

Chapter 8. Gaming the System: Assessing Basic Writing with Black Male Student-Athletes

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The scenes featured below arise from memories, with all dialogue reconstructed of rubbled lived experiences. Dear reader, please understand them in a “language of beholding,” as Black feminist theorist Christina Sharpe (2016) asks in waking afterlives of transatlantic slavery, that ongoing hold: “How are we beholden to and beholders of each other in ways that change across time and place and space and yet remain?” (p. 101).

Some stroll in, hoodie completely over face, mumbling a greeting I cannot hear. Some enter the physical classroom in groups, mid-conversation, as though our shared space were an old space where they’d always been. Momentarily a spectator, I learn about whose ankle musta been torn up juking who else’s sorry attempt at a tackle. Some greet me enthusiastically, even shake my hand, making whatever name they’ll call me: “Mr. Lou,” “Mr. Maraj,” “Professor,” “Dr. Lou,” or my favorite, “Mr. Teach.” In my emails with administration, they’re known as “the guys,” and the guys will all share individuated experiences with writing on a spectrum including experiences as the lone translator for their immigrant African family, to accounts of private tutoring in English, to admissions of never really caring about school—and not really caring about this class, too—with their minds on the National Football League (NFL). On Zoom, they learn to clown me by not turning on cameras and saying “ayo what’s up Mr. Maraj” and having me guess who exactly I should respond to. When I guess wrong, they say I’m messed up because they don’t sound alike. They are my students, many of them Black male student-athletes—football players—in Workshop in Composition, who sometimes follow me to Seminar in Composition, and then elsewhere in the historically White university of an Eastern-US city. Yet “the guys” represent more than a monolith, some fresh out of predominantly White private high schools, some from the rural US South, some highly-recruited prospects from the same Eastern U.S. state. Most of them know of Trinidad and Tobago, where I’m from, tangentially, with the “ain’t that where Nicki Minaj from?”

Sometimes they talk over me, whether I’m at the front of the room, whether across their different Zoom screens at each other, or by Zoom-bombing their teammates to interject their own flow into a particular day’s discussion. But, for the most part, they let me do my thing, and one of the guys will be the talker, the question-asker, the one building rapport with me that pays off when I get

the late-in-the-semester email about if we “all good” for him to submit his paper later cuz you know how “fighting demons” be. I know, as a Black im/migrant in the US, the importance of names, of individuation from cultural stereotypes, so I learn the name of each of these Black men, sometimes more than one name per person, understanding that “Big Mike” is not the same as Michael, for instance. As an international undergraduate student, I fought hard to ensure that others said my name, Louis, with the silent French “s” pronunciation I grew up with, until one White woman psychology professor told me (in front of everyone) even that was “wrong”; so, I moved on as “Lou,” far easier for Americans to deal with. I learn their stories too—of their names, about whose locked-up cousin motivates whom, about whose single mother took them to practices amid evictions and hunger, about who got dozens of offers from big-name athletic programs and Ivy-league schools. But “the guys” somehow manifest as a collective in missives about late work, about catching up during finals week, about scheduling my class for the upcoming semester since they really enjoy taking my classes because I connect with “them” in ways others do not. A fraught tension between the group identity and the individual characters of these young men ebbs and flows throughout my times with them, but especially in the Workshop course. It’s always messy in Workshop where assessment seems prefigured.

Workshop, as it turns out, equates to “basic” or “Basic Writing:” a seemingly taboo term for a while now—as some argue tensions around those labeled “basic writers” have been in circulation as long as the field of composition has (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010), with particular contentions with the entire enterprise dating back to the 1990s (Shor, 1997). The remedial connotations and praxis around the title “basic” and such courses’ racialized dimensions acting as an institutional barrier for Black and Brown students (Poe et al., 2014; Hodara & Jaggars, 2014; Poe et al., 2019; Nastal, 2019) have warranted a shift in how institutions name these courses, yet in some cases their operation bears out their traditional dynamics. Recent moves to do away with or replace remedial writing structures altogether have introduced arrangements designed to rapidly move students through composition requirements (Glau, 2007; Rigolino & Freel, 2007; Adams et al., 2009;). In light of these changes, Rachel Ihara (2020) questions whether “by unsettling the boundary between ‘remedial’ and ‘regular’ college writers, mainstreaming programs ultimately challenge us to rethink the goals of college writing writ large,” as these initiatives’ consequences might inadvertently make First-Year Writing into Basic Writing and/or “underscore equity issues that have troubled basic writing from the beginning” (p. 86). And, of course, the utility of both courses remains under consistent question by universities who fuel our work’s precarity by exploiting a vast number of our adjunct colleagues as contingent labor (Kynard, 2022).

