practices, the Sangha is created and recreated. In antiracist writing assessment ecologies, "labor" can reference this doing of things (Inoue, 2014a), and I use it as a measure of expectations of the classroom, so that we avoid using a dominant discourse as the measure of "good writing," when it's really just one kind of good writing. Labor makes clear that we are speaking of verbs, of processes filled with action that all can agree upon and do. And in these ways, labor is an antiracist measure in classroom writing assessment ecologies. It is through labor and practices that ecologies change, that people interact and affect each other and their environments, so labor is useful to measure, even useful to determine grades because it (re)creates the sangha-ecology. And because one's labor inter-is with others' labors, all classroom labor is the material enactment of interconnectedness whether we see it as such or not.

Interconnection as a way to explicitly understand the relationship between and among people, their labors, drafts, practices, and environments is vital to a fully functioning antiracist writing assessment ecology. It offers students ways out of simply disagreeing, simply seeing difference, or "agreeing to disagree." Seeing difference is a good start, but ultimately, we must work together, help each other in writing classrooms and beyond. We must see how we all inter-are, how we can be a Sangha. Once we act in ways that acknowledge the fluid boundaries between ourselves and others, between our writing and others' judgments of it, we become fuller.

## **AS MARXIAN ECOLOGY**

Given interconnection, it might seem that antiracist writing assessment ecologies can be apolitical, even ahistorical. I don't mean that the people in them or even the environments in which those people interact can be read as apolitical (they too cannot). I mean the ecology as a set of structures itself, as a system itself, could appear to be apolitical, appear to have no politics of its own. This is not true. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies (all assessment ecologies, really) are political and historical by their natures. And these politics are important to

make clear to students and be clear for teachers because of the goals or purposes of antiracist writing assessment ecologies (i.e., to help students problematize their existential writing assessment situations). The politics of any writing assessment ecology will determine what is valued, how it gets valued, who benefits most, and the consequences or products of those benefits.

We know from experience that when people get together to judge and make decisions, particularly in classrooms, they do so through relations of power, relations that are a part of larger social structures that come from the mix of languages, genders, racial formations, class, age, ability, etc. in society. We just don't agree about everything, and when we disagree, those with more power in the system have a louder voice. The systems in and through which we make important judgments, such as grading and feedback systems—assessment systems—themselves are political and historical, which is to say they have a politics of their own. To understand the way the politics of antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies work, I find that Gramscian “historic bloc” and “hegemony” offer sufficient explanations that can be used by writing teachers. In part, this is due to the familiarity of Marxian critiques, even if cursorily understood by some.

Dobrin and Weisser explain ecomposition as a set of systems in the world. They explain that “humans occupy two spaces: a biosphere, consisting of the earth and its atmosphere, which supports our physical existence, and a semiosphere, consisting of discourse, which shapes our existence and allows us to make sense of it” (2002, p. 574). This binary of connected spheres in which humans inhabit explains a number of important things about environments: discourse's influence on material places, places' influence on discourse, and an accounting of both the material and the discursive. But it doesn't account very well for time, change, or how particular power arrangements maintain themselves, such as unequal racial formations inhabiting the ecology, or whose words get to describe the landscape or environment? Whose discourse shapes whose lived environments? It doesn't really explain, for instance, how a white racial *habitus* remains so universal, even in places where the teachers ascribe to critical and antiracist agendas, or where students are almost all of color, multilingual, or working class.

Gramsci and Marxian theories help explain the grounds by which we can understand the nature of ecological systems as political, material, and discursive ecologies that are inclined toward the hegemonic, or “determined” (in the Marxian sense, discussed below) to produce particular outcomes or products. Seeing antiracist writing assessment ecologies as Marxian systems can provide powerful ways to critique and change unfair and unequal power relations among racial formations in a writing course, and more consciously engage in antiracist agendas in the assessment of writing. It offers language for teachers and students to problem-pose, or problematize the existential writing assessment situations of

students. Thus an explicit Marxian analysis of the classroom's writing assessment ecology is important to discuss with students.

