

CODA.

ASSESSING ENGLISH SO THAT PEOPLE STOP KILLING EACH OTHER

“Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?”
Ihab Hassan asked my group of teaching assistants in 1968. We are still
trying to come up with an answer.

—O’Reilley, “Exterminate,” p. 143

I close this book with Mary Rose O’Reilley’s invocation of Ihab Hassan’s question for several reasons. The short 1989 article in which O’Reilley offers the above is a kind of rumination on her teaching life to that point, which began in the 1960s. She asks, “how did I get here,” and invokes Jerry Farber’s infamous article and book, *The Student as Nigger*, which I open with in Chapter 1. So in one sense, O’Reilley brings me full circle back to Farber and problematizing grades in the writing classroom. The question above is prompted by a growing cynicism in her own teaching, and a sense that “young people in the profession know rather little about the history of what, to some of us in mid-career, is still ‘the new pedagogy’” (“Exterminate” 143). The new pedagogy she speaks of is loosely the student-centered classroom and discussions of power relations in the classroom, pedagogies that look to give up power, pedagogies that agree with many of labor-based grading contracts’ basic assumptions.

As I’m sure you’ve figured out by now, labor-based grading contracts can offer students in writing classrooms the chance not just to redirect the way power moves in the classroom, but to critique power, and that begins by making obvious how power usually moves and who controls it. Labor-based grading contracts show us that in writing classrooms, power can move, not through standards and teacher’s judgments of student writing—although teachers still judge writing—but through students’ own labors. While they de-emphasize a dominant, White, academic, discursive standard, they may make learning such a standard easier for many students if writing with less anxiety and the ability to take more risks in writing is linked to such learning. But mostly, I promote labor-based grading contracts because they can encourage assessment ecologies that value multiple Discourses and allow students to maintain their right to their own Discourses in the English writing classroom. I promote them because they make learning a dominant White racial Discourse problematic (in the Freirean sense), offering conditions in the

classroom that allow diverse *habitus* and judgments to sit side by side in tension, allowing students to question and critique that dominant Discourse while paradoxically having the choice to learn it or something else. I promote them because they work against White language supremacy by offering conditions for counter hegemonic discussions about language and judgment, and allow for alternative ways of languaging that provide students with flexible, rhetorical practices that can help them in their futures. Ultimately, I promote them because they create sustainable and liveable conditions for locally diverse students and teachers to do antiracist, anti-White supremacist, and other social justice language work, conditions that are much harder to have when writing is graded on so-called quality or by some single standard, and when students' labors are not fully recognized and valued. These conditions, conditions that I believe are fairer for raciolinguistically diverse students, open the writing classroom to ask similar questions that Hassan and O'Reilly do. And they start with standards controlled by teachers.

Do standards in English writing classrooms kill people? Hmm. Maybe a better question is this: In a world of police brutality against Black and Brown people in the US, of border walls and regressive and harmful immigration policies, of increasing violence against Muslims, of women losing their rights to the control their own bodies, of overt White supremacy, of mass shootings in schools, of blatant refusals to be compassionate to the hundreds of thousands of refugees around the world, where do we really think this violence, discord, and killing starts? What is the nature of the ecologies in which some people find it necessary to oppress or kill others who are different from them, who think or speak or worship differently than them? All of these decisions are made by judging others by our own standards, and inevitably finding others wanting, deficient. People who judge in these ways lack practices of problematizing their own existential situations. They lack an ability to sit uneasily with paradox.

I don't mean to suggest that there are not some cases where a person is simply mentally ill or an anomaly, the exceptions to the norm. I'm saying there are far fewer of those cases than we may think. If literacies are bound up not just with communication but with our identities and the social formations that people find affinity with, if literacy is bound up with how we understand and make our worlds, then a world with literacy classrooms that use singular standards to determine progress and grades of locally diverse students, a world that holds every student in the classroom to the same standard regardless of who they are or where they came from or what they hope for in their lives, is a world that tacitly provides and validates the logics of White supremacy. It is a world that promotes White language supremacy. It is a world that validates the use of a dominant *habitus* to make similar kinds of judgments of people elsewhere outside of school.

