

## CHAPTER 7.

# INDIVIDUALISM, RACISM, AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE WRITING RUBRIC

Individualism is a hallmark of American (specifically US) thinking, and it permeates our educational system. This notion of “liberty, individualism, and equal opportunity in choice” or “abstract liberalism” is at odds with the historic, lived realities of people of color in the United States (Martinez, 2020, p. 5). When we tie assessment, as we have historically done, to this story of individualism and equal opportunity, we also tie it to Whiteness. If minoritized students have equivalent skills as White students, assessed by the same standards or the same rubric, this is seen as equitable education. But this notion of equity relies on definitions of replicability and fairness that are “dangerous” (Huot, 2002, p. 88). Success that is based on “power and access to the dominant discourse” only reinforces oppression (Inoue, 2015, p. 226). The dominant discourse here refers to habits of Whiteness and White language. While I did not originally consider race as a factor in my study, it would be negligent to ignore the ways that race and racism intersected with faculty attitudes, rubric design, and institutional power at Oak and St. Rita’s. So, too, it is important to view these stories as part of a larger narrative about education in America.

Over time, the discourse about race and writing assessment in the U.S. has shifted from exclusion to inclusion. Yet that inclusion—both historically and currently—still stresses *individual* paths to success rather than systemic change, as described in Chapter 2. The first president of the Educational Testing Services (ETS), Henry Chancey, positioned the work of testing as a part of a mission to “secure individual freedom through education” (Elliot, 2005, p. 122). At this time, Black men, particularly those who served in World War II, began to enter college in greater numbers under the G.I. Bill (Elliot, 2005). Chancey predicted that education would become increasingly tailored to the individual and that college admissions testing would play a key role in this process (Elliot, 2005). While ETS and entrance testing came under critique in the 1960s, this focus on the individual continues. Any assessment system based on common competencies reinforces the ideology of American individualism. Gallagher (2016) defined competency-based education as “a highly individualized approach” where students gain credentials (p. 22). In this mod-

el of education, “writing is understood as a discrete, commodified, vocational skill,” a skill that individual teachers coach individual students to master (p. 22). While students might take different routes to achieve a certain outcome/competency/proficiency, the promise of a common, universal outcome or skill remains. But despite the perceived universality of these outcomes, it is individuals who are responsible for achieving them. Whether it is traditional testing or rubric-based assessment, the focus is on individual achievement within systems of education rather than on the systems themselves.

The AAC&U aligns itself with this discourse when they argue that equity in higher education means that those with different backgrounds still finish college with the same skills and proficiency levels (Maki, 2015). They use the phrase “inclusive excellence” to mean that education is inclusive when all students meet the same standards of excellence. Excellence itself, however, is a problematic term. It is often used in neoliberalism because “it *appears* so ideologically neutral” (Laubach Wright, 2017, p. 272). But such terminology is deeply linked to White ideologies. For Inoue (2015), evaluating writing on “so-called quality” maintains ruling relations. It is part of a larger assessment system that has historically manufactured what it means to be excellent (Elliot, 2005). Within this system standards are set and meeting those standards become synonymous with excellence (Yancey, 2005). As Inoue (2015) explained, these standards of excellence are grounded in White language supremacy and include linguistic markers that are often absent from the writing of non-White students. He has argued that labor is a more equitable measurement than excellence. Yet, the AAC&U believes it is “impossible to decouple quality from equity” (McConnell & Rhodes, 2017, p. 49). For the AAC&U, “inclusive excellence” is only achieved when each individual student completes the same “practical liberal education that prepares them for success” (AAC&U, 2015b, p. 7).

To identify inequities, the AAC&U calls for disaggregating student data. This data may indeed provide a clearer picture of inequity, but too often the solution is remediating the individual student rather than changing the criteria by which they are judged. In addition, individual faculty and administrators may be motivated by their own experiences and priorities, and the majority are White. Individual career moves can drive change just as much as consensus among experts (Trimbur, 1989). We see this particularly at St. Rita’s. Here, students who fail the first-year writing portfolio must re-take the course. It is Dr. Gerald Z who controls the conversations about this assessment, using his own academic standing to do so. The role of individuals, like Dr. Z, who hold social, economic, and institutional power within their universities should not be overlooked in our discussion about how the work of assessment happens at

specific universities. Therefore, placing these individuals within an ecology of assessment, the confluence of influences, allows us to name systems of power and identify White language ideologies at work.

This chapter directly addresses the way that faculty participants at St. Rita's and Oak operate within the racialized structures that rule U.S. higher education. While I did not ask questions specifically about race, I asked the majority of participants how they felt their institutional context and student population varied from other schools, and how that might affect writing instruction and assessment. In this chapter, I engage directly with how faculty talked about these student populations and institutional differences and how these views often assumed a White, prepared student as the default. So, too, my interviews touched on deeper racial and political tensions within the United States. The timing of my initial interviews and site visits was fortuitously placed within a week of President Trump's election in 2016. As seen in the sidewalk writings at Oak (pictured in my introduction), this tension was palpable at the time of my visits. In particular, my interview with Gerald Z at St. Rita's and my interview with Brad, the art history professor at Oak, struck me as representative of the larger tensions within the U.S. in Fall 2016. Both individuals acknowledged their power as White men: Gerald<sup>7</sup> was not shy about being "the big, bad, White guy," and Brad acknowledged his positionally as an "old fart of a White guy." Despite varying political views, both participants drew on an ideology of individualism that they saw as racially neutral. Gerald's belief in individualism and his bootstraps mentality caused him to believe that holding students to strict standards was in their best interest. Meanwhile, Brad's frustration with systems of power caused him to focus on changes in his own individual classroom rather than his institutional power. While sometimes challenging to engage with, both cases add much to our understanding of the way individuals interact with larger, systemic systems of race and power within higher education.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT, STUDENT POPULATION, AND "PREPAREDNESS"**

Local institutional context has played a significant role in this study and this book. I've addressed the ways that Oak benefits from funding sources and a

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7 I refer to Gerald Z as Gerald in this chapter when I specifically draw from my interview with him. However, at other points I refer to him by the pseudonym Dr. Z because other colleagues often refer to him with the title Dr. and his surname initial. As other participants were commonly referred to by the first names in conversations with colleagues, I found this to be an interesting signal of the Dr. Z's status and power.