Perhaps the most overarching and important term to offer students is one that some may already know, hegemony. Antonio Gramsci, the early twentieth century Italian political philosopher and theorist, articulated a theory of political economy that used the terms "hegemony" and "historic bloc." The term "hegemony" likely comes from the Greek word *egemonia* or *egemon*, which means "leader, ruler, often in the sense of a state other than his own" (Williams, 1985, p. 144; as quoted in Mastroianni, 2012). As a concept, then, hegemony started with having the flavor of rule and leadership. Written while imprisoned during 1927 to 1935, Gramsci articulates hegemony in his prison notebooks, which were written in code to avoid being taken or destroyed by the prison censor. Gramsci describes the term as the multitude of economic, political, moral, and cultural relations of force that produce consent in society between dominated groups (for Gramsci the proletariat and their allies, the peasant classes) for the benefit of political leadership, or the dominant group (the bourgeoisie) (Williams, 1985, pp. 194-195, 200-201). Hegemony, then, is an historically based set of conflicts or clashes of interests among social groups and forces, a gaining and losing ground, all of which produce benefits primarily for a dominant group. Raymond Williams explains hegemony as

a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values —constitutive and constituting —which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. (1977, p. 110)

Thus hegemony in our lived experiences is both in our reconfirming practices and in how we understand, justify, and talk about those practices. Hegemony is a way to describe the constitutive set of practices, meanings, perceptions, and values that make up one's whole life, and a way simultaneously to describe the constituting aspects of one's whole life. In a much simplified way, hegemony explains the product and process of culture and ideology. It explains one half of the Freirean problem-posing strategy, the problematizing that is made concrete through examining structures such as discourses and *habitus*, which as Althusser (1971) tells us, is ideology that interpellates us as subjects.<sup>26</sup> The concept of hegemony theorizes the structural part of the problem posed about language, explaining the nature of dispositions and discourses and how they are constituted in larger social and economic spheres, and how those discourses and *habitus*, when deployed, create consent.

Williams adds that hegemony is also “a process ... a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific changing pressures and limits” (1977, p. 112). This means there is never one hegemony to understand, even in one concrete historic moment, which is the only real way to explore or investigate it. Instead, hegemony is always plural, always like Volosinov’s language, always in the historic act of becoming. Thus it is usually more accurate to speak of the hegemonic, rather than the hegemony. Furthermore, as Williams and others have pointed out, within any hegemonic moment, there is always the counter-hegemonic. Hegemony is always in the process of being reproduced, rearticulated, and revised.

In locally diverse classrooms, however, tensions in the assessment ecology (a product of its politics) often come from an uncritical use of a dominant discourse in judging and assessing student writing. Gramsci’s hegemony explains in slightly different terms why these tensions occur. Standardized assessments usually are racist and hegemonic because they are *standardized*, that is, because they use a tacit hegemonic white racial *habitus* as the standard for the test. By enforcing a standard, they measure and fit various shapes of pegs into a one-sized, square hole. Once we see writing assessment ecologies as participating in the (counter)hegemonic, we can see the ways writing assessments create desires and expectations in students and teachers, or change them, shape our perceptions of ourselves and others, or help us critique those perceptions, give us meanings that we live by, or help us see how those meanings are constructed, and constitute ourselves and our environments (interpellating us), or provide ways to reconstitute ourselves and environments. And we see that all these things are a product of a clash of political interests.