Within this larger backdrop and in these specific parts, a particular history cultures this “Workshop.” This history brought the fields of rhetoric and writing studies Dave Bartholomae’s (1986) famous “Inventing the University” and its

arguments that estimations of academic discourse in such spaces “invent” the university through writing. This essay, then, sets out not to categorically or structurally challenge that “university” invented as such—the settler-colonial, racist, neoliberal machine using students and their writing as its raw material for formulating itself a function of that machine—but to find ephemerally fugitive means within its oppressive spaces for Black meaning-making. It demonstrates how those opportunities for rhetorical agency might be offered to those racially objectified for the university’s profit. And it undertakes this endeavor in the face of traditional assessment’s use as a mechanism for gatekeeping and surveillance in “basic” writing classrooms. What I’m tryna say is, while, for Bartholomae, students invent academic discourses through their approximations, this study demonstrates how disturbing the uses of institutional mechanisms culturing those approximations might shift relationships with assessment. These different relationships make the assessment model raw material for fugitive purposes in contrast to Bartholomae’s understanding of student writing as raw material for hegemonic means (the invention of so-called “academic” discourse and the university writ large).

My chapter responds to scholarship on the fallout of various writing assessments on students of color (White & Thomas, 1981; Sternglass, 1997; Fox, 1999; Inoue, 2015, 2019; Inoue & Poe, 2012), particularly continuing a line of inquiring into the racial politics of “remediation” in “remedial” writing classes and assessment by Mary Soliday (2002). Building on Black feminist thought (Lorde, 1984; McKittrick, 2014; Sharpe, 2016) and my previous work on the notion of *rhetorical reclamation* (Maraj, 2020a), this study lays bare what Katherine McKittrick (2014) calls the “mathematics of the unliving”—that, I emphasize, constitutes the racialized roles of Black male student-athletes at historically White universities—to undercut a traditional assessment model by *gaming the system* of writing assessment.

In what follows, I unpack the critical framework for this argument by demonstrating how “assessment”—particularly quantitative assessment—and sport stats work hand in hand in historically White universities to force Black being into a value system animating transatlantic slavery logics. These logics then map on to Black male bodies in developing writing classes in ways congruent with how White academic spaces overall culture them. Next, I offer micro-contexts for the particular intervention my Workshop course seeks and the Black feminist framework therein. This essay then outlines and analyzes the assessment practices involved in gaming the system as a means to steal back from the historically White university for Black rhetorical agency through a motivational tactic working insidiously beside a traditional assessment model. Playing with (as in toying) traditional assessment models allows brief glimpses at students’ meaning-making agency different from playing for those models. And, yes, that does involve mobilizing the oppressive systems that govern gameplay, but for different purposes. These fugitive purposes seek to misappropriate these systems’ logics to enter into a kind of “undercommons” of the university, as philosophers Stephano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) call them.

The Sum of Our Parts: Mathematically Assessing Blackness

In order to grasp the contexts for how (classroom) assessment extends antiBlack thought and logics, we might gloss the ways U.S. media and audiences historically view Black athletes. For decades, conservative media commentators and White sport fans have deployed the mantra “shut up and play” whenever activism enters a sporting arena or its adjacent spaces, especially when Black athletes articulate that activism. Famous examples range the experiences of Muhammad Ali, John Carlos, Tommie Smith, LeBron James, and Colin Kaepernick. But these (racist) White folks find ways to critique athletes’ bodies and playing styles without them sending “overtly” political messages too—think quickly of Serena Williams’ trials with tennis officials and the policing of her Black woman’s body by them, fellow players, and tennis fans. As visual studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood highlights, “From very early in the [Williams] sisters’ careers, journalists and critics made comments about their clothing and hairstyles (especially the signature braids and beads of their teenage years) as much as on their aggressive playing style” (2015, p. 99). The Black body and Blackness, thus, always already function politically and remain heavily policed in the making of Whiteness. A functioning logic behind this racism as well as behind the idea that athletes should entertain and should not “campaign” politically derives from understanding the Black body as object, as commodity, as for mere consumption rather than agential existence.

In the final chapter of Fleetwood’s (2015) *On Racial Icons*, the Black feminist excavates how Black athletes become iconized and consumed, highlighting their objectification. The drafting, trading, and valuation of Black athletes by sport industries, along with fetishization of them by sports commentators, represent only some ways in which this objectification has become “routine public discourse” (p. 81). Together with gendered and sexualized dimensions of such discourse and their racialized qualitative assessments—how commonplace it might be to hear “he’s a beast!” and “what a stud” in a sports bar—especially in professional football (Oates, 2007), the use of mathematical assessment in determining and selling Black male value pervades public rhetoric in statistical sports analysis.

