

# From a Whisper to a Voice: Sociocultural Style and Anti-Racist Pedagogy

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*ABSTRACT: Against a Racial Real backdrop, I argue for consciously adopting a sociocultural approach to style in linguistically and racially diverse Basic Writing classrooms. To make this argument, I focus on a multilingual writer named Tejada, who reveals how she had internalized a racialized stereotypical discourse about herself as a minority—a discourse which operated in an unconscious manner despite it informing her written voice on the page. Tejada’s revelation led to her decision to amplify, rather than hushing, her own voice. Her epiphany is presented through a case study approach, including a close analysis of Tejada’s process writing and recorded transcripts of peer to peer and student to teacher interaction. I end the article with some practical advice for how to promote sociocultural style feedback that develops a practice of micro-affirmation with students.*

*KEYWORDS: anti-racist pedagogy; Basic Writing; enregisterment; micro-aggression; socio-cultural style*

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

TEACHER’S POV

A WHITE TEACHER with a RED PEN rewrites a sentence on her student’s paper, her eyes never looking up as she CROSSES OUT the parentheticals, notes a skillful phrasing by ✓ing the left margin of the page.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

EXTREME CLOSE UP, SCREEN CAPTURE

as CURSOR selects “add comment” from the insert menu on DOCS, types control+ t, a new tab and a quick Google search is typed in BROWSER “Purdue OWL’s use of parentheses,” copies text, “Use parentheses to set off nonessential material, such as dates, clarifying

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information, or sources, from a sentence,” pastes, clicks COMMENT.

INT. STUDENT ROOM

a BROWN STUDENT stares at blinking CURSOR, CURSOR moves to click RESOLVE.

I have begun this article with screenplay directions and conventions to draw on a style unfamiliar to some readers of this journal. I've chosen a screenplay form because of how it sets the stage for a story: directions highlight whether or not the storytelling takes place in an interior or exterior setting, may prescribe the casting of the characters ((i.e., BROWN or WHITE)), and yet does not reveal the internal consciousness of the characters. I, and perhaps you too, have had to learn about the form, and how these conventions ((INT., capitalization, new lines)) are used to capture where the focus of the viewer should be before dialogue occurs. Writing in screenplay directions is an attempt to disrupt my own ease of reading, as I highlight the dramatically small scale—that is, the micro and interior scenes of feedback. By including these three short scenes, I intend for their directions to enact the distance between written marks, on pages and on a body of work, as well as the tension between interpretation and intention. In these hypothetical scenes, despite the difference between the technologies and the effects of a red pen, we imagine a teacher who is alone with a stylistic choice of a student writer—in this case, the choice to place a detail in parenthesis. These scenes unfold a story where a series of assessive contexts create a dramatic tension between the characters. Specifically, the character of the TEACHER is a cerebral, well-intentioned, but oblivious WHITE authority. This teacher is not heeding racial realities surrounding these juxtaposed interior scenes. In this way, I'm imagining a version of myself.

Debates about the sociocultural politics of what motivates and should motivate basic writing teaching *and* basic writing teachers will always be caught up in how the world outside the classroom shapes not only the styles inside the classroom, but also how we respond to these styles (see Harris; Lu “Redefining”; “Symposium on Basic Writing”). In these debates, sociocultural difference or conflict is theorized as a resource for a writer's agency; however, this theoretical argument complicates the *practice* of teaching Basic Writing: *if, given how the world surrounding my classroom operates, my students negotiate identity and conflict as they write, then what should be my response to this particular writer?*

In this article, I summon sociocultural politics by questioning not only the place where much of our stylistic feedback about the micro happens—too often outside of our shared time with students as a social group—but also the manner of our feedback. Drawing from Andrea Olinger’s sociocultural style definition, where style involves “the dynamic co-construction of typified indexical meanings (types of people, practices, situations, texts) perceived in a single sign or a cluster of signs and influenced by participants’ language ideologies” (125), my goal is to reveal how this definition works from the interactions of a student named Tejada, her peers, and myself, as a graduate student, teaching Basic Writing at a large, public research university in the northeastern United States in 2009. Presented as a case study, the example involves how a micro feature of Tejada’s style receives impressions from her white teacher (me) and her diverse peer group, and then how this feature becomes registered (*enregistered*), so that Tejada is able to discover and affirm a deeper social-personal resonance, a racial awareness, for her voice.