As I’ve mentioned already, there is nothing wrong with a white racial *habitus* in and of itself. What is wrong is that it has been used as a standard by which to place people in hierarchies since the beginning of education itself, at times suggesting people’s intelligence and ability, as well as determining their access to future opportunities. Antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies works against this hegemonic function of writing assessments by not using a standard to rank students, and instead uses labor to focus on the interconnection of various diverse *habitus* that help make critical meaning. Problem-posing as an enactment of interconnection helps students problematize their existential writing assessment situations in the hegemonic by interrogating the ways their texts reveal particular *habitus* and interpellating ideology. Furthermore, when hegemonic writing assessment interpellates students as individuals (as Yagelski claims), and not as interconnected, it reinforces politics and personal interests, constructing difference in hierarchical terms, not on lateral landscapes that inter-are. This is counterproductive to antiracist projects and critical ones that look to understand

difference on its own terms.

Keep in mind that antiracist writing assessment ecologies should have a strong ethics to them, but it comes from the entire ecology, not one node or person in it, not the teacher only. Thus, we cannot place our trust in the benevolence of teachers as the key element for an appropriate, effective, and fair writing assessment ecology? We cannot rely on our altruism to solve racism in our classroom writing assessment ecologies. Because if we trust in this paradigm, trust in focusing on teachers' ethics as a good way to design and enact antiracist writing assessment ecologies, then we have to believe that all writing teachers, regardless of their training, backgrounds, ethics, pedagogies, idiosyncrasies, politics, constraints, and contexts in which they teach, will do the right thing most of the time, or will know what to do. I don't think this has happened, nor can it. More important, no amount of good intentions can make up for a structurally racist society, institution, or writing assessment ecology.

Don't get me wrong. I strongly believe in writing teachers' need for strong and explicit ethics, and I believe most (if not all) writing teachers mean well. I believe that a good teacher is like Quintilian's ideal orator, the "good person speaking well." A strong ethical center is important for writing pedagogy and central to what we teach in writing classrooms. Freire, in fact, discusses ethics by saying that the foundation of any liberation or revolution is love, "a profound love for the world and for people," referencing Che Guevara's sentiment that revolution must be seen as "an act of love" by revolutionaries (1970, p. 89). But judging and grading writing have other requirements beyond love in order to be fair and equitable, for example, participation by those who are being judged, by those who have the most stake in the assessment ecology. And participation by those being liberated, by the way, is central to Freire's problem-posing method that leads to critical consciousness through enacting the counter-hegemonic. Even when we love others and wish them the best, we often do not know what that best thing is, nor how to achieve it. Most important, we (teachers) cannot achieve it for students. It is their revolution, not ours.

The above discussion doesn't explain well why such cooperative hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects and processes in an historic place and time, like Fresno State today, either changes things in one direction, keeps them the same, or simply rearticulates the status quo of social relations, practices, values, etc. This is important because I'm arguing that antiracist writing assessment ecologies are at some level counter-hegemonic. Dominic Mastroianni's explanation of Gramsci's hegemony as historically specific begins to help make sense of this question and of counter-hegemony's ability to change the ecology:

Gramsci's "hegemony" refers to a process of moral and intel-



lectual leadership through which dominated or subordinate classes of post-1870 industrial Western European nations consent to their own domination by ruling classes, as opposed to being simply forced or coerced into accepting inferior positions. It is important to note that, although Gramsci's prison writings typically avoid using Marxist terms such as "class," "bourgeoisie," and "proletariat" (because his work was read by a Fascist censor), Gramsci defines hegemony as a form of control exercised by a dominant class, in the Marxist sense of a group controlling the means of production. (2012)