In an earlier article on the antiBlack workings of American (fantasy) football, I highlight how statistics-based digital fantasy sport games animate the aftermaths of transatlantic slavery (Maraj, 2020b). When mostly White male audiences use number-crunching for pleasure or money-making (through sports betting) through these games, they assess a real-life Black man’s value based on their on-field yardage and scoring outputs. Assessments of Black men that saturate U.S. culture, particularly quantitative assessment of them, renders them as disposable objects for the pleasure of, and investment in, Whiteness and hyper-capitalism.

These kinds of objectifying assessments, which cannot be divorced from the White racial habitus of our classroom spaces (Inoue, 2015), take us into what Sharpe (2016) calls the “wake,” the afterlives of transatlantic slavery that curtail Black diasporic being. As I illustrate through my analysis of fantasy football’s use

of slave-trade logics, the tabulation of Black male value in these ways re/minds us of stocktaking ledgers/documents of the plantation, the slave port, and the slave auction block where Black bodies were listed alongside livestock and machinery with their cost assessed as objects (Maraj, 2020b). In reckoning with ways to move beyond this math, McKittrick (2014) emphasizes that “this is where we begin, this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the *mathematics of the unliving*” (p. 17, emphasis added). And for the Black student-athlete, because of the “farm system” nature of collegiate athletics in the US, the math of it all represents a calculated risk. While professional athletes might get their bag by breaking their body to accumulate numeric value(s) for potentially millions of dollars, the Black student-athletes in my Workshop classes invest in the gamble of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) industry—they take their chances at practice and on the field for years as commodity-objects without financial reward. And let’s not pretend that only the NCAA gains; universities gain substantially from student-athletes as commodities—the game tickets, the merchandise, and even the marketing “brand” of these institutions that they sell to potential student and parent fans.

But these are not the only ways that the collegiate athletic system engage the afterlives of transatlantic slavery and the US racial caste system. As Alvin Logan et al. (2015) show, the restrictions and parameters of a student-athlete’s movement from school to school bear similarities to the plantation model. Victoria L. Jackson (2018), a former Division 1 track and field athlete, compares college sports to Jim Crow logics, explaining that “non-revenue” athletes “runners, tennis players, golfers, gymnasts, swimmers—can both play *and* study” as they participate in mostly historically White sports while “the professionalism required of big-time college football and basketball athletes leaves no time for the “student” part of the student-athlete equation.” The capitalist “use”—for lack of a better word—of these mostly Black student athletes by these institutions creates a particular culture around Blackness and specifically Black masculinity on historically White campuses: one that values Black bodies as more squarely revenue-generating than others.

Education scholars T. Elon Dancy et al. (2018) explain that the plantation politics of historically White universities reveal that “Black male bodies on college campuses are seen as primarily generators of income and properties of entertainment,” while “testimonies of Black male non-student-athletes attest to the academy’s rejection of Black men as intellectual and unwelcome in the classroom” (p. 184).¹ Black men, therefore, whether student-athletes or not, fall prey to racist histories and cultures of stereotypical Black maleness on these campuses. These men’s presence as commodities for the consumption of White peers sustain legacies of antiBlackness. Racist perceptions of them continue

1. On the latter, see also Vershawn Ashanti Young’s book *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity* (Wayne State University Press, 2007).

to circulate as media representations of Black athletes still widely promulgate racial essentialism through the binary of “black-brawn versus White brains” (Hughey and Goss, 2015).

Enter the writing classroom, and, particularly, one designed for the “developing” writer that, like the ideology of colorblindness, has sought to move away from the language of problematics without addressing problematics—if we don’t say “basic” then we don’t think “basic,” right? Black men, who historically White universities view and (actively attempt to) culture as revenue generators and not students, thinkers, or intellectuals, come to these spaces often with varying levels of lowered confidence in their writing. Some, because of their enculturation by educational institutions to know their “worth” as entertainment, grapple with how writing might be useful in forwarding this idea. Many a time, the first assignment in Workshop leads to reflections on why writing might be useful for engaging social media publics, how it might be wise to finetune one’s “brand” by paying attention to writing (its own negotiation of capitalism, mind you). I recall one student in particular—a highly-recruited freshman wide receiver, dreadlocks down to his shoulders, with a big personality, who first resisted our writing assignments—changing tune and explaining to me after class one day how useful it might be to know how to “deal with the haters” on social media if he only could learn to use writing for that. Regardless of these students’ motivations and perceptions of the course’s usefulness, the general air of “not good enough” that comes with the “basic” of “basic writing” looms thick.