Our students learn how to judge their world by the practices of judgment they experience as they move through their worlds. Experiencing standards over and over in classrooms validates by repetition the practice. If standards are always applied and people are ranked based on them, if people are denied things because of them in dispassionate ways through the first twelve or sixteen years of one's life—the crucial literacy learning years—then I think it is easier to justify judging everyone, no matter the subject or decision, circumstance or situation, by a single standard, unproblematically, and those judgments lead, if one pushes the logic far enough, to killing.

So, how do we teach English so people stop killing each other? Perhaps, we might ask, how do we judge language so that people stop killing each other? That, I think, is the real question. This is the exact problem that I argue labor-based grading contracts explicitly addresses in writing classrooms, the problem of grading locally diverse students, the paradox of teachers who are by necessity steeped in a White racial *habitus* while many of their students are not, the problem of how to help students and teacher confront and discuss bravely the racialized politics of language and its judgment. Yes, if we can confront such paradoxes in the judgment of language, in the judgments of *habitus* through our *habitus*, then maybe some of the killing may stop.

O'Reilly concludes her article: "The point is, you can't just put your chairs in a circle and forget about the human condition" (146). I wish I could say that this good conclusion was on my mind over most of the last fifteen years as I developed my version of contracts, but it wasn't. It has only been in the last five or six years that I've understood how important it is to account for the human condition, that is, the material conditions, the embodied conditions of learning in various, diverse bodies who inhabit different places in our larger community. This human condition is implicated in any writing classroom where a group of locally diverse (or homogenous) students come together to read, write, and engage. And what is more critical to the human condition, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, than labor, work, action. No matter how one wishes to define these terms, they reference people toiling, exerting, struggling, trying, suffering, succeeding, and failing. They reference making and historicizing, building for others, not just for ourselves. Laboring, which may be a good synonym for suffering in the writing classroom, is quintessentially the human condition.

Ten years after O'Reilly wrote the above article, she revisited her teaching in *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. In its opening chapter, she says, "I would like to ask what spaces we can create in the classroom that will allow students freedom to nourish an inner life" (3). What she means by an inner life are contemplative practices that might offer students learning and something else, something human, perhaps something that acknowledges their

unique human conditions. What she offers in the book are beautiful ruminations and contemplative practices from her classroom, deep listening, paying attention, being still enough to notice, standing in radical presence. Here's how O'Reilley describes the practices of deep listening from her classroom:

it deals with the whole rather than with the parts: it attends not to the momentary faltering but to the long path of the soul, not to the stammer, but to the poem being born. It completes the clumsy gesture in an arc of grace. One can, I think, *listen someone into existence*, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish. (21)

What strikes me about O'Reilley's contemplative pedagogy is its compassion and its potential for growing the patience in teachers that is needed when we confront students who are different from us, who do not look, or sound, or come from the same places as we do, or want the same kinds of things for themselves as we do. Her pedagogy is one that asks us to listen deeply to our students, cultivating enough grace to allow for their seemingly clumsy gestures, their momentary faltering in words, so that their poems, or papers, or new selves, can be born. Labor-based grading contracts offer conditions, for such compassionate pedagogies to work, pedagogies that can, I think, listen many students into existence. Or rather, labor-based ecologies, ones fundamentally focused on the three dimensions of laboring, ones that do not use a dominant White standard of language to rank students, provide an encouraging and compassionate place for us to *attend* to our students, for students to *attend* to each other and themselves. Attending is more than an auditory metaphor. It is more fully embodied and compassionate. It includes a vital part of what I hear O'Reilley asking us to consider in our pedagogies: the material conditions of learning, living, languaging, and laboring. Attending includes the bodily, which is also about presence—being present for ourselves and others. It is about paying attention to this still moment, acknowledging the emotional and intellectual dimensions of it, and about beholding that which is becoming in front of us all the time. I believe, labor-based grading contracts help cultivate assessment ecologies in which students have more ability and more opportunity to be radically present, to be here in this moment, the only moment any of us have, and just practice.