So the hegemonic is the mechanisms of control of the means of production of something in a society's historic moment, and it is a process that moves students, teachers, parents, and administrators to consent to things in schools that benefit primarily a dominant group, somehow masking the contradictory outcomes of what they are consenting to. This is a bigger problem for multilingual, working class, and students of color. In a locally diverse writing classroom where the goal is the production of academic literacy practices in students, and where the teacher consciously engages in an antiracist project by asking students to read about racism, racial formations, and whiteness, and even encourages her students to use their own home languages, but still must grade based on a local SEAE and set of academic discursive conventions, say ones found in the popular first-year writing textbook, *They Say / I Say* (Graff & Berkenstein, 2014), it is difficult for the classroom writing assessment ecology to escape reproducing the hegemonic, since both the local SEAE and the textbook by Graff and Berkenstein are hegemonic, both are derived from a white racial *habitus*. The point is, you don't have to be thinking in racial terms for your writing assessment ecology to be racist or only promote a hegemonic, white racial *habitus*. This is the default in most (if not all) classrooms, schools, and disciplines. In fact, not thinking about racism and the hegemonic allows for such things to flourish, allows for consent to be unobstructed. Even in a classroom where the teacher has explicit antiracist readings and agendas, where students are encouraged to critique racism in society, the racism in the classroom's writing assessment ecology can still flourish if it is not addressed explicitly as an ecology with its own unique racial politics that are hegemonic, that move students and teachers to consent to a white racial *habitus* as the standard, and even to desire it.

How does one escape a racist classroom writing assessment ecology? First and foremost, students participation in grading and assessment in the entire ecology is vital. They must liberate themselves. They cannot be liberated.<sup>27</sup> So antiracist writing assessment ecologies are counter-hegemonic in this way, in giving the

means of grade production, assessment production, and the production of expectations, over to students, or mostly over to them. There are lots of ways to do this. I'll discuss a few in Chapter 4 (grading contracts) and 5 (a heuristic, and an example assessment activity).

Another key to seeing how the counter-hegemonic can work in antiracist writing assessment ecologies may be in Gramsci's notion of civil society. Mastroianni emphasizes that in order to understand the nature of Gramsci's historically situated hegemony, one needs to understand his concepts of state and civil society. But to understand these concepts, one must understand the Marxian concepts of base and superstructure, which define the structural relationships that create the (counter)hegemonic and the conditions for civil society. We can also see this classic Marxist dialectic (base and superstructure) as one overlay that helps us understand one set of relationships that guide the material and the discursive in an antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology.

Through analyses of the Russian and French revolutions,<sup>28</sup> Gramsci works from the traditional Marxist binary of an economic base (the material practices and economic relations) and theoretical/cultural superstructure (the theories, social relations, and articulations) that describes that base and springs from it, but he doesn't spend a lot of time on the economic. He's more interested in superstructure, in the ways consent is reproduced through structures of language, story, folklore, education, media, etc. He claims that domination in society (Western Europe) doesn't start with the economic base of practices of the proletariat, as traditional Marxism proposes; instead, our practices and theorizing are a dialectical, "interrelated and reciprocal" unity, which he terms an "historic bloc" (2000, p. 192-93).<sup>29</sup> This means that the superstructure is equally important to civil society's manufacturing of consent just as much as the state's military and economic structures are important to coercively regulating broad societal divisions and labor markets when structures of consent break down. Gramsci calls the ways that superstructure works itself out in society as "relations of force," and there are at least three, which correspond roughly to Marx's uses of superstructure in society (Gramsci, 2000, pp. 204-207).

Williams defines these three uses as a way to define Marxian superstructure, and I think also Gramscian superstructure. Williams explains that superstructure can be seen in three senses, as "institutions," "forms of consciousness," and "political and cultural practices" (1977, p. 77). Thus hegemony is stubborn and reproduced through a dialectic between base and superstructure, through the superstructures of educational and disciplinary institutions, classrooms and the like; through forms of consciousness that express a local SEAE and a set of white racial *habitus* as the dominant way by which intelligent and civil people communicate; and through political and cultural practices in schools and aca-

demia, in our textual discourses, our journals, department meetings, and ways we read and respond to our students' writing in classrooms and in programs that designate civil exchange. Thus the fight over and in the hegemonic is a complex network of ecologies in which people "fight it out" for control and power, for intellectual, material, and figurative territory over a number of terrains (through institutions, forms of consciousness, and practices). An antiracist classroom assessment ecology, then, is a kind of Marxian dialectic of a base that consists of the material environment(s) and forces that students and teacher enact and work in—all the things we do in a classroom and outside of it—and a superstructure, or a set of relations of force that explain and justify the classroom and its writing assessment practices, (e.g., the use of the local SEAE, the use of a textbook, and conventions privileged, the use of a portfolio, the discourses used to judge writing, a rubric used to explain expectations and evaluate writing, etc.). Antiracist writing assessment ecologies gives students control over the superstructure and by dialectical default also the base of activities and production, both of which help construct that ecology. When students control most of what is called assessment, then the grounds for the counter-hegemonic is fertile.

