

Access and Exclusion: Chinese Undergraduates and Basic Writing in the Global University

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ABSTRACT: This article draws on a qualitative study of Chinese international undergraduates at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Throughout, I argue that these students' FYW experiences compel BW instructors and WPAs to reevaluate pedagogies long thought to empower underrepresented students, ones rooted in our encounters since Open Admissions with working-class students, multilingual writers, and students of color. For my participants, these pedagogies narrowed their educational goals, casting them to the margins of a campus where they had been given unprecedented access (and where access had contracted for domestic students of color). Their stories reveal a university transformed by profit-driven internationalization, one that requires new approaches to writing assessment, assignment design, and programmatic activism in order to secure access for historically underrepresented domestic students and international students.

KEYWORDS: access; activism; Basic Writing; belonging; Chinese international students; critical pedagogy; ELL; English language learning; international students; internationalization; race

In the fifty years since Open Admissions, Basic Writing scholars have routinely called for expanded access to higher education. Just as often, this advocacy has been at odds with institutional priorities. From the start, faculty and campus administrators walked back Open Admissions and other educational opportunity programs (EOPs), citing concerns about institutional prestige and underprepared students (Horner 202-3). More recently, these programs have been casualties of contracting state budgets that have cut student aid and cultivated a wealthier (and whiter) student body at state flagships (Jaquette et. al. 638; Lamos, "Minority-Serving" 5). Yet, even as Basic Writing has consistently opposed these trends, our advocacy for students has often made us unwitting accomplices. In our efforts to secure institutional support for our students, Basic Writing instructors and WPAs have often resorted to the same deficit terms used by those opposed to EOPs,

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with the result being that “we end up arguing with words that sabotage our argument” (Rose, “Language” 342). This is clear in recent efforts by California State University WPAs to replace no-credit remedial courses with a stretch model, when WPAs nonetheless described underrepresented CSU students as remedial and deficient—the very language used by administrators and policymakers in favor of no-credit courses (Melzer 90). Likewise, our placement mechanisms and curricula, especially at institutions with no-credit courses focused on isolated skills, alienate our most vulnerable students from the university’s research and knowledge production (Rose, “Language” 352). The result is that the students we claim to support are marked as institutional outsiders upon their arrival to campus, reinforcing larger patterns of racial and economic exclusion (Shor 92-3).

In this article, I join Basic Writing scholars who have grappled with our field’s uneasy relationship to access, in particular those who have worked to identify how our efforts to expand access can unwittingly reinscribe students of color and multilingual writers as remedial institutional outsiders (e.g. Horner, Melzer). Specifically, I study one group whose experiences reveal a good deal about access as colleges and universities experience ongoing state disinvestment: Chinese international students. These students, who on many campuses pay full-price tuition, have been given unprecedented access to US higher education in a time when institutional support for domestic students of color and state appropriations for higher education have dwindled (Folbre 45-6, Jaquette et. al. 638, Kannon et. al. 84).¹ Drawing on qualitative research at the largest US enroller of Chinese undergraduates, I document how these students quickly come to see their US educations as unstable investments from which they must extract the maximum return possible, often in response to the university’s failure to support their educational goals even after aggressively recruiting them.² Across my interviews, participants shared how they recalibrated their educational goals in response to ethnic isolation that defied their expectations of US campus life, a move that they hoped would recuperate at least some return from their educational investments. Troublingly, these shifts in their educational and social goals most often occurred as they negotiated monolingual ideologies on campus, ideologies that sent persuasive messages about their linguistic and cultural belonging even as they moved through writing classrooms that aimed to empower students of color and multilingual writers.