Given this cultural context, fraught tensions surround both the qualitative and quantitative assessment of Black men’s writing and performance in Workshop in Composition. Some come to course material knowing that systems exist within the university that allow for them to “focus” on their sport. Some approach writing suspiciously, acknowledging that they have not historically done well with it. Some have no roadmap for their path toward writing in the university and do not know that Workshop stands as a prerequisite to Seminar in Composition, the standard “first-year writing” course. So how does one work with this population of students to assess their own writing and writing processes? What methods exist for undercutting the racialized, gendered, and classed problematics laid out in bringing these men to our Workshop classroom?

The next section lays the groundwork for responding to these questions by offering the institutional micro-context for my specific “Basic Writing”-come-Workshop classes. It works through the history of this class at its institution and how that history racializes the course and its assessment. Then, it offers my attempt at addressing that history through the building of a cohort model for moving students interested in writing about sport through a sequence of writing classes—a sequence that begins with Workshop in Composition. In that sequence’s structuring, I situate assessment practices geared toward *gaming the system* in these courses’ particular philosophical drive to “define to empower” identity, culture, and writing and their interrelationships.

The Athletic Writing Sequence and “Culturing” Process

Let’s throw it back for a mo’ for some institutional background. I’ve just given a job talk for a position in “African American Rhetoric” about the intellectual capacities of Black storytelling and language—particularly for Black graduate students—in rhetoric and writing studies at Eastern-City U. It seems strange that I’m fielding questions about European poetic form immediately after having delivered a talk that negotiates Black diasporic masculinity triangulated through the “n-word,” but it’s all good. As questions roll on and begin to address the content of my research, a senior White male scholar asks how I could possibly make an argument about antiBlack racism as a source of intellectual exclusion for Black students and scholars at various levels in these fields. He claims the only valid site of antiBlack racism in rhetorical and writing studies is the “basic writing” classroom. Of course, I could not deny that antiBlackness pervades those classrooms, but I had to make it clear how omnipresent antiBlackness in fact is—it functions as the engine that drives the Western world, so offering examples of it elsewhere in writing studies’ exclusionary spaces was easy. I share this anecdote to illustrate a dynamic of White supremacist thought in academia and in our field more discretely: some White scholars (and non-White scholars too) often believe that racism might be contained to particular spaces and snuffed out by simply changing those spaces or alleviating the “problem” of Black languaging in them. Racism, and by extension Blackness, within this frame, is perceived as a “problem” to be “fixed,” localized to Black people not understanding language (and therefore cordoned to “Basic Writing” classrooms), independent of its interrelations with the normalized workings of U.S. society.

This type of thinking fundamentally misrecognizes antiBlack racism as a localized wound to be sutured rather than the blood that fuels the body that is hyper-capitalism. The solution offered by this soon-to-be senior colleague profoundly demonstrates what Black feminist activist, thinker, and poet Audre Lorde (1984) calls “the first patriarchal lesson” (p. 112). In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” Lorde (1984) urges, “In this world, divide and conquer must become define and empower,” with the former being “the failure . . . to recognize difference as a crucial strength” (p. 112). Instead of characterizing Blackness and difference writ large as “problems,” and a kind of problem endemic to lacking the currency to enter academic discourse communities, we could seek to foreground differences, racial and otherwise, and what social change might be generated through engaging them. It also means unearthing the potentials of literacies already extant and alive in our students’ previous engagement with the world (Gilyard, 1991; Guerra, 1998). This work means delving deeply into what one already knows of the self’s relation to their surroundings and systems of power at work in that dialectic. As Black feminist, antiracist, and decolonial pedagogical practice, it means providing space for students to reflect on what intersectional identities, multiliteracies, and experiences they

bring to classroom spaces, since their linguistic and sociocultural agency might come from what they already understand of the world and their engagements with it. It means thinking through and from those complex identities (the politics of their privileges and marginalizations), multiliteracies, and experiences as grounds for using writing for making knowledge and experiences “otherwise,” as Beverly Moss (2003) and others have argued for decades. Before approaching a description of the structural retooling—and assessment strategies therein—that attempts to open space for empowerment through definition, I’ll work to define the historical space in which I taught “Workshop in Composition.”

In conversation with definitions of “basic writing” and “basic writers” by contemporaneous scholars like Pat Bizzell and Mina Shaughnessy, Dave Bartholomae’s (1986) “Inventing the University” contends that error should not be the sole basis for understanding these categories, while insisting that entry, or approximation to entry, into an academic discourse community by students determines where they are in relation to the university. Bartholomae, in assessing student essays at the same Eastern-City University where I taught Workshop in Composition, writes, “I think that all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’—that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak” (p. 10). But what of those historically cultured as objects denied the agency of speaking? What of those denied “special” rights, who represent the antithesis of insiders? How might one imagine oneself a part of a discourse foreclosed to them when the White habitus of our classrooms, and indeed, US society, says “shut up and play!”? What might assessment look like if borne out of experience rather than deficit?

