

CODA

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I had never been a member of the writing assessment discourse community, really, despite some WPA positions. Writing assessment was more a subset for which I turn to those more expert than me, many (most?) of whom are here in *Considering Students, Teachers and Writing Assessment*. So as I read, a concern would come to mind, and then the concern would be addressed. Still, I find myself thinking about the word *fairness*. It is, of course, the right word, what we all want. But I can't help but see it as some American Platonic ideal, part of the trinity of philosophical liberalism: neutrality, equality, fairness. These are the terms that drive so much of what I read in *Considering Students, Teachers and Writing Assessment*—objective testing and guaranties of equity pursued in the search for fairness in an acknowledged not quite fair system (thinking of “system” in the broadest sense). Ideals are good. It's why we teach: seeking the ideal, working toward it, motivated by it. But I worry nevertheless in terms of racism and other forms of often subtle exclusion (the more blatant forms easily exposed and readily given to attempts at countering the overt bigotry). I worry because even the most academic resistance to Critical Race Theory has argued that CRT seeks to destroy the liberal ideals, argues that there is no neutrality, no equity, no fairness (see, for example, Pyle, 1999). The arguments are not quite false. Critical Legal Studies, the precursor to CRT, really was just that cynical, but CRT has been less so, still believes in the possibility of the ideal but seeks to be pragmatic along the way.

Now, I'm not suggesting that any of the articles in this collection would challenge the perceived tenets of CRT. But it seems to me monodirectional in the way these attempts at fairness are described (and I do mean “seems,” since, as I said, my understanding is limited to the pages of this collection). So to get at my really rather simple critique and consideration of *fairness* as almost assessment jargon, I think it's important to refresh our memories of what CRT is, especially given the current attacks on the term (the term more than the theory) as I write this. I can imagine some unfortunate teacher along the line being the subject of some 21st century Scopes Monkey Trial (maybe a Signifying Monkey Trial (thinking of Gates, 1988, with tongue in cheek).

As I write this, CRT has become a catch phrase for representations of racism, as well as other forms of exclusion: gender, gender identity, sexuality, class. But I focus on racism because, even as I realize the real differences among these other

Otherings and recognize that racism extends beyond Black and Latinx, I still find Mike Davis's assertion compelling, in general, that

no matter how important feminist consciousness must be . . . , racism remains the divisive issue within class and gender [and sexual orientation]. . . . [T]he real weak link in the domestic base of American imperialism is a Black and Hispanic working class, fifty million strong. This is the nation within a nation, society within a society, that alone possesses the numerical and positional strength to undermine the American empire from within. (cited in Villanueva, 1999)

In the words of Peruvian sociologist and decolonial theorist Aníbal Quijano:

The idea of "race" is surely the most efficient instrument of social domination produced in the last 500 years. Dating from the very beginning of the formation of the Americas and of capitalism (at the turn of the 16th century), in the ensuing centuries it was imposed on the population of the whole planet as an aspect of European colonial domination. (2007, p. 45)

In so saying, Quijano is echoing two of the basic tenets of CRT: (1) that race is a creation, a social construction, as we have become accustomed to saying (and that includes "colorism" the degree to which folks of the same "race" or ethnicity (a troubling word, since it's a euphemism for racism) will frown upon the darker of "their own kind"); and (2)—especially (2)—that it is pervasive, that one cannot escape race or its manifestations as racism. None of us can escape racism; none of us can truly rise above. There is the ideal of neutrality but not its true realization. That's part of what bothers folks like Pyle, above.