My goal is to encourage our attention (and our camera angles) to shift from the finished narrative of teaching style as rhetorical choice to a not-yet story where dialogues, reflections, listening, and metalinguistic awareness around sociocultural style and voice emerge. For many, the capitalization of a letter or the placement or absence of a parenthetical are not typical agendas of a classroom, of research, or a subject of almost a decade of thought, as they are for me here. Such stylistic considerations often occur at a late stage of review and away from the public scene of a classroom. What might we miss by not zooming in on such micro moments?

### **White Response: Registering Impressions Privately**

Anti-racist Basic Writing must recognize the ongoing and historical reality of racism in ourselves, our classrooms, and our interpretations. Carmen Kynard, teaching at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, theorizes anti-racist pedagogy through what Derrick Bell names as a Racial Realist positioning: “And it don’t stop,” referring to the ongoing reality of that position (Kynard 382). I also adopt this positioning, because given the ongoing realities of racism that structure each of our daily lives, impressions of style emerge from race-based experiences. That is, since racism informs our classrooms, our pedagogies, and the interiorities of ourselves and our students, an impression of a micro feature can function as the subtle signal of a racial stereotype, and such recurring impressions create a pattern. Moreover, an impressionistic response that does not also include democratic discussion

with students about intentions will not only limit learning or growth, but I believe it will lead us further away from, as Asao Inoue puts it, “socially just futures.”

Instead, I argue the association between a teacher’s impressionistic response to a student’s stylistic feature requires a public outing. In my position here, I diverge from Star Medzarian, who contends “that to teach style effectively through response, we must use language that moves beyond impression and considers the rhetoricality of students’ stylistic choices” (188). She writes,

Impressionistic description, as I define it in relation to response to student writing, encompasses all commentary that does not refer to the student writing itself. It is the embodiment of our own reactions to texts as readers and is especially problematic for evaluating student writing, as it influences the grade that is ultimately assigned. (189)

Medzarian further aligns a critique of this impressionistic discourse with literary approaches to style and current traditional rhetoric. However, without an acknowledgement of diversity or Bell’s Racial Realism in the writing classroom, Medzarian’s critique of impressionistic discourse risks a reading as another chapter in a field history that assumes monolingual and *white* perspectives when it comes to the embodiment of our own reactions. Inoue calls out these generalized impressionistic judgments because of how they work to assume an embodied sense of “power.” He writes,

And what does strength, authenticity, and honesty look like as textual markers? It is a self-reliant voice that is focused on itself as a cool, rational, thinking self in the writing and in its reading of [a] writer’s own experiences or ideas. This isn’t to say these are bad qualities in writing, only that they are linked to whiteness and this link often has uneven racist consequences in classroom writing assessments. (49-50)

What Inoue references as “whiteness” occurs first through an *impression* based on how a teacher has read a stylistic feature of a student.

The solution is not to replace our impressions of style in favor of teaching conscious rhetorical choices. Rather, the challenge is to recognize how impressions can become a starting point and not the finish line in our discussions with students about stylistic features in their writing. Given this

claim, my argument is that if we adopt a Racial Realist positioning, then we must not ignore, dismiss, or respond in an isolated manner to aspects of student writing which trigger a racial impression about voice; instead we must create a space for sociocultural style.

### **Dissin' Feedback: A Basic Writing Assessive Context**

WHAT IF students answered back to the teacher in the classroom space rather than behind her back in the institutional hallway?—Pamela Gay, Introduction to “Dialogizing Response” (4)

Feedback about style occurs in a power, or assessive, context, initiated by a teacher to students. That is, like the opening scene of this article, our feedback process is often *private* or *interpersonal*, and this choice means we are not able to benefit from the diverse perspectives present in our classrooms. But when teachers share their impression of a particular micro feature, and allow the impression to circulate in a whole classroom environment, we learn to reflect on the limits and possibilities of bringing our impressions of style out into the open, alongside our students. Laura Micciche’s “Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar” provides insightful topics for classroom discussions where grammar itself is a “positioning tool” for student inquiry into published texts (722). Yet, Micciche does not practice these inquiries as grounded in student writing as an open discussion—a pedagogical decision that limits how peers and Micciche might otherwise have gotten caught up in co-constructing stylistic interpretations of the writing they were doing, not only reading, in the course. However, Min-Zhan Lu’s “Professing Multiculturalism Style in the Contact Zone” *does* invite students into class discussions of sociocultural options in a peer’s writing. Yet, as Lu’s pedagogical decision is mediated through a handout Lu creates, demonstrating how a student’s syntax signals multiple discursive positions, Lu has in a way already framed the discussion, and limits a democratic discussion of sociocultural style. We need more pedagogical style scholarship where participants are invited to share what it is *they* notice, an invitation that may enable similar or alternative positions alongside the impressions of a teacher.

