Renewing Commitments to Minoritized Writers

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> We are in the middle of an extraordinary social experiment: the attempt to provide education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy. To have any prayer of success, we'll need . . . a philosophy of language and literacy that affirms the diverse sources of linguistic competence and deepens our understanding of the ways class and culture blind us to the richness of those sources.
>
> —Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*, 238

In the fifty-some years that *Composition Studies* [formerly *Freshman English News*] has been mapping our field, much attention has been given to so-called minoritized writers.[1] The initial analysis of minoritized writers in *Freshman English News*, for instance, was almost entirely framed by the construct of remediation—by what we teachers could do for "those" students. In her 1972 "Lessons from Experience: Teaching Minority Students," Susan Koprowski writes,

> The difference in teaching a remedial Freshman English course to educationally deprived white students and teaching the same material to Black and Chicano students may be calculated in terms of a single problem—attitude. Minority students can make the white instructor feel defensive, paralyzed by insecurity in dealing with what may be a fundamentally hostile class. (4)

The following year, William D. Lutz echoed Koprowski, framing the composition course as one of "survival" for minoritized students "because of the additional problems of culture and language differences" (4). Of course, both scholars were writing in response to the nationwide open-enrollment movement of the early 1970s, most famously researched by Mina Shaughnessy, whose 1977 *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teachers of Basic Writing* heralded a new look at the status of so-called Basic Writers, most of whom, according to Shaughnessy, grew up in "one of New York's racial or ethnic enclaves" (3).[2] Since its publication, *Errors and Expectations* has been heavily critiqued, leading to more linguistically aware research that supports students' right to their own language (Baker-Bell; Canagarajah; Clark and Ivanic; Elbow; Gilyard; Horner and Lu; Inoue and Poe; Kynard; Lippi-Green; Milson-Whyte et al.; Paris; Perryman-Clark et al.; Rose; Richardson; Ruiz; Smitherman, and many others). Yet despite our field's awareness of language

varieties and prejudice, Black and Latinx students continue to populate our professional imaginary as Basic Writers or as needing to be flagged in first year writing courses on the basis of "the skin that they speak" (Delpit). In short, as Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams so insightfully emphasized, our discipline has conflated students of color with basic writing, to position them as "non-universal outsiders" and "aliens to the traditions which other students lay claim" (569).

Such a perspective reflects the staying power of racism and whiteliness rather than any so-called student need(s). Renewing our field's commitment to minoritized students requires sustained attention—not to any perceived deficits on their part—but to the specific ways minoritized students are challenging this longstanding deficit model (and concomitant racism) to enact their writerly agency and thereby successfully pursue their own writing goals.

The Covid-19 Exigence

> Composition scholars should . . . strive to create pedagogies that . . . take . . . exclusionary practices into consideration.
>
> —Iris Ruiz, *Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities*, 143

Academe is at the tipping point with regard to an authentic commitment to—and understanding of—minoritized undergraduates, starting during their first year. In addition to being flagged in their writing classes as needing correction and help, these students also regularly face other microaggressions (from peers and instructors alike), experience cultural isolation, and withstand repeated racism—especially at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), which too often lack *authentic*, culturally sensitive programming. Little wonder then that Black and Latinx students attain lower academic credentials than their white counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). While 40.1% of white adults over the age of twenty-five have completed a bachelor's or higher degree, only 26.1% of Black and only 18.8% of Hispanic[3] adults have reached the same levels of education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In addition, from Fall 2019 to Fall 2021 during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Black enrollment in higher education declined by 12% while Latinx enrollments declined by 6.9% (National Student Clearing House). Within California's community college system, where more that 40% of students are Latinx, Latinx students account for nearly half of those who have left academe due to the pandemic (Brown).[4]

The preceding statistics paint a grim context for minoritized students, especially given the reverberations of Covid-19 in terms of employment,

isolation, socially mediated communication, and educational inequity. The transition to remote learning, for instance, was particularly problematic for Black and Latinx students, who were more likely than their white peers to experience internet connectivity issues that affected academic participation and performance (Means and Neisler).[5] Yet these same students offer us models of engaged pedagogy that not only dispel the myth of the minoritized basic writer but spark a reconceptualization of our teacherly commitment, as we demonstrate in the following section.