The case study at this article’s core—focused on a student named Ruby (a pseudonym)—compels us to reevaluate classroom practices long thought to empower underrepresented students, practices rooted in Basic Writing’s

historic encounters with cultural and linguistic difference (Trimbur 220). More broadly, though, experiences like Ruby's also complicate narratives about access that have guided placement, curricula, and activism in Basic Writing. Charting a throughline from Open Admissions, scholars have repeatedly shown that access to higher education remains a benefit largely reserved for the white middle and upper classes, both through institutional policy and deep-seated cultural beliefs about who ought to attend college (Kynard, "Stayin Woke" 520; Lamos, "Basic" 27-8; Martinez, "The American Way" 585; Prendergast, *Literacy* 37). Amidst declining student of color enrollment at many flagships (Baumhardt) and increased racist violence nationally, such insights must continue to inform Basic Writing. Yet, I worry that the political contexts we often imagine for our work can eclipse the full complexity of race on today's campuses. Specifically, the long shadow cast by composition's civil-rights era advocacy (Bruch and Marback 651) obscures a new force defining campus racial politics: the corporate university's revenue-driven entrance into the global higher ed market. As scholar-teachers committed to access, Basic Writing professionals must grapple with how recruitment and enrollment decisions are now tied also to the instabilities of global "fast capitalism" (Lu, "An Essay"). We must identify how our classrooms quietly uphold ideologies of language, culture, and race that frustrate the educational goals of students like Ruby, who experience both transnational educational mobility and longstanding domestic racism. Doing so is essential to enacting equitable models of access and student support in a time where campus race politics are being reshaped by a higher ed marketplace that is increasingly global.

Before turning to Ruby's story, I first introduce my larger study of Chinese undergraduates, noting in particular how this group's experience of the corporate-international university provides unique insight for Basic Writing and composition scholars committed to access. I then turn to Ruby's experiences, noting in particular how she navigated a campus where she felt peers and professors were open to her linguistic and cultural differences—but where she nonetheless came to see those differences as deficits that prevented her academic success and full participation in campus life. Unfortunately, Ruby's growing sense of campus alienation persisted even as she encountered writing pedagogies long thought to create space for difference in universities that still privilege white linguistic and cultural codes. Indeed, as was the case for most of my research participants, these pedagogies actually narrowed Ruby's educational and social goals, a finding that sounds an alarm about our classrooms' ability to dislodge damaging linguistic and

racial ideologies on internationally diverse US campuses. Following Ruby's case study, I consider the wider implications of Ruby's story, focusing in particular on how access and campus race politics have been transformed by profit-driven internationalization. Finally, in the conclusion, I outline approaches to writing assessment, assignment design, and programmatic activism that can equip students and writing instructors alike to publicly demand access for historically underrepresented students, all while securing the educational goals of the international students like Ruby who bear the burden of public disinvestment.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS: CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES IN US WRITING CLASSROOMS

This article draws on a qualitative study of Chinese undergraduates at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign during the 2014-15 academic year. At that time, the campus was a leading enroller of students from China, placing it at the center of a national press conversation about international enrollment (e.g. Belkin and Jordan, *Tea Leaf*). Since then, Chinese undergraduates have remained in the national spotlight due to ongoing tensions with China over trade and intellectual property, suspicions about their political loyalties, and the uncertain status of international students amidst the pandemic (Silver) and an increasingly hostile immigration climate (Wong and Barnes). Likewise, the U of I has continued to attract media attention for its aggressive recruitment of international students and the fiscal motives of its enrollment practices. As on many campuses, the international student population at the U of I grew precipitously following the 2008 financial crisis, when many states slashed public higher education funding. In Illinois, these cuts began an era of austerity that lingers today (McGee), at one point leading to fears that some of the state's public universities could close (Brown) or lose their accreditation (Seltzer). Meanwhile, the university turned to international students as a revenue source, with administrators publicly touting the fiscal benefits of this decision (Cohen) even though the Illinois legislature had been historically opposed to out-of-state enrollment (Abelmann, "The American University"). As a result, the Chinese undergraduate population at the U of I grew 250% between 2009 and 2019 (Final), compared to a national increase of 189% during the same period (Fast Facts).³ By 2014, nearly 10% of the first-year class at the U of I was from China alone (Cohen).