Moreover, racial friction around instructor feedback and student response is likely happening anyway, regardless of whether or not we name it as such. Carole Center’s critique of teacher researcher scholarship in *JBW* provides examples that, as Center contends, “may offer rich analyses of students’ reactions to comments without making the students’ or teachers’

race visible,” noting the problem with this erasure as “readers. . . unable to make use of this research to understand how race may influence the power relations that underlie students’ responses to comments” (30). Center’s analysis of seven years of *JBW* teacher scholarship, including approximately seventy articles, tracks whether or not race is made visible in student-present articles (24). Not only is there a small number of student-present articles, the numbers of racially-visible articles about all subjects, including the teacher, is even smaller. Of note for my argument is Center’s analysis of two student-present articles where race is invisible, by Jane Maher and Sara Chaney. In both texts, rich stories of teacher-student interactions are provided, such as Chaney’s feedback letter to her student Amber, and Maher’s mini-scene of a feedback interaction with her student Robin. At the same time, building from Center’s argument, I highlight how feedback exchanges in Maher’s article reveal a kind of scenario that is relevant to current discussions of feedback as micro-aggression. Maher’s narrative about teaching writing in prison and the challenge of building affirming relationships with students inside reveals both her advocacy and her knowledge of the socioeconomic, racist power structures at work within any project of rehabilitation—especially within educational projects that do not first focus on whether people you work with are habilitated in the first place. Maher’s intention, however, is not the focus of my analysis; it is the impact to Robin. Maher writes,

I had just returned a set of essays to my students. After about five minutes Robin (not her real name) approached my desk and placed her essay in front of me. By the time I had finished commenting on her essay, I had written more than she had, and clearly my comments had offended her. I looked down and saw that she had printed, in large letters, the following words: “Are you dissin’ me?” The other students were still reviewing their essays, so I had a chance to respond: “No, Robin, I’m not dissin’ you, I’m trying to help you become a better writer so you can succeed in this course.” When we had a chance to talk (out in the hall, away from the other students, but within earshot of an officer), I discovered that Robin had completed three years of high school, but during those three years, she had not written one essay, “not even one page, not even one paragraph, not even one word,” yet she had passed all of her English courses. Robin was furious that I had “messed up” her essay “with all that shit you wrote. If you don’t like my writing, just give me a bad grade.” (96)

What Maher points to in the previous contexts of Robin's learning history, where Robin's accomplishments of three years of high school do not include having written an essay, a page, a paragraph, or even a word, is alarming. However, recognizing this reality means that the contrast to what Robin *did* accomplish now by turning in an assignment sets up the tension. Take how Maher's sharing of Robin's reaction includes the term "dissin.'" "Dissin'" is a lexical feature of Robin's style first expressed in a written context to teacher Jane. The term indexes a social meaning in the narrative, as *dissin'* refers to how Robin interprets Jane's feedback. Jane may be trying to validate Robin's concerns by repeating Robin's words back to her, when she exclaims, "No, Robin, I'm not dissin' you." Here is the beginning of a sociocultural interaction, and I assume such interactions between them continue as Maher shares that "since Robin questioned every one of my comments and corrections, she managed to pass my course and the exit examination and qualify for credit-bearing classes" (96).

I read the *dissin'* interaction as a missed opportunity for learning more about Robin, Jane, and the expectations of the other writers in the room about feedback. Rather than exploring this co-construction, Maher's telling of one interaction highlights the rightful blame on a system of inadequate resources, bad teaching, and the consequences; however, since *dissin'* is not unraveled or examined, the reader is unable to interpret what Robin means by *dissin'* or why Jane says what she does in response. In this way, *dissin'* could register a different social meaning for the readers of Center's article, since Center's argument is that the presentation of race in *JBW* is often "colorblind," or too implicit. Once we begin to read with sociocultural style in mind, however, perhaps it is not so implicit. While Center remarks Maher's paraphrase of "messed up" for the word *dissin'*, and captures Robin's emotional response by including "all that shit you wrote," Robin's language does not get taken up as a sociocultural stylistic feature, neither by Center nor Maher, and layers of sociocultural style are left unexposed—sociocultural layers that "would be even more valuable explorations of the struggle over the teacher's authority to comment on student writing" (Center 32).