Strategic Enactments of Writerly Agency as Excellence and Activism

> I love language. Language, to me, is what sunrise is to the birds.
>
> —Jimmy Santiago Baca, *Stories from the Edge*, 85

Despite the constraints of Covid and the multigenerational persistence of whiteliness in academe, Black and Latinx writers continue to carve space for excellence and activism. For example, Jada, a Black participant in Ray's dissertation research, is majoring in broadcast journalism and serves as the campus ambassador for prospective minority students. Despite the numbing regularity of microaggressions she experiences, Jada repeatedly writes and produces pieces that teach her peers and instructors alike about campus-wide racial hostility—her work is engaged pedagogy that distinguishes her from the white students in their PWI:

> I see my classmates doing fluff pieces . . . like the [football team] won this weekend. . . . But an unarmed Black man just got shot. . . . For me it's important to kind of show the things that people want to like ignore or want to like not pay as much attention to. Because of the white privilege my classmates have, they are able to overlook that and talk about what they want to talk about. I feel like I have an obligation to talk about the things that nobody wants to.[6]

In exerting her writerly agency and controlling some features of the racial narrative, Jada educates her readers about the racial reality of campus and beyond, successfully negotiating what Collin Craig calls the "cultures of insularity" that characterize PWIs and often alienate minoritized students. Yes, Jada sometimes feels alienated, isolated within a PWI, but her writing serves as a vehicle for Black advocacy, a sense of purpose, and a link to the broader Black community. She is a writer with a clear understanding of exigence, audience, context, and purpose. Jada is no basic writer—she is a writer with agency.

One feature of Jada's writerly agency is her deliberate rhetorical strategy at the level of syntax and grammar. In his discourse-based interviews[7] with Jada, Ray identified Jada's strategic shifts to the imperative mood[8] as her way of reminding her white professors that they are implicated in her critiques. For example, in concluding an essay that critiques "culture of poverty" tropes with respect to African American men, Jada writes: "Overall, when passing judgment on these victims, acknowledge the racist and discriminatory factors that have affected them." When asked if she would consider using a grammatical mood more consistent with the rest of the essay, Jada declined, stating she made this shift to help her mostly white readers see themselves in her demand that racism and discrimination be acknowledged as contributing factors to poverty and crime. The tacit knowledge informing her choice demonstrates Jada's keen awareness of the rhetorical situation—as well as some of the affordances—of writing while Black in white spaces**.**

Such agentive strategies occur across the full range of writing processes. For example, Alexandra, another undergraduate student in Ray's study, demonstrates how she uses a style of culturally informed prewriting (invention) in a way that might not resonate with a writing teacher at a PWI:

> *A lo loco* writing for me is like when I know I have to write something and, like, maybe I have a few ideas or maybe I don't, but that's the first step in my writing . . . kind of like a brainstorming in a sense . . . but I write everything that comes to mind.

In Puerto Rico, *a lo loco* indicates anything done wildly or with crazy abandon, sparking connotations of playful creativity—but such creativity leads to productivity only if the teacher gets out of the way. Decades ago, Peter Elbow admonished us that "freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact, there must be no discussion or comment at all" (*Writing without Teachers* 4). Alexandra informed Ray that grounding herself in the ways of *la isla* allows her to claim her sense of belonging and writerly agency—despite her feelings of cultural isolation at a PWI.

Jada and Alexandra offer writerly experiences of rhetorical action, action rooted in a cultural-ethnic community within a PWI. Their writing processes are purposeful, agential, and didactic. Jada's self-sponsored, activist journalism that speaks "b(l)ack to institutional discourses" (Craig), and Alexandra's *a lo loco* embodies a purposeful writerly negotiation of context that evokes affective traces of the writer's community of belonging (Flower). In short, these two minoritized students know what they're doing—and why. Although the constraints might be considerable, both undergraduate writers are navigating

issues of racialized expectations, personal purpose and resilience, and educational inequity within the context of a PWI.