In 1997, Fred McFeely Rogers, the acclaimed host and originator of “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood,”⁶⁴ the public television show for children, receive a life-

64 *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* first aired in 1968 and recorded its final shows in 2000. By the time, Mr. Rogers had finished, he had been awarded four Emmys and forty honorary degrees and had recorded 896 episodes of his TV show (“Fred Rogers”).

time achievement award at that year's Daytime Emmys. In his now famous and short acceptance speech, he asked the audience for a favor: "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are. Ten seconds of silence." I cannot think of a more compassionate way to articulate the way each of us becomes who we are today and who we will be tomorrow. But to see it, to see the loving into being, requires what Mr. Rogers asks of us, what O'Reilley asks, that we attend others into being, that attending is an act of love as much as it is of grace, and loving helps others become. As I reflected in Chapter 1, we are all *becoming*, in all the ways that that word can mean. I was loved into being because I was becoming. I was a beautiful brown boy, a becoming brown boy in a dark world of White supremacy and racism with just enough people around me to attend me into being, and it is my obligation to return that attending and loving, first to those who loved me into being, then to others who are not me, my students and colleagues, all of whom are becoming themselves. Is there anything more important? Is there a better answer to Hassan's and O'Reilley's question?

While I realize that some of our students, perhaps even some of us teachers, may not characterize our childhoods as places in which people around us loved us into being, but maybe we might imagine a classroom in which this could be true. A present and future that is becoming. We might think of the assessment ecologies we cultivated with our students as places that invite us, urge us, move us to love our students and their writing labors into being, to attend to them without ranking.

To attend to others into existence, to act in compassionate ways, and to be radically present are the same practices. They are labors of loving and learning, of living and growing. To love is to attend, to deeply listen to another who is not like us, to be present for them, and to do so on their terms, not to change them into our image of middle-class Whiteness, or some other *habitus*, but to simply do so because they, like us, are becoming. Love-attending is a practice of radical presence. It is not easy. But our students are here. We are here. It is now. We have no other moment but now. Really attending deeply means sitting with another in their relative suffering, being compassionate, without conditions, like our mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, our brothers and sisters often do, or did, or could have in a more perfect world.

In a recent FYW course, the second in our stretch sequence, one of my students offered a description of his past literacy experiences, hinting at what our class' labor-based grading contract gave me. He is African American, with parents from Africa, but he was raised in the US. I leave his "stammers" and "clumsy gestures" to urge you to attend deeply right now, right here.

My experience in the past with literacy hasn't been positive; when I was as young as I can remember when it came to writing or reading I just wouldn't do it, I didn't like it. Like in elementary school, reading especially was always rewarded. During those schooling days logging our reading for the school week was a requirement; however, if we read long enough or read a challenging book we'd earn points and could trade them in for candies, toys and electronics. But I soon compared myself to other people because of the expensive things they got from their points, which in turn I saw as them being extremely proficient at reading. So what I did was take a bunch of challenging books that were above my level and stressed myself meaninglessly over them and putting myself down because no matter what I tried, I couldn't read at the level of my peers. It all just became some silly game to me. My younger self was thinking "I only play games that I like so I'm just not gonna go a deal with that", and for the longest time that's what I've seen it as, something that I just don't want to partake in. So I gave up. Gave up on trying to be like everyone else, and until recently only ever saw reading as a chore. This goes the same for writing too. Whenever I had to do it, it was just boring. Was always told to close read the literature, look for devices and methods in the writing. You don't know how many times from a teacher I've heard "look for the literary devices the author uses to convey their purpose". Sure it was a of learning about literature, but I thought it was a superficial way of learning; could never apply what was taught towards my own endeavors because I felt what was taught was so shallow.

Now, it isn't so bad thanks to this class when I started it in the winter quarter, it got me used to reading and writing, especially writing.

When I sit in the presence of my student's words, when I try to listen deeply, when I stop placing any of my expectations on him for this writing, I don't have to ask or urge him to find more meaning than the final sentence, than the simple fact that our labor-based grading contract ecology "got me used to reading and writing." That is something, given his past experiences. He is becoming right in front of me, and I'm lucky enough to witness it.

But this doesn't mean I cannot dialogue with him, ask more questions, and

do so in an environment that rewards this extra labor. I can model a way to compassionately attend him into being, and he might return that attending to me or his peers. But he will surely see an alternative to the standards-driven, White language supremacist classroom that I'm arguing does so much harm in and out of school. He will get chances to problematize the judgments of language and consider the ways our *habitus* function in systems of judgment like those in schools, like White supremacist ones in the larger society. Such an ecology, such a writing classroom, assesses writing so that people might stop killing each other by seeing difference not as a threat or as wrong but as another becoming. Yes, I have flimsy evidence for such a claim, but if I'm going to have faith in anything that will stop the killing, and violence, and discord in the world, I'd like it to be our loving and compassionate attending to each other.