In a recent essay in *Journal of Basic Writing* that Bartholomae (2020) titles “Back to Basics,” the composition studies doyen reflects on his experiences teaching Workshop in his final year at the same institution. He makes no qualms about equating “Basic Writing” with “Workshop,” opening with, “I retired from teaching in August, 2018. In my last year, I taught two of the courses I taught in 1975, my first year . . . One of them was Basic Writing, now titled ‘Workshop in Composition’” (p. 91). It seems that while much tension and conversation have pressured many into changing their relationships with the idea of “basic writing,” in almost half a century, an expert in the area believes mainly words, not practices, to have evolved when it comes to it. Bartholomae (2020) admits despite the gap of forty-plus years, the structure of 2017 and 2018 courses remained “exactly like” the courses he taught in the 1970s (p. 93). And while he deployed different language like “Metropolitan English”—a choice noted as strategic—to stand in as some unraced equivalent for what he at no point refers to as *White U.S. Standardized English*—the essay does highlight differences in student populations from the jump. He writes, “In 1975, my Basic Writing students were almost all working class, most were Black. They came from Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and small towns in between. In the Fall Term, 2017, my students were all Chinese.

Many, but not all, came from privileged families” (p. 91). So, this recent course is an English as a Second Language section, and the essay goes on to express deep admiration for these international students, their sacrifice, their resolve, all while noting, “The room looked like an ad for J. Crew” (p. 91). It proffers no sustained attention to stark differences between these populations or a reading about what these differences might reveal. Nonetheless, the article still uses these students and their experiences as fetishized commodity-objects to illustrate what it means to “get back to basics.” In doing so, it relates how students *still* faced weekly assignments designed to find (and I would posit assess) “common errors” (p. 93), with “basic writing” routinely referred to as a “problem.”

The essay ends on the following revelation, which echoes his earlier epistemological orientation to academic discourse from “Inventing the University:”

What I have learned late in my career is to see the importance of bringing our energies to the fundamental problems of writing in a global context, and there is no better testing ground than undergraduate courses that combine travel and travel writing, where the opening assignment, for example, may be to write about South Africa, to write about South Africa without being South African. (p. 125)

We might gather, then, that students should (still) estimate at “insider-ness” in order to learn writing, and, from this example, that insider-ness should take no heed of historical and ongoing violences perpetually perpetrated against the Global South and its peoples. These cultures remain spaces for colonization, testing-grounds within which to gauge and assess how “well” a writer might grasp at writing as difficulty, as struggle, as “problem.” In the example, South Africa (and its peoples) represent objects that fund White frames of learning. But what, again, of the position of commodity-object? Of the lived experiences of those whose breaking bodies fuel the university, the economy, and the global White supremacist project?

Growing up in the Caribbean, I experienced colonialism, racism, and globalization quite differently from my Black male U.S. students. I saw colorism in full effect in clashes between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians and was spoonfed ideas of British English and British-styled schooling as “superior” to attempts at a native tongue or conscience. But when approached to work with the particular population of Black male student-athletes by a graduate student on my job visit at Eastern-City U, my approach was to find ways, in course design, pedagogy, and assessment, to animate educational processes that *define and empower*. In my mind, this approach directly contrasts the divide and conquer philosophy of asking students to feign insider-ness by understanding as precept, really, their “outsider-ness” to the world of writing, or South Africa, or academic discourse.

In order to do so, I designed a sequence of courses around sport-writing and social justice that spoke to the lived experiences of athletes, their histories

of activism, and their writing on various topics. Thinking ecologically, the sequence, its class activities, assignments and assessment mobilize the antiracist thrust of define-and-empower outlined earlier, where understanding difference in relation to power stays key. As we are well aware, the racialized dynamics of standardized placement testing disadvantage students of color in their lead up to higher-education spaces (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). Because many Black student-athletes test into Workshop, the sequence starts there, with a cohort of students (both student-athletes and non-student-athletes) following me, if they so desire, to Seminar in Composition: Sports, and then on to Writing for the Public: The Public Athlete—the last a general education writing requirement focusing on public sport-writing across various informational, creative, professional, and journalistic genres. In the two years of the sequence's existence, a large percentage of students who have followed it are Black male student-athletes, many football players. The cohort model aims to provide space for students interested in these types of writing to pursue coursework in it together in a supportive environment that speaks directly to their extant multiliteracies, while also attuning students of color to opportunities in writing classes and majors that align with their interests. Crucial to these courses' implementation is fostering a critical racial consciousness about the role of athletes and, in particular, Black athletes in facing antiBlack racism and engaging public activism in relation to writing. Working in concert with this aim, the assessment approach of *gaming the system* functioned as the basis for offering students means to define and empower, particularly in our Workshop course.