If base and superstructure are the engine of civil society and its political workings, then they can explain the way civil assessment is produced in a writing classroom. Gramsci explains that

"civil society" has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic "incursions" of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence [sic] which was still effective. (2000, p. 227)

Why is society's defense still effective, why is hegemony so stubborn? Why does the EPT still control the educational futures of students when we have DSP, or a somewhat critically aware WPA, or teachers who consciously do antiracist work in classrooms? Perhaps part of the answer is in the fact that the dialectic of base and superstructure in every classroom writing assessment ecology is hegemonic and most ecologies are not designed to be counter-hegemonic, not designed to see or criticize their own racial politics. This counter-hegemonic characteristic begins with who controls the assessment ecology.

Furthermore, in classroom assessment ecologies, there are many superstruc-

tural trenches behind the immediate ones we focus on. A white racial *habitus* is reinforced by other discourses of empiricism: objectivity; neutrality; hyperindividualism; unsentimental, detached discussion; and the pervasive assumption of a Cartesian *Cogito* in grading and assessing of writing. Behind those discourses are ones we see on TV and in popular media that depict intelligent and educated people who speak like Lindsey or as I do in this book. Behind our explanations of our judgments in our classroom writing assessment ecologies (one trench) are the explanations and justifications of the DSP (another trench), and behind that are those that explain Early Start, and behind that are those that explain the EPT, and it goes on. And all these trenches maintain to some degree, in various overlapping ways, the civil society of academia, the civil literacies we teach, the civil assessments we maintain.

Seeing a local SEAE or white racial *habitus* as *the standard* which classroom writing assessments must use doesn't simply come from the discipline of writing studies, from our journals, books, and conferences, or English departments' agreements in meetings and program review discussions, nor is it simply a matter of what our colleagues ask of us from other corners of the university and academy, nor is it just pressure from our local communities. It is all of these forces. The superstructural relations of force, the hegemony of racist writing assessment ecologies that promotes only one version of English, what Horner and Trimbur (2002) called a "unidirectional monolingualism" and Matsuda (2006) explained is associated with the "myth of linguistic homogeneity," *determine* the standard and its dominant discourse, and is reinforced by another trench, the local white racial *habitus*. The trenches of the hegemonic are numerous and overlapping civil writing assessment ecologies.

"Determination" is an important part of Marxian thought and helps explain base and superstructure's relation to consent in the hegemonic, and explains why most civil writing assessments are racist in writing classrooms. I've used the term above, but it demands a bit of explanation. Williams explains that the concept of determination comes from Marx's original use of the word *bestimmen*, which is translated in English as "determine." Williams points out that determine means "setting bounds" or "setting limits" (1977, p. 84); however, "in practice determination is never only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures," a complex process in real, historic circumstances, something Marxism's base and superstructure often lose when used as abstract categories (p. 87) divorced from real, concrete, historical moments in particular places. The point is that part of the way the hegemonic functions is through processes and practices, values and articulations that are determined in both senses of the word. They are determined in the sense of setting boundaries or limits on, say, choice in a DSP ecology (e.g., a student may choose the one- or two-semester option to meet the same

writing requirement at Fresno State), and determined in the sense of exerting pressure toward some end or outcome, such as the fact that there is no option to not take a writing course. There is pressure and obligation to fulfill the university's writing requirement. So while students do have a higher degree of agency through personal choice in a DSP ecology than they would in other placement ecologies, their choice is constrained and pressured. Students are free to choose their courses, but not free to *not* choose a course or to choose just *any* course.