sense of faculty collaboration that is lacking at St. Rita’s. These differences are significant, but in this section, I write more explicitly about the way that faculty at these institutions view their institutional context in terms of the student body. When we compare these institutions side-by-side using the national standard integrated post-secondary education data system (IPEDS), it is hard to argue that race or socioeconomic status is insignificant in the local experiences at these two institutions (see Table 7.3). The overall racial makeup of students varies significantly between the two schools, as does the admissions criteria. Oak’s student body is 62 percent White with only a small number of Hispanic (8 percent) and Black students (6 percent). Meanwhile, St. Rita’s undergraduate student population is more balanced among these three demographics at approximately 41 percent White, 27 percent Hispanic, and 29 percent Black. The population of Asian American students is small at both institutions: 4 percent at Oak and 1 percent at St. Rita’s. Oak does attract a more international population with 14 percent of their students listed as non-resident aliens, while St. Rita’s shows 0 percent in this category.

**Table 7.3: IPEDS Data on Oak & St. Rita’s**

	Oak	St. Rita’s
<b>Student Population total</b>	2,293	718
White students	62%	41%
Hispanic/Latino	8%	27%
Black students	6%	29%
Asian American students	4%	1%
Non-resident aliens	14%	0%
<b>Acceptance Rate</b>	29%	Open-access
<b>Retention from first-second year</b>	90%	47%
<b>Graduation Rate (6-yr)</b>	86%	24%
<b>Graduation Rate (overall)</b>	82%	44%
White students	83%	43%
Hispanic/Latino	84%	64%
Black	82%	14%
<b>Instructional Staff</b>		
Full-Time	252	21
Part-Time	26	66

Another key difference is admission qualifications. Oak is considered highly competitive with a 29 percent acceptance rate while St. Rita's is open-access. Although students take out loans at about equal rates, Oak is more than double the cost of St. Rita's. In addition, those who do take out loans for their education at Oak are much less likely to default on them, with only about two percent defaulting in comparison to 13 percent at St. Rita's. Finally, the graduation rate and how it varies by race is a significant factor distinguishing the two institutions. At Oak, minoritized students graduate at similar rates as White students. The overall graduate rate is 82 percent, and White, Black, and Hispanic populations rates are all within one percent of that average. Meanwhile, St. Rita's graduation rate is 44 percent overall but only 14 percent for Black students.

Although these numbers are striking, the way that institutional reporting structures influence them should be considered here. IPEDS is the standard for reporting such information, yet their overall graduate rates are based on full-time students, and nearly 40 percent of St. Rita's students are part-time. So, too, data is based on individual years, which can vary widely when the overall student population is as low as it is at St. Rita's. While it was my main informant at St. Rita's, Dwayne, who encouraged me to use the IPEDS statistics for comparison between institutions, he also collected his own data on these issues. He noted that other schools were unlikely to run this data "person by person" the way he does at St. Rita's; however, this is how he comes to a "real retention" number, one that is more around 25 percent than the 47 percent he acknowledges is reported through IPEDS. Thus, nationally reported numbers only tell part of the story about student population and the institutional context of these small schools. The data from my interviews adds a more dynamic view of institutional context but also shows how faculty ignore certain demographic realities, particularly race, in an attempt to present a neutral (and colorblind) representation of their institution.

The faculty at Oak almost unanimously answered my questions about their institutional context in terms of the academic prowess of their students. They mentioned that incoming students at Oak have "really polished skills," are "generally good students across the board," and have an "upward trajectory of preparation." Oak is traditionally a liberal arts school that sought to raise its profile in the 1980s when the president of the university stopped all residential fraternities. Ben, the former writing committee chair and dean of first-year students, noted that this was a turning point where Oak was able to recruit students who were "more seriously academically." He also explained that through a series of endowments in the past ten years, the university has been able to incorporate more diversity in its student population, particularly when it comes to socio-economic diversity.

When it comes to writing, the faculty at Oak viewed it as valued across the curriculum in that students are both asked to write in a lot of different classes and value that preparation. These comments reinforce a generalized idea of the default Oak student—well prepared, high-performing, engaged. So engaged that Ronnie, English department chair, said with a chuckle: “they take some keeping up with.” No one says that they are also White—race does not readily enter these descriptions. Only Shirong and Wendy, both of whom work with and value international students, commented that some students come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and “didn’t start at the same starting point as other students.” Shirong explained that the challenges these students experience with writing are not about mechanics as much as they are about culture, and that language-learning is inherently tied to culture. Wendy, too, noted that the students she has worked with from China come with very different expectations of what a classroom environment is like. She explained that those students have often only written small papers of less than 250 words that were graded with very limited expectations, likely for grammar.

While the racial makeup of the student population at St. Rita’s is entirely different than that of Oak, faculty members also frame their student body in terms of preparation and ability rather than race. Socio-economic status does enter the conversation more explicitly here, but it is the rare exception that race is directly mentioned. Students at St. Rita’s are continually framed in opposition to the traditional college student. “Our freshman are different here,” said composition-teacher Heather: “their perception of college is sort of like it’s a continuation of high school.” Heather, along with others, stressed that these students are also first-generation college students. Dwayne noted that since St. Rita’s is open-access with rolling admissions, many of their students don’t consider college until the last minute: “We’ve got kids that decided they were going to go to college the day before college.” Gerald lamented that the students “don’t have a culture of education at home.” Lucinda also explained the impact of the non-residential nature of St. Rita’s: their students are local and come from families that do not have a tradition of going away for college. So, too, many faculty stressed that their students come from “awful,” “underperforming” high schools, and the teachers at those high schools “don’t know writing well enough.” In contrast to Oak, St. Rita’s faculty see their students as “really disengaged” and “reluctant to ask for help.”