The Chinese undergraduates I interviewed were thus at the center of forces that, while uniquely felt on individual campuses, were remaking US

higher education: deteriorating fiscal conditions, growing demand in China for Western education (Fong 3-4), and the emergence of “internationalization” as an institutional buzzword on par with “diversity.” My 28 literacy life history interviews (Brandt 9-11) probed the impact of these institutional shifts on Chinese undergraduates themselves and college writing instruction more broadly in effort to address the following: What forms of cultural and economic capital do Chinese undergraduates hope to cultivate by pursuing a US undergraduate degree? How do notions of linguistic and cultural difference—as well as US histories of linguistic and racial discrimination—shape how they envision their future careers and economic lives? Finally, what do their stories of segregation reveal about race in FYW classrooms, situated as they are in institutions that increasingly negotiate divergent civic, international, and corporate missions? In pursuing these questions, my study aimed not only to understand the academic motivations of a student population increasingly present in FYW and Basic Writing courses at the U of I and other institutions; I hoped to also understand how this transnationally-mobile student cohort negotiated long-documented forms of racial and linguistic discrimination on US campuses.

In interviews, participants reflected on their general attitudes toward reading and writing, their experiences learning English in China prior to study abroad, and their experiences writing at the University of Illinois (with an emphasis in particular on their first-year writing courses). Participants in these interviews were recruited mainly through the assistance of writing center tutors and first-year writing instructors, who shared information about my project with tutees and former students. I limited my participants to students enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and business fields. 69% of Chinese undergraduates enroll in these disciplines at US universities (Desilver), often because they fear they lack the linguistic fluency to major in the social sciences or humanities (Fong 112). At the U of I, this number was higher, with 75% of Chinese undergraduates enrolled in STEM and business programs (Edwards). Many Chinese students are attracted to such fields by the cultural cachet attached to them in China, and my research participants in particular believed that a degree from the University of Illinois’s highly-ranked Colleges of Business or Engineering would later give them an advantage on the job market (see also Redden, “At U of Illinois”). However, I limited participants to students in these disciplines not only to cultivate a participant pool reflective of the demographic majority of Chinese international students on US campuses; my decision was informed also by my desire to reach “theoretical saturation” through purposive sampling

(Guest et. al. 65). This decision proved critical, enabling me to (1) confirm among my participants the academic motivations Fong documented and (2) understand their shared experiences, as a student population with similar educational and professional aspirations, of linguistic and racial discrimination. Moreover, it seemed particularly apt to study students in STEM and business given that they are at the center of many STEM and business colleges' fiscal strategies, with the U of I Colleges of Engineering and Business even taking out a \$60 million insurance policy in 2018 to insulate themselves against any potential decrease in Chinese student enrollment (Bothwell).

I want to note here that the bulk of my research participants were enrolled in the campus's mainstream composition course, including the student at the center of this article. Yet, my study was motivated by my experiences as a Basic Writing instructor at the University of Illinois. When I began my graduate work at the U of I Center for Writing Studies in fall 2011, I was assigned to teach Basic Writing courses due to my prior experience teaching BW at DePaul University—and because of my extensive work with adult, underrepresented, and multilingual writers at DePaul's writing center. As international enrollment rose steeply, the University of Illinois's Basic Writing program—which had historically served domestic students of color and was initially created to offer race-conscious writing instruction (Lamos, *Interests* 44)—shrank in half (Course Explorer).⁴ At the same time, international students came to comprise 80% of the writing center's clientele and were enrolling in the university's "mainstream" writing course in larger numbers than ever before.⁵

That the percentage of African American students in particular was declining as international enrollment grew (Das Garennes)—and that university administrators were pointing to international enrollment as a measure of diversity (Redden, "At U of Illinois")—raised questions about access that cannot be answered by looking only to the cohorts of basic writers who have historically been featured in our research. Specifically, to fully understand access in a time of contracting support for domestic students of color *and* rapid internationalization, Basic Writing scholars must work to understand more than just how and why institutional enrollment priorities have shifted away from the students our programs have typically served (e.g. Webb-Sunderhaus); we must also examine how and why our institutions have come to privilege other student cohorts in recruitment and enrollment while the presence of domestic students of color has decreased drastically. I thus study a group often not featured in Basic Writing scholarship, similar to Kelly Ritter's examination of students who don't fit the stock image of basic

writers in field-defining texts like *Errors and Expectations*. Doing so can help us better understand the institutional forces that shape our students and programs, ones whose impact we may not fully appreciate when we focus solely on Basic Writing programs and students.