Gaming the System: Betting on Ourselves and Each Other

The approach of *gaming the system* offers a fairly simple framework for engaging assessment to offer Black student-athletes in this particular classroom an empowered—even if fleetingly empowered—position by turning the oppressive conditions of their racialized being on its head into motivation. An important background activity for this assessment practice, our positionality activity that starts the semester of Workshop asks students to begin by naming their identities in relation to systems of power. It then asks them to think through the role of writing in those relationships by manifesting lived experiences that reflect on access (privilege) and marginalization (oppressive lack of access).² I share my stories first: I describe instances where my maleness and relative command of written English allows students to perceive me as an authority at the front of the classroom, while describing how that authority is undercut and complicated by my Caribbean background, my status as a migrant worker in the US, my “foreign”

2. This activity forms the basis for a “proactive” antiracist approach to teaching writing that is fully described and contextualized in an article-length manuscript under consideration at the time of this writing.

accent, my Blackness, and by my languaging. I also open up about violent encounters with White authorities in various spaces and how those encounters shape my outgoing experiences—particularly noting that it does not matter how many degrees I might have, in the eyes of police and other White authorities I am just a Black man, an object to deploy in their brutal imaginations. Students respond with their reflections, telling their stories to culture the space of our classroom with our various identities. My Black student-athletes often open up here about their identities as “athlete” or “football players,” alongside their racial identities, and how they might be perceived as “slow” or intellectually inadequate because of them. Some share memories of how football teams offered opportunities to escape their single-parent family’s housing-insecurity. Others described what being the one Black male on private White high-school campuses was like. These exchanges vitally form the grounds from which we think through assessment for the semester on the first class day and then again at the midpoint and end-point of the semester.

In framing the exercise of “betting on ourselves,” we have an extended and often winding conversation about what motivates these students and how that motivation manifests in their daily lives. Some point to figures like LeBron James, Michael Jordan, or Colin Kaepernick as role models whose success and influence drive them to “do better.” Some cite their mothers, who spent years getting them to practices and through trials that I cannot imagine. Mostly, though, these students note that routine weigh-ins motivate them, that “putting up stats,” and having favorable win-loss records as a team help them to envision where and who they want to be. Importantly, these “stats”—whether tied directly to their physical bodies (like their weight and other measurements) or to their athletic performance (like yards carried on the football field or tackles made)—represent currencies that hold very tangible stakes for their future potentials as professional sports players. Many, therefore, claim their motivation comes from “playing on a Sunday,” from the idea that someday they will play in the NFL: “you gon watch us then Mr. Teach? We got a game this weekend.”

These stats and my students’ awareness of their importance reflect the tangible ways in which they are constantly being assessed based on numbers. In the athletic facility, on the field, by NFL scouts, and in the classroom, these men know the importance of numbers and how these assigned values align with their “worth,” for better or for worse. As discussed earlier, this kind of valuation reminds us of the wake of transatlantic slavery, where White logics and antiBlack systems of humanity mean that Black bodies hold significance as commodity-objects and production based on the cold logics of capitalism. Numerical assessment, then, becomes a particularly fraught enterprise for this group of students. So, we tackle these ideas and conversations head on. In our discussion of assessment, one exchange that my question “what do you think defines who you are?” elicited in Fall 2019 was about individual game statistics versus grades. When faced with the comment that “Mr. Lou, grades ain’t gon’ mean nothing when I’m

ballin' in the NFL,” I ask, “Instead of thinking about which is worth more, could you say why either [stats or grades] is important? What makes them important?” Another student interjected with “Well it’s kinda about value, right, and who makes it?”, which veered into a discussion of who ascribes values to particular bodies and how they produce it. I used this particular opening to talk about the literal trade of Black bodies in transatlantic slavery, to provoke the generative comparisons between that trade and trading in sports industries,³ as well as to prime the group for discussing our assessment circumstances.

We return on the following class day to the syllabus to discuss how we will engage the “traditional” assessment metrics for the course. After all, the university uses this kind of system of assessment—at the end of the course, I’ll have to enter grades on a typical A-F scale, where A-F reflect percentages between 100-60. While I am tasked with coming up with the rubrics for class assignments and the letter grades for these assignments, for this particular class, students must demonstrate to an external committee that they have made a passing grade to move on to Seminar in Composition. At the end of the semester, I must furnish a portfolio of student work from my “least developed/borderline writers” that includes student drafts and revised drafts for a committee of Workshop in Composition instructors and the Undergraduate Composition Director. Alongside these I must send to the Director a table indicating who has passed the course and who has failed before officially entering final grades. Because of the hyper-surveillance involved in who passes through this particular gate at this institution,⁴ who can have this “special” right to the insider-ness of academic discourse in first year writing proper (a la Bartholomae [1986, 2020]), I explain all of these dynamics to my students upfront and throughout the semester.