Those at Oak refrain from discussing the finances of their students in general, only noting exceptions—those funded by specific outreach efforts to broaden the student population. However, the low socio-economic status of the students at St. Rita’s is something many faculty members are actively aware of. In terms of local context, there is an understanding that St. Rita’s exists within a depressed

region of the country. Lucinda explained that it was the first school in the region to offer a four-year degree, and the school purposefully sought to provide such a degree to those working in the steel industry that surrounds the college. The building for the school was donated by British Petroleum (BP), and the order of Catholicism that established St. Rita's seeks to bring education (among other services) to economically deprived regions. Gerald explained that the students are poor and that they often work 30-40 hours a week to support their families. While he doesn't think that is feasible to pair full-time work with a full-time college education, he acknowledged that the state limits financial aid so that it is difficult to pursue college part-time and still receive financial assistance.<sup>8</sup> Jeremy, too, recognized the financial limitations of his students and how this interacts with financial aid and state funding. He believes that remedial courses are necessary but recognizes the financial burden they place on students. If they don't meet certain scores on placement exams, Jeremy explained, "the state is loath to fund them," and that aid may or may not be reinstated when those scores are achieved. He noted that the state does this because they see it as "paying twice" for what should be achieved in high school. Dwayne went further with this point, noting that the placement system is managed by admissions and that he finds higher performing students are sometimes placed in lower-level classes for no discernible reason. He is also the only one to directly link this inequity to race as well as socio-economic status: "It does seem like race and class could have played a role," he lamented.

As seen in other research, faculty define students, particularly Black students, in terms of deficit (Davila, 2017). This holds true of Latinx and Hispanic students as well. We repeatedly see the population of students at St. Rita's defined in opposition to the "normal," "prepared" college student. Meanwhile, the Oak faculty rarely mention the race or economic class of their students, noting only that they are high achieving and prepared. When faculty at both institutions talk about student population, they talk about preparedness and merit rather than their race or language backgrounds. They explicitly link good writing with preparedness and coming from good (aka wealthy) high schools. Bethany Davila (2012) noted that in her study this type of talk "ultimately functioned to create a stereotype of privileged White students who have had better educations and are therefore better writers" (p. 191). Davila's later (2017) study found that there were two main ways that "White talk" manifested in her interviews with faculty: avoiding the subject of race or asserting that it is not relevant to the subject at hand. While my participants did not directly argue that race is irrelevant to ru-

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8 Although he characterizes the students as full-time, as many as 40% of undergraduates at St. Rita's are actually part-time.

bric-making, they did not discuss it as a factor either. This ideology of neutrality “may eclipse local meaning making” (Davila, 2017, p. 158). Thus, looking at how faculty talk about their local settings, including what they do *not* talk about, helps build a better picture of how power functions in those institutions.

## ACCULTURATIONIST RUBRICS & ADAPTATION

These assumptions about neutrality and language play out in the text of the rubrics themselves. Although the AAC&U intends for their rubrics to represent an assets-based model, this is difficult to maintain at St. Rita’s when the lowest benchmark category does not match with the texts that students there routinely produce. One way the AAC&U addresses this issue is to have a “zero” performance level that doesn’t necessarily indicate poor performance, but rather indicates that a dimension of the rubric was not present in that artifact. The zero can mean that the student artifact is below the benchmark level, but it can also simply mean that dimension of the rubric was not present in that artifact. When used at the programmatic level, the zero can provide valuable information about what was collected, and theoretically, what is taught. For example, national scoring using the Written Communication rubric has a disproportionately high number (15 percent) of zero scores for “research and sources” (Rhodes & McConnell, 2021). This potentially shows us that faculty are not assigning writing that asks for research rather than that students are not succeeding in using sources. Thus, the “zero” does not assign blame for not fitting the rubric but leads to an open question of why the artifacts gathered do not show evidence of source use.

Although the national data from the VALUE Institute has shown that students at all levels of higher education can consistently reach the top performance levels on the rubric (Rhodes & McConnell, 2021), the notion of deficit, lower ability and/or unpreparedness is often translated to the rubrics when they are modified. As I described in Chapter 5, one of the most common changes to the VALUE rubric is to make the lowest performance level negative. This shift not only moves away from the asset-based model, but also shifts the responsibility for a low score from an unknown entity to the student author. At Oak, the lowest level is labeled “weak,” while at St. Rita’s, it is called “insufficient.”

At Oak, raters long for the assignment sheets, often attempting to infer whether they should bump up the student score to account for something not being a factor of the assignment. For example, 2017 faculty-rater Eshaal said she tried to be “more lenient” because she didn’t know what the assignment prompt was asking for. While she was encouraged not to do this, I would argue that the definition of the artifact as “weak” rather than simply a non-represented “zero” score encourages this kind of emotional investment on the part of the rater, who



does not want the student labeled as “weak” when the assignment is to blame. Meanwhile, at St. Rita’s, the rubric is used to actually determine whether or not students pass certain general education courses, and so “insufficient” is exactly what it says—that student will be held back from progressing to the next level of their degree if their writing falls within this portion of the rubric. The AAC&U does define the “benchmark” level as the skills often found in beginning level college students, but they are also clear that they do not intend the rubrics to represent “college readiness standards” (Rhodes, 2010, p. 3). Nevertheless, when applied in an environment where students are viewed primarily in terms of preparation, the benchmark becomes just that—a sign of who is prepared and who is “weak” or “insufficient.”

In addition, both the original rubric and the ones used at Oak and St. Rita’s reinforce the view that “SEAE is widely accessible and not affiliated with any one group of people” (Davila, 2012, p. 196). The original VALUE rubric for Written Communication (2009) uses terminology in the “Control of Syntax and Mechanics” section that is coded for Whiteness. The capstone dimension reads:

Uses graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency and is virtually error free.

Clarity, in particular, has been noted as a stand-in for Standardized Edited American English (SEAE), which is depicted as “neutral, clear, widely accessible” (Davila, 2017, p. 168). So, too, Davila (2017) argued that using the generic term *language* on outcomes and rubrics “leaves SEAE unnamed and contributes to its position as neutral” (p. 168). The notion of a text being “error-free” fits with Valerie Balester’s (2012) definition of the “acculturationist rubric,” which assumes errors are easily quantified. Such rubrics convey the message that SEAE is “stable and easily identifiable” to both writers and readers (p. 66).

While the rubric at Oak changed over the course of my study, the language under the dimension titled “process and style” maintained a similar acculturationist stance. Oak’s rubric defined the “process and style” dimension in terms of a “polished state.” This state included the “refinement of ideas” as well as style but linked the two together under an assumption that well-developed ideas are to be presented using SEAE. The 2016 version of the rubric equated maturity with White language practice and assumed that it is a mere matter of “attention to clarity and concision” that allows students to reach the performance category of “mature.” Although the 2018 revised rubric clearly labels the use of SEAE as “adherence to convention,” rather than as morally or developmentally superior, it still sees clarity and conciseness as a matter of “sustained attention” and a feature of “engaging prose.” By linking process and style, there is the assumption that all writers have equal access to SEAE conventions if only they take the time to edit.