Moreover, because who is designated a basic writer shifts across institutions (Matsuda, “Basic Writing” 67-8; Ritter, *Before* 38), my participants’ experiences are instructive for those whose Basic Writing programs *are* increasingly comprised of international students and multilingual writers (see Matsuda, “Let’s” 142). Even though my participants tended to enroll in the U of I’s mainstream writing course, they may have just as easily been placed in Basic Writing or “ESL” courses at institutions with different placement criteria. These students’ experiences also speak to longstanding concerns in Basic Writing about campus linguistic discrimination, clear in a steady stream of stories from the *Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Ed* about their supposed linguistic deficiencies, underpreparation, and academic dishonesty (e.g. Barker, Bartlett and Fischer). Finally, like more traditional basic writers, my participants experienced linguistic discrimination through placement mechanisms aiming for the “linguistic containment” (Matsuda, “The Myth” 638) of multilingual writers and students of color⁶—even as their family financial resources gave them access to test preparation and tutoring programs that enabled them to bypass Basic Writing and ESL courses (Bartlett and Fisher). Despite that my participants tended to enroll in mainstream composition, then, their experiences provide insight for Basic Writing professionals who do serve international students—and who are concerned with placement, the stigma associated with our courses, and access to higher ed more broadly.

The case study that follows represents recurring themes in my interviews and observations. From my 28 interviewees, I focus on Ruby’s for the ways her story is both an “apt illustration” of experiences reported across interviews (Ellen 237) *and* a “telling case” (239) that brought more clearly into view the themes and experiences reported by other participants. Like others who have studied basic and multilingual writers, I employ a case study methodology for its careful attention to the contexts and histories that shape individuals’ writing and language-learning experiences (e.g. Balester; Rose, *Lives*; Spack; Stanley; Sternglass; Tardy). Moreover, given that my interviews took place in English—the second or third language for my research participants—a case study approach mitigates the difficulty of coding interview data that includes rich negotiations between languages. I worried in particular that reporting only on coding categories across interviews would flatten my participants’ sometimes-lengthy descriptions of

concepts for which they did not have an accessible English vocabulary. My case study approach is likewise an attempt to resist the tendency in composition scholarship to speak *for* researched populations (Royster 30) and the dangers in ethnographic research of isolating significant moments of students' experiences from their social worlds (Trainor 30-1). By narrating my participants' stories through case studies, I try to offer textured portraits of how Chinese undergraduates navigate US writing classrooms, in the process drawing attention to the institutional forces most shaping access in our changing institutions.

LANGUAGE, THE WRITING CLASSROOM, AND RUBY'S FALTERING EDUCATIONAL INVESTMENTS

When I met Ruby, she was a junior studying accounting, but she stressed throughout her interview that she didn't have much interest in her major. Instead, Ruby chose accounting when, during her first year at the University of Illinois, she became convinced that she lacked the linguistic and cultural knowledge to be successful in marketing courses. As Ruby reassessed her professional aspirations, she also began to reconsider her place in the campus community. Ruby had come to the US expecting "to be more like active and involved in the campus," but she quickly discovered that she would have few interactions outside her Chinese peer group. In this section, I document how Ruby came to see such academic and cultural growth as out of reach, ultimately altering her career path so that she could recuperate at least some returns from what she described as her faltering educational investment. Importantly, Ruby's writing classroom was at the center of her story of how she came to see her cultural and linguistic differences as liabilities, even as she described curricula and teaching practices that strove to create space for such differences. Stories like Ruby's, I argue, reveal how pedagogies rooted in Basic Writing's commitments to access and inclusion—which at the U of I included course projects centered on undergraduate research of race and student identity—can falter amidst campus monolingualism and monoculturalism, in the process offering critical insights about access in a time of university privatization and internationalization.