When Jane opts for a semi-private context, referenced to her readers through a use of parentheticals—"(out in the hall, away from the other students, but within earshot of an officer)"—she not only highlights the privilege of a semi-private context for feedback that the teacher initiates, but also signals a lost opportunity for discovering the role *other* students, the full range of voices available in a context, may register with *dissin'*. The power dynamic between teacher and student in their situation is left unex-

plored and presented as simple. What micro feedback might be an example of this feeling for Robin? Why does Jane include the perspective of *dissin'* in her tale? What does the interaction look like out in the hallway? What impression does Robin get when Jane is so quickly able to assemble more in commentary than she had written initially? And how was Jane able to finally repair this relationship so clearly to conclude its narrative with the student Robin's "teach me, Jane, teach me"?

Sociocultural style researcher Olinger theorizes that our understandings of style "must consider the forces shaping individual's perceptions and the ways in which stylistic meanings might change over time or across contexts" (121). Olinger's interactive take on style foregrounds dynamism and co-construction, as collaboration helps writers notice how style's meanings are "constantly jostling one another and being reshaped," (126) and resulting in "styling" (124). Therefore, sociocultural impressions and disagreement, such as "dissin," should be made part of the feedback on writing in our shared time with all students. Taking such a view, an alternative presents itself. What if instead, the interaction between teacher and student had been more public by way of questions for the rest of the class: "Do you all agree that in marking up Robin's paper, I'm dissin' her? Am I hurting or helping Robin's voice by correcting her writing?" What new opportunities, and for what, would installing such a moment in the classroom offer in terms of styling and recognition?

### **Interactive Styling: Researching Basic Writing**

Medzarian endorses a style pedagogy that contextualizes style with the values of a classroom, which is important; however, we cannot ignore the relationship between an impression and a choice when it comes to style and Basic Writing. The tension echoes educational discourse about access and power because unconscious (impressionistic) occurrence and conscious effect (rhetorical choice) is, in any educational context, emergent. Impressions of language use affect how we voice our identities in an educational context (Besharah and Olivier 26), and play a role in how we shape our relationships. Voice, in this way, is less a feature of "individual accomplishment" (Sperling and Appleman) and more "the capacity of making oneself heard" (Juffermans and Van Der Aa 113).

A collaborative classroom with student writing at the center helps micro features of style get registered, or, put in linguistic anthropological terms, helps to *enregister* choices for that writer. That is, a collaborative



classroom makes possible the emergent connection between how a “register,” or set of linguistic features, and a “voice” become recognized as linked by a social group (Agha; Johnstone). Beyond a stable set of options, style is interactive, and we perform style with others. Style enables us to project a “type of person, practice, situation, text” in a context (Olinger 125). That is, style must reference something specific that is recognizable to another, what Olinger refers to as “typified indexical meanings” (125). Olinger’s reference to indexical meaning points us to Asif Agha’s enregisterment as the process behind a register being recognized *as register* and one that “entails that the population of users. . . understand the stereotypic personas, relationships, and practices that the language conjures” (40).<sup>1</sup>

In the case study of a student, Tejada, who had the opportunity, along with all of my writing students, to receive class feedback on stylistic choices in sentence writing, the process of enregisterment led to Tejada’s styling.<sup>2</sup> For this case study that follows, I work to reveal through selections from classroom transcripts of interaction some of the stance-taking, interaction, and commentary of sociocultural style. These interactions happened through two kinds of sentence workshops; one of these involved student-led sentence workshops and the other were instructor-led sentence workshops, with sentences selected by me from our shared course readings. I ensured that every writer had a chance to stand in front of their peers and lead their own sentence workshop over the semester, just as I determined the type of sentence and focus of the interaction for the published writing. My goal was to facilitate sociocultural style.