The rubric at St. Rita's has two dimensions for sentence level error: 1) prose style and syntax; 2) spelling, word-choice, grammar, and punctuation. As discussed in both Chapter 5 and 6, the faculty at St. Rita's do not agree that there is the need for two separate dimensions, particularly on a rubric with only five total dimensions. Yet, Gerald Z's insistence that these elements are key to good writing prevails. The language of this rubric appears to recognize that students at St. Rita's come from different language backgrounds, yet it clearly labels those forms of English as inappropriate for writing in an academic setting. The rubric associates written prose with SEAE and contrasts that with speaking, calling for "standard written English rather than spoken English." Furthermore, the "prose and syntax" dimension clearly and deliberately shows a progression from "insufficient" and "distorted" English to "slang or dialects of English" to "standard written English," which is "sufficient."

These statements fit with Balester's (2012) description of acculturationist rubrics in that it calls for SEAE to be "the sole language variety to be used in schools" (p. 66). However, I would argue that this rubric takes a more outwardly eradicationist view of language. As defined by April Baker-Bell (2020), eradicationist language pedagogy is when:

Black Language is not acknowledged as a language and gets treated as linguistic, morally, and intellectually inferior. The goal of this approach is to eradicate Black Language from students' linguistic repertoire and replace it with White Mainstream English. (p. 28)

The rubric at St. Rita's recognizes variety but does not recognize that multiple Englishes can be written or that they are not simply "slang." Rather, it outright calls for the elimination of non-White, non-standard English. This eradicationist stance has real-world consequences for the students at St. Rita's. Dwayne studied the correlation between the two sentence-level dimensions of the rubric and found that while there was a high variance among the other areas, students consistently received the same score on these two dimensions. Furthermore, he explained that if students had two scores of "insufficient" on the rubric, they would need to retake the first-year writing course, even if they had high scores on other areas of the rubric. Although the university decided not to charge the students for the course the second time, it added to their load and kept them in school longer or discouraged them from continuing at all.

Regardless of the AAC&U's call for inclusive excellence in relation to the VALUE rubrics, current writing scales continue to exclude language variety. The acculturationist, even eradicationist, wording of these rubrics signals a need to erase the individual identity of the student and depict the performance of

students, faculty, and entire universities in a “neutral” way that itself “actively creates continued White dominance” (Davila, 2012, p. 184). It is impossible to fully embrace the asset-based approach advocated for by the AAC&U or acknowledge the needs of local student populations while maintaining this focus on standardized, White English within the dimensions of the rubric.

## **WHITE MEN TALKING: THE INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL FACULTY MEMBERS**

As demonstrated throughout this book, faculty play a significant role in designing local assessment practice, even when using national documents for guidance. Therefore, any discussion of individual demographics and power is incomplete without a look at faculty. When we talk about diversity, we often talk about student population. IPEDs provides statistics on the racial makeup of student bodies by individual institution and year. They disaggregate graduation statistics by race and can thus identify inequities such as the much lower graduation rate for Black students at St. Rita’s. So, too, the AAC&U advocates for disaggregating data based on race, socioeconomic status, and other demographic factors. They see disaggregation of student data as key to working against a deficit model of higher education and working toward inclusive excellence (McConnell & Rhodes, 2017, p. 49). But who is in charge of looking at this data, using it, and working toward more equitable practices within higher education? The answer is: still primarily White faculty members and administrators.

While IPEDs does not provide the racial data on faculty members per institution, the National Center for Education Statistics does give demographic data for faculty across institutions (IES, n.d.). As of 2018, they found that 40 percent of full-time faculty were White males, and 35 percent were White females. Twelve percent were Asian/Pacific Islander. Only *three* percent of full-time faculty were Black or Hispanic with those statistics combined. Like IPEDs data, the focus is on full-time faculty, and again, this ignores a significant portion of St. Rita’s population. While Oak has only 21 part-time faculty to 252 full-time, at St. Rita’s, the majority are part-time. They have only 26 full-time faculty members and 66 part-time (IPEDs, n.d.). However, as reflected in my interview with Heather at St. Rita’s, full-time faculty still make the decisions. When I asked Heather if she was involved in the initial creation of the rubric used there, she said, “I wasn’t full-time when we started this, so they wouldn’t have asked me.” So, too, the general education committee wanted to have clear outcomes because they recognized that their reliance on adjunct labor means that outcomes are not consistently met. At best, the general education outcomes can be seen as a means to guide adjuncts; at worst, they also control and discipline them.

Meanwhile, Gerald Z is full-time and tenured, and Dwayne feels that he can do nothing to get him to align his courses with what he knows to be good composition pedagogy. It is clear that certain individuals have far more power within this system than others.

I did not ask my participants to identify their race or ethnicity. However, the demographics within my study appeared to fit with the overall makeup of faculty within academia. The majority of my participants were White with a few exceptions, most notably international faculty members. My one Black female participant was present for the assessment at Oak but did not consent to an interview. Although institutional ethnography attempts to avoid falling into the trap of presenting only the standpoint of the ruling (Rankin, 2017b), the truth of my study is that White voices dominated the discourse. This section shows how two particular White male faculty members talk about their own relationship to race, power, and the institution. I present these two White male points of view not to valorize them but as examples of how racial and individual power interacts with institutional power to influence writing assessment at these particular institutions. These individuals hold institutional power, and because they do, their acts are ultimately the acts of the institution.

### **GERALD'S STORY OF HIMSELF: SON OF A COP SAVES WORKING CLASS KIDS FROM THE DANGERS OF RHETORIC**

As we have seen at St. Rita's, competency-based education and the desire for all students to achieve certain levels of "success" dominates the thinking. Jeremy drills grammar but justifies his basic writing course through the notion that students proceed at their own individual pace until they have reached the necessary competency to complete the regular first-year writing course. This mindset was pervasive at St. Rita's. However, there was one individual there who was particularly influential in determining assessment practice at St. Rita's, not because he directed the writing program, chaired the general education committee, or had particular relevant expertise, but because he asserted his individual control. Gerald, or Dr. Z as his colleagues refer to him, frequently asserted himself as a privileged member of society, in his own words: the "big, bad White guy." One might assume, then, that Gerald closely identifies with the institutional structures of the academy, but in many ways, he does not.