"What I can do is maintain my academic performance": Tempered Academic Expectations

Compared with many of her Chinese peers, Ruby decided to pursue US higher education late in high school. Where many Chinese students be-

gin preparing for education abroad in primary school, enrolling in private English schools and vying for seats at prestigious secondary schools, Ruby began to study for the TOEFL and SAT only in the summer prior to her final year of school. At that time, one of her friends, who would later attend UCLA, urged Ruby to apply to US universities. Ruby had already been aware that US degrees were seen as more prestigious in China, and so, with her friend's encouragement, she began preparing to go abroad. "Almost everyone in China knows how much better the education here is than China," she said, explaining her decision. "You know more people—and expand your social circle." In contrast, Ruby claimed that Chinese universities offered little to the vast majority of the country's students: Only a privileged few, she said, were accepted to China's best universities, and, like the majority of her Chinese conationals, she believed that the nation's other universities were academically subpar.⁷ Moreover, she believed that the quality of students remaining in China was poorer because many of her Chinese peers were exhausted by the time they enrolled in college. Many students, she said, attended "cram schools" in preparation for the infamous gaokao, the country's standardized and hypercompetitive university entrance exam. "The last year of high school is like hell," she said. "They get up at five and start studying to like ten o'clock at night." She also claimed that China's regimented high schools left her peers unequipped to manage the relaxed atmosphere of the country's universities. This coupling of academic fatigue and newfound independence, she said, produced an unsuitable campus environment at China's universities. "It's the atmosphere in college. Most students, they don't work, they don't study. They just skipping classes and just show up on exams. Actually, lots of college students cheat during their exams."

Where Ruby described Chinese higher education in mostly negative terms, she saw attending the U of I as an opportunity to gain professional and cultural capital. In her estimation, the strengths of US universities were unparalleled, commenting, "Everyone knows the education in the US is best in the world," and she planned to take full advantage of the opportunities she believed available at the U of I. In addition to majoring in advertising or marketing, she imagined that she would be involved in campus organizations and would form friendships with domestic students. She had also been open to the possibility of moving to the US permanently after graduation. However, Ruby's first two years at the university frustrated these expectations. For instance, Ruby decided to major in accounting after coming to believe that she would not be able to compete with domestic peers for advertising and marketing jobs, saying that she lacked the language skills and cultural

background necessary for success in those fields. Ruby had settled on accounting only because she felt that, with her original goals untenable, she should instead enroll in either the engineering or business colleges, which she felt were well regarded in industry. “I don’t have any particular interest in any major,” she explained. “I’m not the engineering kind,” she laughed, adding, “I met some friends after I came here and they all said I don’t look like accounting person. They think I should go into advertising. I don’t know why but they all said that.”

Ruby likewise began to temper her expectation that she’d cultivate cross-cultural friendships, and her reflections on her segregated social circle began to reveal the complicated role of language and linguistic difference in her frustrated educational goals. Like nearly all the Chinese students I interviewed, Ruby described a mix of cultural and language differences that prevented her from connecting with students of different backgrounds.⁸ “I think language is actually not the biggest problem in some ways,” she explained. “Like the cultural differences, if you have a particular topic you can talk for awhile with them, but it’s hard for you to go further and talk with. Because you share different maybe values and backgrounds, it just sometimes hard to make our conversation interesting.” Ruby worried that this lack of connection with domestic students (and, by extension, her lack of involvement in campus organizations) would reflect poorly when she began looking for jobs. “I’ve been disappointed because you have to write something on your resume, but I don’t really have many experiences to write about. That was the biggest stress of my college life.” Yet, Ruby hoped that her major in accountancy would offer at least some career stability—and allow her to secure a return on her expensive education. “Now I plan to finish the master’s degree here so I can like take the CPA exam,” she said. “But I think if I get the CPA certificate, I think I have to at least work here for one or two years so that it doesn’t waste my certificate.” Ruby’s concerns about failing to properly capitalize on her US degree were also evident as she discussed her plans to eventually return to China. There, she planned to first work in a public firm, since she believed that most people returning to China began their careers in one of the nation’s government-operated industries. Eventually, though, she hoped to join a multinational corporation, where she could use her English skills. “If I’m going back to China, I think I expect my work to involve lots of English in my job, because otherwise my experience here would be kind of wasted.”