I highlight different moments in Tejada’s process to demonstrate how enregisterment led her toward a metalinguistic awareness of her voice in context. By showing a “caught-on-camera” interaction alongside some of her reflective writing, the case study places value on the benefits of social cultural style. Olinger warns that methods of researching sociocultural style may entail “[e]liciting or inferring typified indexical meanings”; yet, it is not possible to do this through written texts alone (127). Since context is paramount in this approach, teacher research should include “writers’ commentary on the texts” (127). I collected all of Tejada’s process drafts and reflections pre and post workshop, and analyzed transcripts of classroom interactions where she participated. I selected from this data snippets of interaction that demonstrated the process of enregisterment, grounding my analysis with Tejada’s explicit reasons for choosing her sentence. In addition, since “indexical meanings are visible when writers take stances on the identities they perceive in particular words or phrases,” inclusion

of embodied description also helps reveal sociocultural style (127). “This stance-taking might be visible in their tone of voice, facial expressions, and laughter” (127). While my transcripts of our class interaction are in the form of recorded spoken language, I did take care to use notation that mimics the audible pauses, interruptions, starts, and stops of the discussion, such as “. . .” to show pauses between one and two seconds of duration.

### **Classroom Interactions: Enregistering Tejada’s Parenthesis**

The story begins with Tejada’s choice of her sentence. As she writes in a reflective post on our learning management software before the class’ second sentence workshop of the semester, on that day in October, “this sentence is very important.” She offers further reflection to her classmates on SPARK about how the topic of the sentence affects “many people’s choices to speak or remain silent.”

After students write these responses that preface their choice of sentences, workshop begins. Tejada is the second writer for workshop that day. She proceeds to write this sentence on the dry erase board:

I, (as part of a minority group) have witnessed and experienced how a single word or action on the part of those who are not categorized within the dominant culture, has contributed to the growth of stereotypical racial views as well as the choices of expression among those who are victimized by prejudice ideologies.

The first thing Tejada has to say after writing her sentence is “yea I know it’s long. It has a lot of stuff.” Note she does not make a claim that the sentence is long because it is complicated, or because it is performing a tangled sense of relationship (which it is); instead it’s just long because “it has a lot of stuff,” or a lot of content, contained within its form. She then offers some context of what motivates her take on the topic. Referencing the incident at the VMA’s involving Taylor Swift, sharing that she can relate to Swift “as a minority,” she continues,

Tejada: And I can actually relate to this because I am a minority group and if we. . . whether we want to accept it or not, race is extremely influential in today’s society and there have been instances in which I have been kind of. . . you know. . . scared of expressing myself. Because-- for example. . . I. . . I tend to sometimes speak in a loud voice, sometimes. And this gives other people an impression

of Hispanic people as being loud. And stuff like that. I also refer to the Kanye West thing at the VMA's [suppressed laughter] where his act, which was-- he was very rude and everything, but because of what he did, and I have encountered many people on campus. . . students who have told me that black people are insensitive and-- or. . . rude actually. So this is an example of how, you know, one action or a single word can contribute to this view. And how these prejudice ideologies kind of, you know, affect our decision on whether to remain silent or speak and express ourselves.

I'm mapping Tejada's use of "kind ofs" and "you knows" in this transcript excerpt onto her use of parentheses in her sentence. Her various pauses and shifts in tone reveal a rhetorical context that Tejada is still formalizing, both in her paper and in her relationship to her peers. Her words reveal her strong conviction, and yet, the presence of hedging above illustrates her awareness that she might be speaking to an audience who likely must be persuaded when it comes to the reality behind her words. This relationship to audience is formed in her use of parentheses in her sentence. The connections between racism and Tejada's life as a student has not been made explicit in her written description of her paper's purpose; however, her purposes become clearer as she speaks it.

Tejada: I chose it because my essay is about things that influence us and our choices on whether to express ourselves or, you know, remain silent. And this sentence is really referring to the. . . the quote that I said earlier in earlier classes about Wallace [an instructor-led sentence workshop] in which he says that, you know, things that are said. . . basically society who. . . those people who are not part of the dominant culture are basically it's hard for them to express themselves. In some cases when they do they're rendered invisible. You know? Not heard. Not understood.

After Tejada provides this context, she begins to field questions from her peers. For example, when AJ, an immigrant from Jordan and multilingual writer, asks her to explain again how stereotypes affect speaking or silence after she introduces her paper, I again note more audience cues in her response:

Tejada: Oh, well. Like I said it's like. . . The way you feel. . . I'm sorry. I'm sorry. . . I believe it relates to that because I, myself, have been in situations in which things that I've said or things that I do have

actually contributed to my entire race as a whole. Some people are kind of, I don't know, I'm just saying there are just some people who take your actions. . . This is just directed towards people who are a part of minority groups, obviously, who are permanently affected by this but. . . I just feel like there are situations in which one is presented with. . . pretty much anything you say or anything you do is actually, you know, judged and how that [AJ: So. . . ] fear of being judged [AJ: So. . . ] kind of affects how you express yourself.