When analyzing my interview transcripts as a whole, I rarely used my code for external or personal influences, yet it appeared frequently in my interview with Gerald. I wondered, at first, how relevant these moments were to a book about rubrics and writing assessment. Campbell (2006) warned against institutional ethnographers' tendency to get too caught up in the competing

stories of participants. Yet, Gerald's own view of his relationship to systems of powers is complex. So, too, I believe his point of view—while potentially traumatizing to those who have been subjected to bullying, racism, sexism, and other oppression within the academia—helps us “expose” how individual lives “come under the influence of specific ruling practice” (Campbell, 2006, p. 95). Gerald's point of view on grammar and rubrics remains unchallenged at St. Rita's. If Gerald rules St. Rita's, who or what rules Gerald? And how do we ultimately disrupt those systems of power and their influence on both those who are harmed by them and those who cause harm because of them? Knowing how Gerald views himself within this system may offer us some answers to these questions.

This section's subheading might be one version of how Gerald frames his own story at St. Rita's. In this story, Gerald, of course, is the hero. Through both long tangents and short interjections during our interview, I learned a great deal about Gerald's background and life experiences. Not once, but *four* times in the interview, Gerald identified as the son of a cop. He uses this identity to tie himself to the working class and to set himself up in opposition to academia. “I don't think I'm smart,” he said, “I'm just a cop's kid.” But he's not any cop's kid, either. He's “a cop's son who ended up getting his Ph.D. in English” from a prestigious university. He sees himself, then, as the embodiment of the American bootstraps narrative. He grew up “working class” but succeeded, and he did so by learning basic competencies. In fact, he may have had to subvert his own language background to do so—although he doesn't mention this outright, when he gets angry/passionate, a bit of dialect seems to creep into his speech.

In addition to being a son, Gerald is a father, which also came up several times in the interview. In particular, Gerald told me about his regrets in not bringing his son up Catholic. While seemingly out of the blue, this story connects with Gerald's own feelings about working at a Catholic institution. He values the “mission oriented” nature of St. Rita's and thinks it is good for the students. He noted that parents sometimes send their students to St. Rita's in hopes that their children will receive traditional Catholic discipline. He seems to see it as his place, then, to subject students to this discipline. For example, he makes students revise their first paper as many times as it takes to get an A. More than any other participant, Gerald talked about specific students, those who succeeded and thanked him for this discipline. “I'm still Facebook friends with some of them,” Gerald told me, “And they say, well, this guy taught me

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9 This is Gerald's definition. I recognized that police officer is not seen as a universally “working class” profession.

how to write. For the first time, somebody forced me.” This discipline, this *forced* writing, is not only what he thinks students need, but also what he thinks they value. He even goes as far as to say that a student who was a Marine particularly liked this approach because those in the military “like abuse.”

Whether or not it is this discipline that Gerald seeks for his own son, Gerald sees his role as a teacher as similar to his role as a parent. Not only does he mention how his parenting relates to his teaching, but he also consistently infantilizes his students. He believes strongly that questioning conventions is not meant for his students/children. “If you think it is,” he said in a chilling, but telling statement: “You don’t know what it means to bring up children. You don’t know what it means to educate young people.” This connection is solidified with the story he tells me about how he regrets not raising his son Catholic. Gerald was raised Catholic but later came to question and leave his faith. He said: “It’s a lot different growing up with a God and then deconstructing your Gods later.” By not bringing his own son up Catholic, he feels that his son has had to deal with philosophical questions at a younger age and that this has made things more difficult than they were for Gerald who only came to question religion as an adult. So, too, he believes in teaching writing as teaching traditional structures first and questioning them later. “It’s okay to deconstruct [conventions] after you’ve learned them,” is an idea he repeats throughout the interview.

Although Gerald’s words are particularly infantilizing, I should note that referring to students as “kids” is the norm at St. Rita’s. Also worthy of note is that Gerald does not always seem to associate this status with youth but rather with being at the beginning stages of learning a subject. He frequently compares teaching writing to his own experience learning art, which he has been studying for the past five years. He explained that the artist can’t draw a portrait until they know basic structures, like a nose. For Gerald, SEAE grammar is to composition what anatomy is to art. He knows that the way he treats students is seen as demeaning. In fact, he complains that most educators these days are too focused on empowering students. For Gerald, there is nothing demeaning about being seen as a beginner, and to imply so is in itself demeaning. “I go to art class in the city with men who are a lot more practiced, professional artists than I am,” he said, “and there’s no demeaning me when they treat me as a beginner.” He even went as far as to imply that it is dangerous not to do so, also comparing writing to hunting. He indicated that students must write for an “artificial situation” first just as a hunter must practice on a target.

Gerald is keenly aware that his pedagogical approach does not fit with advances in composition theory and pedagogy. Rather, he actively and aggressively resists those pedagogies by asserting his version of moral rightness. When I asked Gerald one of my standard questions, “How do you define good

writing?” he began by placing his answer in opposition to the answer he likely believed I wanted:

I know it's very fashionable to answer that good writing, it does its thing. It does what it's supposed to do. It meets its audience and has its effect on the audience it's supposed to, which is a very rhetorical understanding of writing.

Gerald knows which practices are disciplinary consensus, but he goes on to outright reject them, even demean them. He described the progression of composition as a field as a grab for disciplinary power, as creating a field “out of thin air.” He went as far to accuse writing instructors of “laziness,” noting that they are driven by a “careerism” rather than concern for students, and thus they won't take the time to “actually correct” student writing.

His critique is not only of composition, but also of academia as whole, thus fitting into the wider conservative attack on intellectualism and expertise. He believes that academic prose is “the worst prose in America right now.” And despite receiving a Ph.D. from an elite institution, he complained that most universities follow the “Harvard model” where academics, thinking they are better than everyone else, seek only self-replication, favoring students who go to graduate school and perpetuate their discipline. This is a ridiculous approach for St. Rita's, he argued, where he has never had an English major continue to graduate school. This concern of overly focusing on the academy is not lost on Dwayne and Heather. Yet, they approach it entirely differently. In keeping with composition pedagogy, they design assignments that have students writing for community and public audiences rather than academic ones whereas Gerald believes that he is doing his students a favor by having them write five-paragraph essays in an artificial setting.