That Ruby came to see her education as an unstable investment was clearest as she described her revised educational goals as part of a familial

responsibility. Although her family was economically comfortable—her father worked in China’s booming construction industry⁹ and her mother owned a spa—she was cognizant of their economic sacrifices. Ruby was particularly concerned by the emotional toll her US education had taken on her mother. “She relies on me a lot. She keeps saying she misses me and she want me to be with her and things like that.” For Ruby, doing well in her courses was a way to, as she put it, “pay back them” for their economic and emotional investments in her education. “What I can do,” she said, “is maintain my academic performance. I work hard for getting A in the class.” To make good on her family’s investments, Ruby would change her major and reenvision her campus life early on during her time at the U of I, and, as I next chronicle, her writing classroom played a critical role in this decision. For those working to make writing classrooms empowering spaces where students defy and disrupt constraining ideologies of language and race, Ruby’s story shows how our classrooms can counterintuitively make students trade in their “liberal ideals” of higher education—their pursuit of personal development through cultural and intellectual diversity (Abelmann 2)—for narrow professional goals.

“They have the language”: The Role of Ruby’s Writing Classroom

During her interview, Ruby laughed at the irony that, in her junior year, she was majoring in accounting and had relatively few social contacts outside her Chinese peer group. In her first-year writing course, she and another Chinese student had cowritten a research paper urging their Chinese peers to be socially and academically proactive. “We suggest how to be academically successful, like you might sit in the first row and talk to your professor, go to the office hours or something like that. And for socially, like, you attend activities, pick an organization you like.” Despite having cowritten an essay that offered strategies for Chinese students to get the most from their time in the US, Ruby said she had largely ignored this advice. “I don’t speak too much in my classes. Unless there are some participation requirement that you have to speak to reach the points. Unless they have that requirement, I won’t speak.” Moreover, Ruby interacted with domestic students only in class and therefore had few opportunities to practice her conversational English. As Ruby described it, her first-year writing course was in many ways a turning point in this retreat toward ethnic and linguistic isolation, since it was there that she began to see her linguistic and cultural differences as

insurmountable barriers to her educational goals—all this despite that her course research project had suggested that those same barriers could be overcome. This occurred as Ruby encountered challenges in the course that her domestic counterparts did not and, at a less visible level, through the way her course made her devalue her cultural and linguistic background.

Significantly, these shifts in Ruby's educational goals largely occurred as she moved through a writing program with a long history of race-conscious writing instruction (Lamos 44), one reflecting broader pedagogical traditions in Basic Writing and whose curricula in its most recent iteration sought to confront campus racism head on. The research project required across the program—which typically enrolls 4,000 students yearly (Prendergast, "Re-inventing" 81)—required archival and ethnographic research into campus issues and was instituted in response to ongoing racial tensions at the university (83). That race was at the center of many course projects was clear at the yearly Undergraduate Rhetoric Conference, where student presentations often focused on issues like the university's recently retired Native American mascot, the campus's dwindling African American population, and the fraught first-year transitions of Korean and Chinese international students. This emphasis on undergraduate research, which in 2012 earned a CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence, was not only intended to foster critical conversations about race across FYW sections but also aligned the program with emerging calls in the field for undergraduate research as a means for students to exert agency in their disciplines and on their campuses (CCCC Position Statement, Grobman). Further, the program's required collaborative writing projects both mirrored the types of team writing students would later encounter across the disciplines *and* put students in situations where they would need to negotiate across linguistic and cultural boundaries, as Ruby's experiences in the course demonstrate. Engaging students in original and collaborative research projects—and continuing a programmatic tradition of race-conscious pedagogy—the curricula Ruby encountered was indebted to decades of Basic Writing and composition research that has sought to empower students and decenter white normativity on campus (e.g. Lu, "Conflict" 888-89; Trimbur).