Tejada's sense of relationship here becomes more defined. She tells AJ that, actually, her sentence is "just directed towards people who are a part of minority groups." Such an audience, however, is not invoked by her choice to place her minority group membership in parentheses.

As Tejada's workshop is heading toward a close, I feel like I have to say something about the parentheses or the length, something to help Tejada at that moment get to a direct sense of her insight that she was implicating herself in that she was placing her identity in parentheses. I want to connect form and content together, as well as to prompt Tejada to consider more critically what her parentheses could mean for her as what she names as her *minority* voice. My struggle to respond to this tangled meaning and also my relationship to it as her white teacher reveals itself in my question to her.

I ask, "Do you want help making this sentence more—do you like it... was it just the idea?" I want to encourage her critical thinking, not lessen it by focusing too much on those parentheses; but at the same time, the sentence is long, and I have a hard time keeping in mind the various relationships. Tejada responds, in a polite, albeit uncritical manner, "If anyone has any suggestions I will gladly take them." She gets a response from AJ, who tells her "Maybe make two sentences out of that." She jokes with him, "Two? And that still wouldn't be too long? Oh I know I tend to do that." At that point, two women whom I assume are identifying with this minority category as Tejada has presented it in her sentence, contribute. Sonya is from an immigrant family from Lebanon and Taquana is a black woman from Boston; both speak up with some affirming feedback:

Sonya: As a part of a minority group, in parenthesis, maybe you could just start with that. Then you could do a comma, I and then you could. . .

Me: Yeah, you're parenthesis 'as part of a minority group' is kind of

interesting for what you're saying.

Taquana: Yea.

Tejada: Okay. . . Any other. . .

Me: Don't you think? I mean. . .

Sonya: Yeah, no no. Because I think that is a big part of the sentence. . .

Me: Yeah, and yet it's in parenthesis which is like I'm being kind of. . . [whispering] I'm whispering.

Sonya: Yeah.

After this exchange, Tejada thanks us all and says that she will take it "under consideration." The workshop's performative whisper, a prompt, to Tejada to consider her options linger.

Between this workshop and the end of the semester reflection, our coursework and Tejada's relationship to it bear parallels. Take, for example, another interaction in the following unit, *Examining Literacies of Power through Privilege*. One day during this unit, I conducted a sentence workshop based on the published writer Gloria Anzaldúa. Students were assigned to read an excerpt from Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, and I had chosen to discuss in class a sentence where I noted sociocultural style in Anzaldúa's use of the word "Anglo." I chose it to introduce how Anzaldúa's perspective on linguistic colonization is performed by how she combines both English and Spanish. That is, I wanted to show them that such perspectives could not only be expressed or argued in a text, but also *performed* through styling. She writes, "*El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua*. Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out." After we acknowledge that one sentence is in Spanish and the other in English, I ask about the translation differences in these sentences. We first went word for word in the sentence.

Me: Anglo. Never heard that word? Tejada, what does that word mean?

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Tejada: Um, They use it to refer to just people, basically.

Me: Ok, people of color?

Tejada: Um, yea. Actually, it depends. You know how like they use to like, like Anglo Saxon people, that's what they are trying to say.

Me: Oh, so old white people?

Tejada: Yea.

As I reflect back to Tejada's sentence workshop and the sentence within parentheses, I notice how her sentence as shared in workshop connects "a wild tongue" and the Anglo power structure that cuts tongues; yet here Tejada's argument about race and identity now brackets that relationship. Her initial answer to my question "what does Anglo mean" reveals to me now how her response that white people are "just people" in the initial response to the question connects to her sentence workshop. However, there are differences here worth pointing out. First, the "race" of the Anglo was something I made explicit. I did so because I want to focus on relationships between race and language—the lexical choice of *Anglo* is very important in the Spanish sentence, both because of its social meaning *and* its styling. We then go back to our word-by-word translation.

Tejada: [interrupts] *con cara de inocente...* is like with an innocent face *nos arrancó la lengua*. . . basically like he snatched her tongue. . . that's what it says.

Me: Ok, so the Anglo snatched her tongue? That's what the Spanish says.