Another assertion that arises from CRT is the concept on "interest conversion." In the article by Derrick Bell (1980) that introduced the concept, he argued that racial "progress" tends to be in the interest of power, particularly America's image globally. Now, that is truly cynical. It was an argument that was dismissed in its time. And now, in some sense, the argument is even less important, since if Quijano is right, no country is free from its own forms of bigotry. But I would argue that in America interest conversion is a necessary aspect of maintaining the overall status quo. Or maybe, to say it better, interest conversion allows for the belief in "progress," rhetorician Richard Weaver's "god term" (1985, p.212). We can argue that we are post-racial because we have elected a Black president, a Black vice president, have greater numbers of middle class of color, etc. There has been progress. Yet we know that Obama and Harris have had to contend with racism, that a successful person of color knows that there will be those who believe the person

is a token, a product of “reverse racism,” some version of the tired affirmative-action argument that continues to plague higher education admissions. The system works, say the anti-CRT. The progress is clear. And each case of a George Floyd or the shooting of an Asian shop, or gatherings of white supremacist groups are anomalies. The system works so well, that introducing something called “CRT” in schools, introducing explicit references to racism and other forms of bigotry are divisive, introduce the bigotries—as if textbooks have anything to do with how children come to know of racism and other Otherings.

So, you say, I’m preaching to the choir; we all know that racism still pervades, sometimes as microaggressions, those unintentional slips (like the compliment I received long ago that the speaker didn’t see me as a person of color) that reflect a bias, or the macroaggressions like the current anti-“CRT” movement, which is itself overtly racist, since it’s founded on nothing more theoretical than The Three Wise Monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. The present indication of the “real” CRT that has gained substantial presence in rhetoric and composition is “the voice of color” and “legal storytelling” wonderfully introduced by Aja Martinez (2020) in *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. But there’s a tenet at play here, the voice of color, that I missed in the discussions of writing assessment in this collection, in terms of fairness. It’s a consideration for the future, I would say.

BY WAY OF AN EXPLANATION.

I was for a time the director of the university writing program at Washington State University, whose portfolio system has received some attention in *Considering Students, Teachers and Writing Assessment*. Among the readers, the evaluators, were bilingual teachers, not just Spanish-English but Mexican Spanish to English and Puerto Rican Spanish to English, a true polyglot (Greek, Bulgarian, Italian, Russian, English), Asian Americans, an Iranian American, and first-generation graduate students, among others—all of whom were current teachers who included writing in their teaching, though they came from across the disciplines (Foreign Languages, Sociology, Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, Political Science, Architecture, etc.). Imagine the conversations, the discussions about the students’ writings, based not only on theory but on experience—the evaluators’ experiences, discussions that would include editing/grammatical matters, no doubt, though also including, for example, how Slavic languages do not use the article (with the exception of Macedonia and Bulgaria, the polyglot would note); that not using the article is not unique to the Asians. Or imagine the discussions of rhetorical effectiveness rather than some monolithic perception of “logic.” These are conversations I’ve heard among the readers. Now, this is a system that had been put

in place long before I took over, so though I'm boasting, it's an institutional more than a personal boast. Nor can I claim that the demographics of the reviewers/readers were unique to the WSU program. In fact, I have to assume that many of the designers, psychometricians, evaluators, and the like discussed in the previous pages also came from a broad spectrum of America and the world. But it's only an optimistic assumption. Nothing was said along those lines that I recall in reading the manuscript. That would be a move forward, I'd say.

You see, one of the arguments of Critical Legal Studies that carried over to Critical Race Theory (though softened somewhat) is that political liberalism had a basic flaw, and that is that the neutrality in neutrality, equity, and fairness necessarily operates from a kind of color blindness, a false objectivity (even as we know there is no such thing as "objective language use") that all are created equal, that at bottom we're all the same—which is true biologically, the "race" writ large—so that injustices must be truly visible, like the shooting of George Floyd, the separation of families at the U.S. southern border, and the like. But if racism is woven into the pattern of society like Quijano or the Critical Race Theorists argue, then there are inherent differences, even if socially constructed. The power of counterstory is making the unknown visible to those who cannot know, though that too often puts the burden on the less powerful to teach the more powerful. In terms of writing assessment, the aim tends to be a universal even while recognizing differences. But who is creating these instruments? What is the basis of their knowledge of those not having been treated fairly, equitably, the ones subject to neutrality in an inherently biased set of situations? There are inherent and surely unrecognized biases at play if the designers do not include those who have done any walking in the Othered's shoes.

At the very least, we need to know more about the designers, the good people seeking greater fairness. Who are they? What do they know of the Others and how do they know? Moving forward, I'd make the case for a dialectic of fairness, not just for the students but from the evaluators.

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