Yet, for all it owed to traditions of critical pedagogy led by Basic Writing researchers, Ruby's writing class counterintuitively narrowed her educational goals, raising questions about the emancipatory possibilities of what have become pedagogical commonplaces (Durst 3). The role of Ruby's writing classroom in this process was most visible as she discussed the course's difficulty—and her belief that the challenges she experienced

were not ones shared by her domestic counterparts. Ruby's first-year writing course was harder than any other she enrolled in her first semester, requiring her to write longer and more complex texts in English than she had in high school or as she prepared for the SAT and TOEFL. She was also struck by the unequal time that she invested in the course compared to her domestic peers. "A native student may take like thirty minutes in writing this, and I may take two hours or even more in writing the same thing. I don't know, writing is not my thing," she shared. Although Ruby had expected that her writing course would be a challenge, she was surprised to find the course so difficult that it played a formative role in her decision to change her major. "Before I came to college, I was deciding if I should go to study advertising or marketing. The first year, I took Rhetoric 105 and I find myself, Oh my god! I don't like writing. So I give up the advertising or marketing because they must involve lots of writing."

Beyond persuading her that she was unprepared to write in her preferred major, Ruby's FYW course also sent subtle but powerful messages about her linguistic and cultural differences, ones that made her doubt her ability to successfully communicate with US audiences. Ruby's first-year writing course encouraged students to engage in semester-long research of campus issues (see Prendergast, "Reinventing" 84), culminating in a final essay that imagined as its audience some campus stakeholder. This curricula, as Ruby described it, had fostered a theoretical understanding of rhetoric and persuasion, but, in the process, she came to believe that she did not possess the cultural background that would be required for her to apply her rhetorical knowledge in the advertising and marketing fields. Specifically, in FYW, Ruby began to feel that she could not undertake the writing and creative work characteristic of those fields because she lacked audience awareness, and she pointed to the writing she now did in accounting as a point of comparison. Where the memos she wrote in accounting were formulaic presentations of financial data, she said that marketing and advertising would have required her to "know what people here [in the US] are thinking about, and know more about their culture and their preferences." As a result, she continued, "I don't think I can do well in advertising." In this way, a classroom that emphasized student-centered research and rhetorical knowledge had made Ruby reconsider her educational and career aspirations, even as rhetorical pedagogies (Covino 37) and undergraduate research (CCCC Position Statement) have been seen as means to activate student agency.

In addition to limiting her sense of rhetorical agency, Ruby's FYW experience also made her see her multilingualism as a deficit, despite describing

classmates and an instructor who rarely commented on the linguistic features of her writing. Ruby's instructor in particular actively worked to minimize her anxiety about language, focusing feedback and their conversations on Ruby's ideas and arguments. For Ruby, this was a relief: "Back in China we, our education on English, they focus a lot on grammar things. Here, they pay more attention to the concepts. That's exactly what I want, because it help me in the most beneficial way." Yet, language was still a source of anxiety for Ruby, and, during FYW, she became convinced that she lacked not only the cultural knowledge but also the linguistic resources she believed necessary for a successful career in marketing. As Ruby explained it, during FYW, she came to believe that "I don't think I can do well with advertising because you have to compete with the native student. They have the language. I don't think I can catch up things in like, under five or ten years." On the other hand, Ruby believed that her own language and that of her Chinese peers carried less currency. For instance, she believed that peer review in her first-year writing and communication courses was less useful when she worked with other Chinese students. She likewise preferred to collaborate with domestic students in accounting courses, which routinely required her to write with classmates. At the time of our interview, Ruby had recently worked in a group comprised of Chinese students, and although she appreciated that they could speak Mandarin together, she believed that the work they produced was of a poorer quality than when she worked with domestic peers.

Ruby's descriptions of her university writing experiences betrayed her belief that she did not have access to valuable linguistic resources that many of her peers easily marshalled, even as instructors and peers focused their attention away from language when reviewing her work. In her reflections, Ruby reveals the continued power of monolingualism's presumption that only certain speakers own or have access to valued dialects, a presumption that orders languages and their speakers along familiar racial lines (Lee and Alvarez 6). The linguistic and cultural boundaries Ruby imagined—and her sense that English fluency was something owned by others—were particularly clear as she described her collaborations with a peer from Singapore who understood but could not speak Chinese. The two negotiated across languages often, and their conversations resembled the cross-language work composition scholars have promoted as a counter to monolingualism (e.g. Wetzl 205). As she discussed their conversations, she laughed, commenting, "When I was making a phone call with my Singapore group member yesterday because we have to work on that case study, I was speaking in Chinese because he can understand that, but he was, he replied to me in English."