Tejada: [agrees]

Me: So, the next sentence is "wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out." What's the relationship between those two ideas? So, would you say it's in the same, like, meaning space?

Tejada: [Shakes head no.]

Me: Ok, why? What does it make you think about?

Nick: Who. Who cut her tongue out.

Nick's response, a white student from Martha's Vinyard, reveals the power of this sentence, since it is the Anglo who becomes connected to the reality of the English sentence of "wild tongues" being "cut out." Perhaps Tejada or her peers lingered on this contrast. Who cuts tongues? What does cutting a tongue look like? What makes a tongue wild?

It is now December when Tejada reflects on her sentence writing in an end of the semester reflective assignment. In her reflection, she discusses a sentence pattern she has noticed—a pattern that affects both what she writes about as well as how she writes. This pattern, according to Tejada, is that she writes about "social issues" in an "extremely formal [and] extended manner." She concludes her reflection by showing how she has disrupted the pattern a bit by the end of the semester. While she is still writing about social issues, she now "[goes] from extremely long, formal, and general sentences to more direct, short, and thought related sentences." She reflects on the sentence she presented at her workshop and what she learned from the workshop in her end of semester reflection. She writes,

In the sentence workshop for Unit 2, I used an elongated sentence "... I, (as part of a minority group) have witnessed and experienced how a single word or action on the part of those who are not categorized within the dominant culture, has contributed to the growth of stereotypical racial views and also limits the choices of expression among those who are victimized by prejudice ideologies." In this sentence I discuss the manner in which social hierarchy affects the "growth of stereotypical racial views" and how it limits "the choices of expression" of those who are "victimized" by it. Within this sentence, I noticed that I wrote "as part of a minority group" within a parenthesis, which seems as if I am refusing to express it completely or almost whispering it. In a way, I also begin to think about how society affects me instead of writing about it in a more general form. I also described the sentence as one of crucial importance throughout my essay and directly associate the "growth of stereotypical racial views" as affecting the choices people make

on whether to speak or remain silent. Now that I think about it, I believe that in a way, I am expressing a form of silence by enclosing the fact that I am a minority within parenthesis.

While it is interesting to me that Tejada does not mention the sentence workshops explicitly here as contexts that brought her attention to this conventional choice, she does use critical reasoning in relation to it. Her consideration occurs in a sociocultural context, regarding the effects of her conventional option. The revised sentence illustrates how she also chose to make her position in the sentence more direct and open in her relationship to audience, since she no longer chose parentheses to bracket that relationship. Finally, she reflects that this choice, “[n]ow that I think about it,” was “expressing a form of silence.” Therefore, to apply Tejada’s reasoning behind this recognition, this suggests to me her micro consideration of how she relates to her social identity vis-à-vis the parentheses and enregistering her voice. This enregistering process helped affirm her voice from a position of relationship. She has now positioned herself in an explicit conversation about race, power, and education. *Wild tongues can’t be tamed.*

### **Affirming Our Students’ Voices in Basic Writing**

[I]f we focus attention on white property in the educational arena, we can begin to expose it and thus prevent it from operating unnoticed. (30) . . . [W]e must teach [students] to recognize the role that race plays in the academy, help them to negotiate this academic environment more successfully, and ultimately give them the tools to change this environment in ways that they see fit.—Steve Lamos, “Basic Writing” (40)

Steve Lamos takes hold of our camera lens and pans out to a more abstract notion of academic literacy as white property. Recently, Inoue also has shown how any pedagogical action is working through assessment ecologies, and he argues such an ecology better be an Anti-racist one. Both Inoue’s and Lamos’s projects involve the practical ways teachers of Basic Writing can position themselves as Anti-racist in the decisions we make about the Basic Writing subject. For Lamos, this involves a macro critique of race and education, while for Inoue this is a more strategic design of laboring practices. For Basic Writing, what role do we see our students playing in such pedagogy?



I ask this question because, like Inoue, and Lamos, *I* hadn't asked this question; instead, *I* through my curricula, practices, and feedback was making systems of privilege visible *to them*.

Tejada and her peers, however, complicate this subject-object relationship, the one where *we* woke teachers make visible systems of power to *those* students. Yet, looking back at these curricular texts now, despite theorizing whiteness operating through systems of privilege, I notice that language curricula that focus on white privilege in the abstract will not necessarily correspond to our students or ourselves making a direct stylistic connection to their and our own positioning within such a system in practice. Even the *most woke* Basic Writing curricula, ones that explicitly teach how privilege operates within all of our lives despite our intentions or desires for transforming that racial reality as individuals living in a systemically racist culture, will remain abstract unless the people in the room ground it with a sociocultural approach to style (McIntosh; Wildman and Davis).