I argued in Chapter 2 that a “great books” philosophy of liberal education has morphed into a “great skills” approach. This shift is clearly shown in Gerald's exercise of power at St. Rita's. Gerald sees his mission as providing foundational competencies to underprepared, first-generation students. He holds similar views as those proponents of the “great books approach,” who tied the success of a democracy to the development of a cultured individual (Russell, 2002, p. 170). In this view, only White, Western views are considered cultured, a view Gerald perpetuates when he describes his students' upbringing as “culturally thin.” This approach is also tied to his own identity as a professor. While he says he loves teaching at St. Rita's, he noted that at “a normal institution” he would be teaching far more Shakespeare, and that he would have to teach at least four of his plays to “be considered a serious professor.” Most keenly, we saw this view enacted in his outburst in the general education meeting. When discussing

the reading outcomes in the general education committee, Dwayne noted that Gerald clearly wanted all general education classes to read three books, and he defined those books as “a title across the spine, and was on paper, and was, you know, a dead White male.” Gerald can’t enact the great books approach by requiring his colleagues in the sciences to teach books, so he calls them names and storms off the committee. After that incident, he is no longer a member of the committee, nor is he allowed to continue as department chair. Gerald’s individual power, his ability to successfully bully his colleagues, is thus not unlimited. His colleagues recognize that the “great books” approach to general education is no longer acceptable.

But the great skills approach to writing—specifically the skill of SEAE grammar—is one where he is allowed to assert his influence. Even though he was absent from the general education committee meeting on writing that I attended, his will was palpable. When the limitations of the current writing “portfolio” model comes up in the general education meeting, Dwayne hesitated saying: “I agree, but he, he, he was playing nice with that assessment.” No one needs to ask who “he” is. Dwayne’s tentativeness here as well as the uncomfortable laughter that follows show the power that Gerald holds over others at his institution. Because competency-based education is viewed as being colorblind and is seen as current best practice, Gerald is able to push toward his own views in this arena. Those views, we could argue, take competency-based learning to an extreme, but they do not fall completely outside the bounds of current thinking the way the “great books” approach does.

Gerald’s power is both individual and institutional. He is forceful about his own views, and his verbal abuse causes his colleagues to fall in line even when they disagree with him. But no matter how much he sees those views as connected to his own identity—that of a son, a father, an artist—they are historically rooted in institutional systems of power and White supremacy. As seen in Chapter 2, writing scales were originally created by eugenicists and have historically excluded students of color and those from language backgrounds other than SEAE. Gerald noted the racial diversity at St. Rita’s as something he values, and yet, he does not consider how that diversity might impact his practice. Race is simply erased from his thinking about language and pedagogy. Gerald sees White Mainstream English as the “target,” the basic competency to reach. He sees his students, perhaps beginning academic writers, as merely children; thus, eradicating their own language expertise, agency, and maturity. His anti-academic, anti-intellectual stance allows him to discredit practices within composition that value language diversity and take a rhetorical approach to language. Yet, he is willing to use that institutional power to reinforce his own ideology. He’s not naive to the role that rubrics play in this, hence his email to



all faculty with the rubric for grading five-paragraph essays. Rubrics, he stated, “institutionalize writing pedagogy.” Thus, he fights his fight for two sections of sentence-level errors on the St. Rita’s rubric, purposefully institutionalizing his view that students are not ready to progress without mastering these great skills.

### **BRAD’S SELF NARRATIVE: FRONT-LINE WRITING PEDAGOGUE BLOWS UP THE SYLLABUS**

The relationship between individualism and institutional power at Oak manifests differently than it does at St. Rita’s, and yet it is no less White. According to Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (2001), fear of conflict and individualism are both elements of White supremacy culture. These two elements of Whiteness limit how progressive the writing committee at Oak is able to be despite good intentions. Faculty members at Oak seek professional standards and “best” practices<sup>10</sup> from a variety of sources, including the VALUE rubrics as well as workshops by specialists in the field of composition. They seek consensus. And yet, they are limited in their influence over actual classroom practice. Philip, the associate provost, noted that there is “a great deal of sovereignty given faculty in their own courses.” The word sovereignty here clearly links faculty practice with ruling relations: it is clear that *individual* faculty rule individual classrooms.

Kristen and the writing committee value this individual sovereignty over collective action. As seen in Chapter 6, when developing the rubric, they attempt to account for as many different pedagogical practices as possible rather than use the power of the rubric to change those practices. They do not want to impose any common assignments in writing classes but rather want an open-ended rubric that accounts for individualism in classroom practice. Barbara, the writing center director, feels that this valuing of classroom sovereignty limits the ability of the writing committee to make positive change on campus. She expressed disappointment that the writing committee hadn’t been able to do more to assess writing instructors and move toward better practices in the classroom. When I asked her what limited the power of the writing committee, she replied: “good feelings.” On a small campus, she explained, you have to pick your battles, and “there’s always a price.”

This tension between individual classroom sovereignty and institutional power plays out in the story of Brad, an art historian who was on the 2016 Oak writing committee that was revising the rubric. Brad desperately wants to upend a system of White language supremacy and revolutionize education. He is another

10 Wilson (2006) challenged the notion of “best” practice, noting that it assumes a fixed set of practices and closes off options (p. xxii). As shown throughout this book, the notion that particular practices are best across contexts is one I also wish to challenge.

White male with tenure, and he recognizes his own privilege. At first, I saw him as a direct contrast to Gerald, as they seem to represent two sides of a political spectrum. While Gerald insists on the importance of “conventions,” when I talked to Brad in November 2016, he was ready to “blow up” everything from the syllabus to capitalism. Yet, as I delved further into their interviews, I found multiple similarities. Like Gerald, Brad volunteered a great deal of personal opinions and experiences, although his commentary was often more abstract. Both have a complex relationship with power based, in part, on individual experiences. Both see themselves in opposition to institutional power structures. However, both also operate within a White ideology that values individualism and self-reliance. Thus, I offer their stories not in opposition, but in concert, to show how White individualism ultimately impedes systemic, institutional change.