The determination built into classroom writing assessments, particularly ones that produce grades on individual assignments, or that use a dominant discourse only as a standard, have these same two aspects to them. As teachers, we never simply ask students to write or read for us, or their peers, even when we give them choices on what they may write about or read. Their choices are constrained, and they are pressured to labor or face the negative consequences. The question an antiracist writing assessment ecology asks explicitly of teachers is: How clear and explicit are the constraints and pressures that determine student labor and the valuing of the products of those labors in the ecology? The clearer and more explicit determination is in an ecology, the fairer it can be.

As a concept, determination also explains the relationship that our labors and activities (base) and the discourses we use to explain, judge, and justify those labors and activities (superstructure) have to the (counter)hegemonic. It explains how everyone is complicit in the politics of the ecology. In fact, seeing, reflecting on, and discussing with students the ways the classroom's assessment ecology determines their desires and actions, their labor and expectations of writing, their judging of writing, can offer ways to think counter-hegemonically, and perhaps change the ecology toward antiracist ends. In this sense, seeing the way the assessment ecology determines student labor and desires provides a way to see the problematizing that is at the center of the assessment activities in the ecology.

But we have not yet talked about the base, the other half of the Marxian dialectic. If superstructure can be located in "institutions," "forms of consciousness," and "political and cultural practices," base, according to Williams, is "the real social existence of man," or the "real relations of production corresponding to a state of development of material productive forces," or the "mode of production at a particular stage of its development," or as Marx himself put it, "productive activities." Each of these ways of seeing the base in the Marxian dialectic is a bit different, but as Mastroianni, and Marx himself (as well as Engels), makes clear, base isn't a reference to an abstract category, rather it is a reference to a particular instance of material production in "a determined historical form" (Williams, 1977, p. 81). And so, base could be thought of as a particular instance of material production in a determined historic moment that is inextricable from the superstructure that dialectically creates and describes

it. Base, then, is the material activities that make up writing assessment in our classrooms. Superstructure is the language we use in our classrooms to explain, rationalize, and explore those activities, or the discourse of assessment. The base cannot be known for sure until a writing course begins, and its superstructure is unique to that course's material base of activities and labor. In short, base and superstructure in an antiracist writing assessment ecology are interconnected. The base of activities inter-is the superstructural ways we talk about those activities.

Base and superstructure offer students and teacher an analysis, a critical description, of the way the hegemonic reproduces itself in an antiracist writing assessment ecology, while also maintaining individual students', teachers', and administrators' agencies by incorporating the more nuanced notion of determine, which provides for choice, boundaries, and pressure. There is always choice in the system. It is just constrained choice. So all must participate in creating both the boundaries and the pressures. As Engels explains, "[w]e make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions" (Williams, 1977, p. 85). This insight, an insight that is the intersection between personal agency and structural constraints that determine one's agency, is what Freire's problem-posing pedagogy attempts to reveal in particular concrete, historical moments for his students. It is also the kind of problems I believe antiracist writing assessment ecologies should encourage students to pose to each other. How does our course, its activities, a student's labors that produce a text, the discourses around these activities and texts determine what ends up on the page, and determine what various readers judge on that page? Are there patterns in the classroom or in any given writing group that might be racial, or that may automatically benefit some and harm others?

Let us not forget that we cannot really know for sure the *habitus* of any given student or group of students, no matter how we group them. Racial *habitus*, like all other dimensions of people, are dynamic and changing. Much like Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory, Gramsci's theorizing is historical and local or specific in nature, accounting for particular dynamic, historical processes of social and economic maintenance and change in society. We can see this in his insistence that base and superstructure form an "historic bloc" (Gramsci, 2000, pp. 192, 197).