As a white teacher of Basic Writing in the Fall of 2009, I was not equipped with the everyday reality of racial micro-aggression on a college campus and did not encourage, as I would now, establishing a shared lens with students. I also believe that had I also been in closer proximity—that is, intimate daily living with the frustrations and emotional challenges of exclusion, discrimination, abuse, and aggression—our classroom could have been healthier and more transformative. I was too tightly bound to a curricular map—an effect of whiteness, in how I understood what it meant to teach who I was teaching—and this realization helps me to see how the term micro-aggression continues to resonate.

In the 1970s in her role as Massachusetts Institute of Technology's ombudsman, Mary Rowe's term for recurring acts of unintentional prejudice is "micro-inequity," a concept she defined to theorize the experiences of waves and waves of "untraditional people in any context." Applied to my reflection on my own position, the inequity I committed was about privilege; how I prioritized *my* pedagogical relationship rather than the experiences of the people in the room. At the same time, by sharing the stage with my students, I think we all got lucky. Our luck comes in the form of Tejada's writing, who brought the day-to-day, embodied experience of racism inside her own head, and through collaboration, peer interaction, and reflection, negotiated it in a sociocultural context. Her courage is the luck part of this refiguring.

Later, in her career, Rowe developed language for how we can bring about more luck, and how we can refigure how we relate, through the mentoring practice of micro-affirmation. She writes,

Micro-affirmations are tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening. Micro-affirmations lie in the practice of generosity, in consistently giving credit to others--in providing comfort and support when others are in distress, . . . Micro-affirmations include the myriad details of fair, specific, timely, consistent and clear feedback that help a person build on strength and correct weakness. (4)

Explicit micro-affirmations help us recognize our voice's power in academic discourse. Noticing this refiguring as luck and courage helps me now recognize some Anti-racist features of styling for basic writers.

Synthesizing Rowe's writing, and also Beverly Tatum's ABC approach to diversity, here is how I see micro-affirmation working:

- *Affirm identities by opening "tiny doors," but not directing steps.* As you work to establish the openings for students to step through, pay attention to how these opportunities teach a class audience different sociocultural perspectives. Resist predetermining the micro activity by using your privilege to decide on which sentence of your students' writing are up for discussion. Instead, invite your students to be front and center directing and participating in sociocultural response.
- *Build community by reflecting on what happens.* For yourself, reflect on your classroom's styling interactions and explicitly recognize, by pointing out to students directly, their "gestures of inclusion and caring" to their peers and how their participation connects to the learning environment. For example, looking back, I might have written to Sonya after the workshop and shared "I'm glad you are in our class, Sonya. You pointing out to Tejada that her use of parenthesis was interesting for what she is saying is exactly the kind of close look at our language choices that I hope happens in these workshops."
- *Cultivate leadership by becoming a student of your students.* As you continually prep for the next class, review the previous classes' sociocultural response. Ask yourself, how can I use my instructor time to cultivate what I am learning from my students and how they are learning from each other?

Given these recommendations, listening in a sociocultural approach to style seems paramount. A sociocultural listening invites student-led dis-

cussions that index racism to enter classrooms on students' own terms. In this way, a teacher must not unilaterally determine which aspects of student writing should warrant private feedback and which aspects are public. Given the routineness of micro-aggressions occurring on our campuses, we must provide a sociocultural space to examine together the effects of such conditions on our meaning making. The voices of our students, their points of view, should be where we might start. Our role is listening, and then, joining our students as we affirm sociocultural impressions.

### Notes

1. Linguistic anthropologists and style researchers have not concerned themselves with a speaker's own self-consciousness about the process of enregisterment--a context that matters to Basic Writing.
2. In 2009, I conducted classroom-based research on the practice of sentence workshops to learn more about the choices and reasons behind them that students were making in their sentence-writing. Tejada was a student in this course. Theorizing this data as a case example of enregisterment, and using it to argue for a sociocultural approach to style in Basic Writing contexts, however, happened years after I had conducted teacher research in Basic Writing for my dissertation at a large, public, Northeastern University. I have published another case from this same initial study in an earlier issue in *JBW*.

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