A sesquipedalian, Brad’s interview was filled with complex, philosophical statements about critical pedagogy, language and politics. I prodded him to tell more of his personal backstory as well. How had this “classic old White guy” come to the place where he recognized his own power and privilege and wanted to “blow up” the system? Brad explained that his resistance to systems of power originated early in his life. Although he grew up in a White middle-class suburb, he noted that as a Southerner, he was aware of racial tension from an early age. In particular, he played football with “Black kids from the other side of town.” During the same formative years, he watched on TV as the Vietnam War and race riots happened. He watched “Black people getting shot up” and became “intensively aware of cultural difference.” Then, in the late 1970s, Brad had the opportunity to do graduate study abroad, an experience he returned to multiple times throughout his interview. During his study in Romania, he needed to do academic work in another language, as a language learner. For Brad, writing a graduate-level academic paper in Romanian was one of the hardest things he’s ever had to do, but it led him to think about how language, culture, and writing interact. In light of the political environment surrounding Trump’s election in November 2016, Brad expressed a desire to renew his commitment to issues of language diversity and pedagogy. “Language matters in every realm of social engagement,” Brad said, “if we didn’t know it before, after last Wednesday [the day of Trump’s election], we know it now.” Brad criticized what he called the “ultimate entitlement” in North America: “I speak English, everybody else needs to.” He expressed frustration that the “dialect of English constructed through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries driven by White Anglo capitalist economic interests” is the default language of academia.

Brad was the only one of my participants to directly invoke “critical pedagogy,” and he talked at length about what this means for the writing classroom. For Brad, critical writing pedagogy needs to not only look different in practice but

also come from “a vastly different cultural and political position” on the “part of the pedagogue.” A critical writing pedagogue, he articulated, “approaches ASE from an L2 plus point of view.” He questioned whether anyone with a monolingual background can really engage with the important issues of language and writing. Rather, he wondered if the person teaching writing shouldn’t be “this wonderful person from Singapore who speaks both at home... and here on campus, three or four different languages.” Although he focuses on international students as English language learners, Brad also recognized that this diversity is not uniquely foreign: “We live in a multi-glossal North American culture.” Thus, he argued that pedagogical practice needs to be reexamined with a multilingual and multi-glossal lens.

Brad recognized that this reexamination is not an easy task: he is bound within an academic system—ruled by boss texts—that is difficult and slow to change. At times, Brad sees this challenge as overwhelming. At multiple points in our interview, he expressed frustration with the ability to work within the system to create change:

Normativity in the classroom is really something that needs to be not simply problematized but fucking blown up and recreated. Sorry. There it is. Just blow it up. You know, but how do you do that? When I need to write up the syllabus for next semester....

His own role as an agent of change within this system is something that Brad struggles with and raises questions that get to the heart of this book, questions I will return to in the conclusion. What can Brad do within this system when assessment keeps accreditors happy and his paycheck coming in? Some questions, like whether or not a college degree is worth the money, he designates as over his pay grade.

In this interview, Brad and I shared the frustration that while admitting that academic language is steeped in Whiteness is a step, it isn’t enough. Yet, Brad also believes that an individual instructor can make a difference:

If we’re going to do anything different, it starts with one professor, one class, throwing out the syllabus and rewriting it in a different way. And frankly, that may simply happen next semester in every fucking course I run, and I don’t really know how to do this.

Brad’s vision of throwing out the syllabus might be appealing to some readers, as it initially was to me. And yet, Brad is a long-time, tenured faculty member. Meanwhile, the proportion of minoritized faculty in adjunct or contract facul-

ty roles is higher than those in tenure-line positions (IES, n.d.). These faculty may be given a particular syllabus to teach or at the very least be regularly renewed based on how well they follow a “master” syllabus designed by others. Tenure-line faculty are shielded from, but also not immune to, the way external power structures dictate these classroom texts. Associate Provost at Oak, Philip was concerned that the next stage for accreditors will be “saying every syllabus has to have certain things on it,” something that he worries will cause a lot of push back from Oak faculty, most of whom are full-time, tenure-line faculty members. Yet, at other institutions, non-tenure line faculty syllabi are already routinely examined for such adherence to institutional norms.

As a tenured faculty member at an institution like Oak, Brad has a lot of power within this system to change his own classroom practice. While he maintains a profound skepticism of the institution as a whole, he is profoundly optimistic about his own ability to separate his classroom from such structures. When I asked him about the VALUE Written Communication rubric, he strongly expressed that he did not care at all about “assessment with a capital A.” Rather, he said: “I’m interested in teaching in my classroom. That’s what I care about.” I asked if that made it difficult for him to be on the writing committee, to which he responded that he recognized the need for it because of the accreditation. While he says he’d be completely fine with Oak giving up their accreditation, he recognized that assessment is something the institution does to maintain its standing with accreditation agencies, and “that’s what keeps the doors open.”

Thus, Brad separates himself from the systems that allow him to continue his work, to keep the university running. Rather than seeing himself as a part of—as complicit with those systems—he sees himself as a “front-line writing pedagogue.” He has taught writing courses at Oak since the 1990s. During that time, he has participated in many writing workshops and revised his own pedagogy extensively. Brad clarified that he is at least somewhat interested in the collaboration with other members of the writing committee in writing the rubric, and yet he frames this interest in terms of how it will help him better evaluate and give feedback in writing in his own classroom. He is very willing to change his own pedagogy to reflect what he learns about writing, but he is unwilling to use his position to ask others to do so as well. Rather than see the writing committee as a place where he can use his influence to change writing pedagogy across the program, Brad falls back on the *individual* control he has over his own classroom. Even as a senior faculty member, he does not embrace the power he holds within the university as a whole.

Perhaps it is his feeling that assessment is a means for accreditation rather than for improving pedagogy that holds Brad back from being as vocal about linguistic justice in the committee as he is in his interview. He does offer sug-

gestions for the writing rubric, but none of them meet the goal he expressed to me of revisiting the rubric from a “poly-glossal, culturally diverse, and global perspective.” He does challenge the notion of “correctness” but remains in the realm of convention: “I don’t care about correctness; I care about if you’re writing in the formal register of academic English.” In fact, he reinforced the idea that “process and style” includes grammar because correct grammar is merely a product of careful revision. He agreed that a “developing” paper is one that lacks “clarity and precisions at the sentence level... that results from revision.” So, too, he reinforced the idea that the way to evaluate style is whether or not it is understood by the audience, noting that if he has to “work at understanding,” he will assess a paper lower.