"Historic bloc" describes the ways in which societal and economic practices (base) both are created by and create the values, social relations, and theories (superstructure) we use to rationalize and explain our material and economic circumstances. Conversely, the term also describes the ways our theorizing and values (superstructure) are created by and create the material and economic (base) they explain and rationalize. Both elements reinforce one another dialectically, move and slowly change in history, and so are simultaneously socially generative

and explanatory. This is the Marxian dialectic of base and superstructure that hegemony describes as processes of determination. The dialectic explains why writing assessment ecologies are holistic in nature and more than their parts, since each part is consubstantial to all others—that is, they inter-are. It should be clear that the dialectic moves in both directions, so base is not simply the foundation, the constitutive, and the superstructure the practices and discourse below it that describe it. Both base and superstructure dialectically constitute and are constituting historical elements. Sometimes it is our explanations of things that instigate change or maintain the status quo, while at others, it is our practices and economic relations that move us to rethink, revise, rearticulate, or maintain how and why we do what we do. Thus because they are a dialectic, base and superstructure inter-are. And because they depend on each other to be in a writing assessment ecology, they inter-are. Gramsci's articulations reveal how even with good people and intentions classroom writing assessment ecologies often reproduce relations of force that arrange people in unequal and unfair ways, cultivate dominant interests, practices, and values, and engender consent by all through particular practices and discourses that justify and explain those practices, coercing some to act and speak in certain ways, and others to accept “failure” or exclusion from the academy.

## FEATURES AND PRIORITIES OF ANTIRACIST WRITING ASSESSMENT ECOLOGIES

What I hope I've shown in this chapter is that any antiracist writing assessment ecology is one that contains three important explicit features. The first feature is an attention to its holistic nature (it's sense of being more than the sum of its parts), an attention to critical production beyond itself, which gives the ecology a purpose of helping students problematize their existential writing assessment situations (see Appendix B for an assignment that asks student to problem pose explicitly). This makes labor students do, the reading, writing, and judging, most important. Labor is the engine for liberation or critical output. Second, the ecology explicitly reveals the interconnectedness of all aspects and elements in the ecology. The locally diverse people and their *habitus*, the environments involved, their feedback, and students' labors are all interconnected. They inter-are, making difference not a point of contention as much as a method of comparing and revealing critical insights, revealing how we language and judge language differently, yet paradoxically need one another to be.

Third, Gramsci's theorizing of hegemony and historic bloc offers a theory students and teachers can use to help explain the political nature of the ecology itself, of the way it determines particular practices, ideas, judgments, and *hab-*

*itus*, so that the counter-hegemonic might flourish. The Marxian dialectic also explains the holistic and interconnected nature of the relationships in ecologies. The language and theory around ecologies tend to avoid the politics inherent in our human and social world. When we avoid the political (power relations) we often avoid race and other social dimensions that embody power differentials because race is an identifier primarily of power differentials, especially in schools. The concept of ecology assumes that people and their environments always form relationships between and among each other, that an aspect of these relationships is one of inter-being, interconnectedness, but just because we are interconnected doesn't mean the nature of our connections to each other are equal, that we each share the same power in a given context of judgment, that how we speak or write is the same or exercises the same degree of power in social settings. Yet despite these uneven power relations, antiracist writing assessment ecologies strive to even power relations by focusing on labor and not quality (determined by comparisons to a single standard) to produce things like grades and expectations, and helping students problematize their writing assessment situations.

However, assuming inter-being in all people and environments is not the same thing as assuming that we are all alike. There is difference, local diversity, but how we understand it and judge it in writing can come from a sense of inter-being, a sense of one student's success or failure as participating in all students' success or failure, and for that matter, the teacher's success or failure in the ecology. We don't need one standard to make judgments on writing in learning contexts—in fact, it's antithetical to learning to write—nor do we need categories and hierarchies, such as grades, which many have already argued against. But let me be clear about it. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies understand the conventional graded classroom as deeply flawed because it needs a single standard by which to rank students and their performances, performances that by their nature are unrankable because they inter-are. Thus grading is racist.