After all, these quantitative and qualitative assessments will ascribe a particular value to their knowledge, and to pretend otherwise does us no good. We discuss how these systems of power—the university, racism, systems of value tied to capitalism—might culture us to understand the purpose of “putting up numbers” as an individuated “everyone for themselves” activity. Despite their playing team sports, the drive to be scouted by NFL teams incites a particular kind of individualism utilized by the university in selling narratives about these team sports rooted in “family” and “togetherness” as a basis for profiting off these student athletes via ticketing and merchandise. Some of the questions that prompt this discussion include: “What does ‘success’ mean to you?” and “How do you think you can achieve success in this class and outside of it?” For this activity, students can respond creatively—by writing a poem or rap, sketching

3. Later, for students who followed the sequence to Writing for the Public, the inherent historical comparisons became more fleshed out when we watched the 2018 documentary *Student Athlete*, which spotlights the NCAA’s exploitation of young athletes, making clear their commitments to plantationscape of college athletics.

4. I have railed against this structure to little avail.

a drawing, or—when we engaged through video call—finding an object around them that illustrates the idea of “success” and saying why. Sometimes, responses featured trophies or game jerseys and what they mean. One poem I remember vividly repeated the phrase “getting my bag.” Through these multiliteracies, by recognizing these students’ lived experiences as legit, we discussed neoliberalism and its fallouts—how thinking only about ourselves and our kin means that we’ll be used for each other’s detriment. Indeed, the structure in place where the students with the lowest grades have their work externally assessed fosters this scenario and breeds a toxic culture of competition. They know these ideas all too well: if a player does better statistically, oftentimes they will start over another teammate at that position—numerical assessments of their value form the basis for direct competition between them, fueling divide-and-conquer logics. Unfortunately, players will get injured, which means that coaches will be prepared to replace one body with the next to keep the machine going. That machine sells the tickets, markets the university, and offers the best “product” to the NFL, while casting away the injured and/or the not good enough. So, how can we resist the bind that as Black people our bodies, their accumulation, and the breaking of them fund White institutions, a reality acutely represented in the Black student-athlete experience? As we develop a critical consciousness of how all these dynamics overlap, in what ways might we engage assessment *as a collective* that would foster *motivation* toward writing in the face of so much against us? The answer lies in collectives rather than the individual—in the move to definition for empowerment rather than division and individualism or insiderness versus outsidership.

The approach of gaming the system asks these students to contribute toward coming up with a class average on assignments at the mid-term point of the semester. We decide on this average by students noting what they believe they can individually contribute (with a percentage number used to indicate this) with a short explanation of why based on what they think they offer when it comes to writing. So, hypothetically, if I had five students (in total enrolled in a class) and they shared they could achieve a 75, 75, 80, 85 and 85 as their respective final grades, I calculate the average of this number (80), and we agree that if they can all hit this average, everyone gets extra credit toward their final grade. Students might aim to hit their individual numbers, for which they receive a smaller degree of extra credit at the midterm point, but the greater stakes remain in the collective effort. The process of sharing individual numbers with each other demands vulnerability, and, though difficult, cultivates an environment where students understand the importance of their relations and relationships to each other in the community cohort. At the mid-term point, we actively revise our individual and group numbers, checking in to imagine where we might be at the end of the semester. This allows the chance to sit with our processes to that point and to assess where we still might go from that juncture. We work through the process of “betting on ourselves” again, where students assess their own propensity for

contributing to the group effort and reflect on aspects of writing they feel better about and where they would like to go from there in our remaining time.

So how does the “betting on ourselves” tactic work to change the capitalist logic that each student’s individual body of work equates to the worth of their individual intelligence? Well, it sadly can’t. The structures in place at this institution do not offer space within the Workshop assessment to challenge that principle outright. The tactic, however, offers a way to subtly steal back affects, motivations, and investments from the university in a coalitional approach that draws on the particular lived experiences of this group of students. Its importance lies not in its replicability, but that it draws from intimate aspects of these students’ lives and reclaims those aspects shaping the oppressive conditions of their experiences through collective frameworks. We define ourselves and empower each other to deal with the strain of the racist, hetreosexist, ableist, colonial, capitalist machine that makes us objects of our own demise. This act of theft embraces Harney and Moten’s (2013) ideas in *The Undercommons* that the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one, that “one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony . . . to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university” (p. 26). Being *in* but not drawing motivation *of* the university (but of something else that was collectively constructed) conjures space to imagine coalitional relationships. So, in my exchanges with these students, in understanding parts of their lives, their multiliteracies, their rhetorics and experiences, together we understand how these might be lifted up as legit—its own kinda intellectual bag, its own kinda discourses not seeking entry into the “insider” spaces that the academy and its “special” discourses it believes itself to contain.