As discussed here and in Chapter 5, this notion of a text being understandable to a generalized audience is problematic and relies on the default assumption of a White, native-English speaking audience. It is committee-member Shirong who questions this in his interview with me when he discusses the way that he can understand the argument made by a Chinese-speaking author when his White American colleagues miss it due to translation errors. Yet, this point never comes up in the writing committee meetings. Ironically, Brad’s hypothetical multi-linguistic person from Singapore who he believes should be teaching writing is there in the flesh on the writing committee at Oak. In fact, Shirong joined the writing committee for this very purpose, hoping he could “talk to people about ways to help especially international students to grow into better writers.” And yet, Shirong spoke only three times in a one-hour meeting I recorded, while Brad spoke 33 times (not including small expressions such as agreement with others). Brad learns a lot from the meetings about disciplinary diversity and how other fields handle evidence, quotation, or other writing variations, but he does not ultimately learn what he needs to know to blow up either the system, the syllabus, or the writing program rubric.

## **HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM, WHITE RACIAL HABITUS & RUBRICS**

It’s easy to read the stories of Gerald and Brad and see one as the villain and one as the hero. But doing so only reinforces a view of Gerald as an *individual* racist and Brad as not racist, when both operate within systems of White supremacy. White supremacy is not individual racist acts or ideas, but rather institutional. It exists in the habits of language and grading that perpetuate our schools *as institutions*. One such habit of Whiteness is hyper-individualism, which puts the rights of the individual above all else, focusing on self-determination and self-reliance (Inoue, 2019). This habit is present throughout the data presented in this

chapter. Hyper-individualism is clearly reflected in Gerald's self-narrative. He rose from a "working class" background as the "son of a cop" to be a professor, and he believes that learning standard White language is the means for others to gain similar social mobility. Although Brad calls for a "poly-glossal" perspective, in practice, he too defaults to hyper-individualism when he expresses a belief that he can *individually* rise above the constraints of the system. Brad focuses on the teacher's individual power to change their syllabus, while not recognizing the collective power of groups such as the writing committee. This ultimately prevents him from enacting the change he seeks or making this change possible for other faculty members who may not share his individual status in the classroom.

Aja Martinez (2020) asked us to consider how we might focus on changing the institution rather than the individual classroom. For her, the former is a precursor to the latter. Similarly, Inoue (2015) reminded us that the consequences of our assessment practice do not occur because of "individual actions by students or a teacher or a rubric alone" (p. 120). It is true that Gerald has more power than many in dictating that the rubric at St. Rita's stresses grammar and mechanics, and that this power has direct consequences for the students who fail the portfolio assessment. But Gerald is granted that power because of his own status as a full-time tenured faculty member who is also White and male. For example, even though Gerald's female colleague Lucinda now occupies a higher status than him in the academic hierarchy, she backs off from challenging Gerald's view in the general education committee. Exercising one's individual prowess, then, is only possible because of where one ranks in the collective.

Similarly, the larger institution of higher education views individual students in terms of their status within a collective, as either prepared or unprepared. Outcomes and rubrics work to define a "benchmark" for preparedness, one that often draws on habits of White language. Faculty who comment on the preparedness of students do not openly consider race but assume a White default. So, too, they assume White writers and White readers when they design their rubrics. BIPOC students are the *exception* to the White norm. Of course, all students (and humans) should be valued for their individual backgrounds and perspectives, but the perspective we see here is that race comes in only as a factor that affects *individuals*. The individual is defined by their diverse characteristics while the collective is assumed to be White, prepared with the socio-economic status necessary to afford higher education. It is then up to those individuals to make up for what is perceived to be a deficit—to take remedial courses at their own expense to "catch up" to the level of other students. These students exist within a White, colonial narrative of progress that states that if non-White individuals only achieve the same outcomes as White individuals, they can overcome the systemic obstacles in their way and forward the progress of the nation as a whole.

Within this system, students only have the power to meet outcomes, while faculty and administrators have the power to change the outcomes. Although, the AAC&U (2020) has argued that their methods “empower the liberal learner” to take the LEAP outcomes and “make them his or her own” (p. 15), this rarely happens in actual practice. Rather the rubrics were designed for scoring artifacts at a programmatic or university level where students are often unaware their work is even being read. To the extent that this work does impact actual practice at colleges and universities, that practice is not something the student has access to or can “make their own.” To their credit, the AAC&U does recognize this oversight and hopes to include student voices in future revisions of the VALUE rubrics (personal communication, K. McConnell, October 25, 2021). However, even if student involvement in rubric development does occur, it occurs within a larger ecology of assessment that involves “a confluence of many structures in language, school, and society” that students, teachers, and assessors “have little control over” (Inoue, 2015, p. 19).

The rubric is a tool created within a larger system of historic racism within universities. As a genre, the rubric presupposes a linear progression of learning that ends in the same place for all learners, not a diversity of outcomes to be achieved. That end place is a matter of quality, of excellence, that is often synonymous with habits of White languaging. Though McConnell and Rhodes (2017) hoped that the VALUE rubric approach to assessment would “raise up, not wash out, the inherent diversity found on campuses” (p. 32), traditional rubrics are not well-positioned for this goal. Furthermore, the process of rubric development and adaptation is centered around reaching consensus rather than highlighting diversity. As I’ve shown throughout this study, rubrics rely on consensus on key outcomes and terminology. In order to make any rubric work in actual practice, the language of the rubric becomes generalized, and with it comes generalized rather than diverse assumptions about writers and readers. Faculty who adapt the rubrics may be diverse, but as a part of the process, they are valued for their role in consensus-building, for their ability to be *representative* of all faculty, not for their individual diversity. Similarly, even if diverse students are engaged in the process of rubric adaptation, they, too, will be representatives of the student population at large. Finally, without systemic change to our institutions, those individuals with more power—whether that power is due to race, gender, or institutional status—will have the most say in determining our actual assessment practices.