And so, the best learning happens in diverse contexts, in diverse environments, filled with multiple ways of understanding, seeing, and being that are not judged or assessed against one standard of literacy, instead each writer explores the nature of judgment in his own discourse and the dominant one (i.e., a local white racial *habitus*) in order to problematize one's existential writing assessment situation. This makes the discourse of assessment and judgment, one akin to reflection, more important than the drafts we might be judging. Through this problematizing, students can come to an awareness of how they inter-are with others and their *habitus*.

Antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies imply that people (re)create places of settlement, places we wish to inhabit or make habitable, Sang-



has that involve mindful, habitual practices and other actions among groups of people. Enacting classroom writing assessment ecologies as a way to create a humane and inhabitable place for everyone is an antiracist project in intention, process, and outcome. Ecologies are activity systems as much as they are people, environments, and relationships. Thus all writing assessment ecologies imply that our first job when designing and enacting them is to make a place livable in ethical and humane ways for everyone.

Finally, I end with a summary of priorities that construct antiracist writing assessment ecologies for writing classrooms that I've developed through my discussion in this chapter. These are priorities that teachers and students can keep in mind as they design and enact their own ecologies. They provide the grounds by which activities, labors, and discussions can be created or interrogated for antiracist assessment agendas, and are in no particular order of importance.

- Ecologies by their natures are always political, so they should be explicit about the racial politics they promote.
- Places, especially in education, are associated with racial formations and other social groups, which may affect some students' abilities to do the work asked.
- The assessment ecology of the classroom can be discussed as a Sangha ecology in order to help students reflect upon the interconnectedness of themselves, the classroom, and their practices, making difference important to who they are and what they can do.
- Focusing on the amount or intensity of labor can offer fairer ways to respect all students' rights to their own languages, and avoid measuring students' writing against a single standard.
- Focusing on change and movement in student discourses, not comparisons to a single standard in grading or evaluating of student writing, even though students may wish to approximate a dominant discourse, can reduce racism in assessments.
- Ecologies constantly change and with them, students, teachers, and language practices change, thus ecologies can engage in a critical documenting of each student's "ceaseless flow of becoming" in their language practices.

There are also priorities that provide ecologies ways to help students problematize their writing assessment situations, the central activity in antiracist writing assessment ecologies. In Chapter 5, I offer a heuristic that helps teachers and students construct antiracist writing assessment ecologies, and in Appendix B, one assessment activity that does the problematizing I call for here. The following list is meant as a summary of the problematizing theme I've discussed in

this chapter.

- Students can discuss how problematizing one's existential writing assessment situation is about making the ecology sustainable, fair, and livable for all.
- Students can continually consider and work from the idea that words are action, language is action, and reflection is action, which makes language and the assessment of it both the means of cultural production (base) and the explaining of that production (superstructure) in assessment activities.
- Assessments and their discourses are more important than the drafts they assess, which means the assessment ecology focuses mostly on the production of the discourses of judgment and assessment.
- Assessment activities use the local diversity in the classroom as a way to create comparisons to a white racial *habitus*, asking students to consider the markers and dispositions in and underneath the texts they read and judge.
- Judgments and questions posed to writers compare *habitus* of students to the dominant white racial *habitus* of the school, discipline, or classroom, or to the *habitus* of readers, not as static entities or dispositions, but as evolving dispositions that change through interaction.
- Interconnection among locally diverse people and *habitus* in ecologies are made explicit and used toward problem-posing ends in the assessment activities—students must reflect upon their need for others who are different from themselves.
- Students need explicit Marxian language to help them understand the politics of the antiracist assessment ecology they participate in and to problematize their existential writing assessment situations; in particular, students can reflect upon the ways rubrics, assignments, or descriptive judgments of their drafts determine their expectations that may have uneven benefits among students in the classroom, or that determine their own desires for their writing or the writing of others.