The classroom space, with our assessment strategy based on offering something outside of what might be “achieved” as part of its ecology, particularly with its embrace of non-standard languages and languages of the Global South, became a kind of fugitive space, a space where we could descend into our undercommons. We move into our “underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still Black, still strong” (Harney ^ Moten, 2013 p. 26). We do this all the while giving the White folks what they want: the show, the performance of intelligence, the evidence to the committee who says pass or fail beyond any of our controls. Sometimes the affective thrust of motivation to get through the bullshit that is hyper-capitalism is all we have and the “gaming the system” tactic uses the system’s metrics for our communal purposes. The emails showing gratitude, the teaching evals noting how engaging, how fun, how exciting it was to just come to class, the daps in the hallways and the “Mr. Teach!”-s hurled from across moving traffic, all tell me the system was gamed for some #BlackBoyJoy.

Given the constraints of the traditional grading metrics, the histories of Black people being raced, used, and disposed by White institutions, and the specific

dynamics that Black student-athletes face as pawn pieces for these institutions and White audiences, the gaming the system approach seeks to find means to define and empower possibilities for subverting these conditions. By naming and characterizing our social positions and positionalities in relation to each other, while discussing the distinct ways in which we remain caught up in the workings of systems of power, these students come to understand themselves as intimately implicated in them. By understating numerical assessment of themselves as a means to use the oppressive conditions that such assessment has forced on to them and their bodies, “betting on ourselves” lays bare the “mathematics of the unliving” as well as the clean-cut neoliberal bootstraps ideology of individual meritocracy. More than that, it might provide these student-athletes some, even minor, versions of agency and self-determination in writing classrooms that constantly race and characterize them as on the “outside” of “academic discourse” finding their way in.

We Are Not Your Problem: (Re)claiming Ecological Space How(ever) We Can

Of course, there remain the day-to-day struggles of student-athlete realities, the politics of “basic writing” in relation to academic discourse, and, the most brutal constant, the antiBlackness that pervades the Western world, college campuses, and our writing classrooms. The assessment model described here might offer mere fleeting, fugitive relief from these conditions; its affective payoffs—the motivation of students cultured as deficient—may work through the span of the sequence but dry up in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. I know it does when I get the emails from former students on how much they miss our spaces. Nevertheless, making flexible the ways in which assessment practices might be made attuned to the lived experiences of students—and particularly Black students—deserves field-wide attention if we strive to help students unearth their critical racial consciousness as part of their writing educations. With a consistent focus on imparting “knowledge of the wake” and how the aftermaths of transatlantic slavery impinge on the everyday workings of discourse, experience, and education, students could come to understand the deep ecologies of antiBlackness (Maraj, 2020a) operating around them.

In addressing such ecologies elsewhere, I have suggested rhetorical reclamation as a means by which Black people on White college campuses might use their presence to do antiracist work. These acts, “gestures, performances, language use, embodiment” turn stigmatizing racialized attention back on to White institutions by openly asserting and, therefore, destabilizing racialized meaning in moments where racist but colorblind discourse continue to fund White supremacy” (Maraj, 2020a, p. 16). The moment under scrutiny through this study, the “basic” of “basic writing” in particular relation to Black male student athletes attempts

to race them congruent to their previous experiences with (White) academics and as intellectuals. Gaming the system, then, allows room to play with the “basic” math of assessment, with the math that coaches and scouts may take up to value a Black body, that a football fan may dispose of once a Black body breaks. So how do we move from these classrooms, move about into the Western world, as the antiBlack engine keeps churning? The pedagogical takeaway lies in asking ourselves how our classroom/assessment ecologies could be re/claimed for the multiliteracies and experiences of those in it, even while operating in oppressive spaces: how might we engage a consciousness of question-asking where “re/claiming” means we “turn once more to a demanding question in the process of possibly meaning” (Maraj, 2020, p. 138)? We must keep questioning our pedagogies, our assessment practices and metrics, ourselves and our identities if we seek to learn and live otherwise.

Understanding the politics of assessment metrics in this way, gaming the system holds to the numbers, as Katherine McKittrick (2012) desires, because the numbers represent a kind of proof of what has transpired. Yet,

The numbers set the stage for our stories of survival—what is not there is *living*. The numbers, the arithmetic of the skin, the shadow of the whip, inspire our insurgency as they demonstrate the ways in which our present genre of the human is flawed. (p. 23-24)

Each application of these numbers toward *different* stories, *alternate* narratives, then, could act as unmaking why and how we look at writing in ways that serve those humans who see us only as numbers. Escape in these ways—Black sociality, Black joy—sometimes, for us, suffices.

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