Getting Demands of Whiteliness Out of the Way of Black and Latinx Excellence and Activism

> Caring teachers are . . . enlightened witnesses for our students. Since our task is to nurture their academic growth, we are called to serve them.
>
> —bell hooks, *Teaching Community*, 89

The senseless murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Daunte Wright, Andre Hill, and many others—together with the Black Lives Matter movement—catalyzed universities across the nation to become more aware of minoritized students' experience with prejudice/racism, microaggression, and inequity. As communication scholars Karen Ashcraft and Brenda J. Allen observe, these murders created a climate where "readiness to 'take a knee' and declare that Black Lives Matter became a litmus test of organizational credibility, instead of a controversial stance" (598). Large-scale responses at PWIs include establishing social justice initiatives; Offices of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); and other such programs, always with the hope that such programs and centers will level the playing ground.

And on a smaller scale, compositionists are also attending to the inequities that have long been visible and practiced in our writing classrooms. Whether these enterprises culminate in mere image management or authentic implementation, the pivot from a kind of disciplinary obliviousness (success is linked to the acquisition of Edited American English) to one of recognition and respect for multiple ways of languaging is rarely seamless or smooth. Still, these large- and smaller-scale DEI initiatives have become a marker of institutional legitimacy. And such shifts in thinking are encouraging, even if DEI projects risk becoming "feel-good" schemes rather than indicators of a genuine antiracist telos. An open question, then, is whether DEI initiatives will facilitate or frustrate the educational arc of minoritized students. To ensure the former, DEI initiatives must include the voices and perspectives of minoritized students. After all, these students can provide first-hand accounts of which policies actually work for them and which do not, both at the level of individual strategies and institutional structures.

As Beatrice Méndez Newman reminds us, "Student voices are our best source for illuminating the obstacles" of education (20). Therefore, the payoff of listening to students, to asking them how they're navigating the academic terrain of a PWI, is considerable. With more nuanced understandings of how students experience, negotiate, and redefine academe along antiracist and

more inclusive lines, university-wide and programmatic equity initiatives can become more focused, more malleable, more successful.

Authentically Renewing Our Commitment

> Commitment to engaged pedagogy carries with it the willingness to be responsible, not to pretend that professors do not have the power to change the direction of our students' lives.
>
> —bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 206

The writers in Ray's study evince rhetorical strategies and tacit knowledges that account for the racial dynamics of context. That is, they plan and compose arguments in ways that educate white audiences (peers and instructors alike) about racially motivated violence and everyday racism**.** These students tap into familiar resources from their communities of belonging, and in ways that promote their self-efficacy, demonstrating day after day their rhetorical qualifications for belonging at a PWI, often going beyond mere requirements to earn the admiration and respect of their instructors and peers. In other words, the participants in Ray's study handily challenge deficit models of "the other" in composition studies via their strategic enactments of writerly agency, all the while negotiating and redefining contexts of academe along antiracist lines.

We can continue to recommit—and learn from—these students when we get our whiteliness out of the way. As the preceding epigraph from the late bell hooks suggests, renewing our academic commitment means taking responsibility for what is humanly possible on our campuses and in our writing classrooms. We can start with getting our whiteliness out of the way, listening to—and learning from our students. We still have much to learn.

Notes

1. This essay represents just a narrow slice of Ray's dissertation project on the writerly strategies and agency of minoritized writers in PWIs.

2. For many compositionists, Shaughnessy's error-awareness scholarship overshadowed the language-awareness scholarship of Geneva Smitherman, whose *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* also appeared in 1977.

3. The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term "Hispanic."

4. According to the National Student Clearing House, there was an 8% drop in overall enrollments across the U.S. during the pandemic, with community colleges losing 15% of their students, with Native American students the most negatively affected.

5. According to Barbara Means and Julie Neisler, the rates of internet connectivity issues affecting academic participation were 17%among Black students, 23% among Latinx students, and 12% among white students.

6. This excerpt comes from an IRB-approved study exploring how Black and Latinx undergraduates use writing to pursue goals in the context of a mid-Atlantic PWI. IRB#: 18058. In this study, Ray is working with Black and Latinx undergraduates at a PWI.

7. See Lee Odell, Dixie Goswami, and Anne Herrington.

8. With its second-person subject, "you," either implied or stated.

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