Yet, for their writing projects, he often took the lead while Ruby prepared their calculations. “We work on the project and we wrote the memo together, and he took the most part of the memo because he said he can’t understand me. Because, if they make him write in Chinese, he will struggle.” Although the two negotiated across languages in their everyday communication, their academic writing operated under the assumption of strict boundaries between languages, with Ruby’s linguistic background having less currency in their university context. Underlying Ruby’s description of their collaboration—and of her writing at the university writ large—was her sense that the linguistic and cultural knowledge valued in the academy was inaccessible to her, a belief that led her to describe her ethnic isolation and narrowed educational path as inevitable. More troubling was that these beliefs about language ownership and linguistic boundaries were solidified early in her college experience through FYW—and that these beliefs were reinforced even as instructors and peers, at least on the surface, did not narrowly focus on the technical features of her writing.

IMPLICATIONS: CAMPUS LIMITS TO LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND BELONGING

Ruby repeated throughout her interview that she was relieved that her instructor deemphasized grammar in the writing classroom, a welcome change from her English education in China. She also appreciated that her instructors and peers seemed unconcerned about her language differences in their daily interactions, commenting, “Before I come to the US, I was really concerned a lot on the accents. But after I come here, I find like there are people having different accents everywhere, so I think that’s fine. As long as you can communicate with others, I don’t think accent matters.” Where Ruby in such moments described a campus open to her linguistic difference, one where monolingual ideologies seemingly have less currency, she also recognized the limits to such openness and believed that she still had to conform to the campus’s linguistic mainstream, commenting, “I don’t think we should use other language to express ourselves here.” Ruby’s writing classroom in many ways reinforced these attitudes about language, persuading her that certain linguistic and cultural knowledge was required to participate in the university’s academic and social worlds, even as she described peers generally unbothered by her accented writing and speech. Indeed, her writing course—with its focus on campus issues—in many ways provided her the space to reach these conclusions about her educational

aspirations, inviting her to identify the cultural and linguistic barriers that existed on campus without providing her the tools to dismantle them.

Experiences like Ruby's, which were shared by many of my research participants and have been documented in other studies of multilingual international students (Fraiberg et al.; Kang, "Tensions"; Zhang-Wu), expose the limits in our changing institutions of writing pedagogies that aim to confront racism and linguistic discrimination. For many composition researchers, identifying and grappling with cultural, linguistic, and racial differences has long been seen as a means for students and instructors alike to begin dismantling racism and other forms of discrimination (e.g. Alexander and Rhodes, Barlow, Brodkey). Indeed, a stated goal of the ethnographic and archival research project at the center of FYW courses at Ruby's institution was to investigate narratives of community and belonging on campus in yet another moment when the university was embroiled in racial controversy (Prendergast, "Reinventing" 82-3). In many ways, such pedagogies are indebted to Basic Writing scholars and instructors, whose classroom experiences working with students of color and multilingual writers—and, for many, whose experiences as multilingual writers and/or scholars of color themselves—impressed on them the necessity of challenging how university writing conventions often subsume and eradicate other discourses (e.g. Lu, "Conflict"; Rose, *Lives*). Yet, the stories like Ruby's documented in my research suggest that our pedagogies, while perhaps effective in naming cultural and linguistic differences, may do little to disrupt the marginalization of those differences (see also Kerschbaum). This finding puts our classrooms in the undesirable position of reinforcing campus racial realities that withhold access to students' educational goals.

Importantly, even as Ruby's writing classroom was where her monolingual attitudes were strengthened, her story has campus implications that stretch far beyond Basic Writing and FYW. Basic Writing programs (and composition programs more broadly) have historically been the first institutional spaces to feel the impact of demographic change, a harbinger of campus realities to come. They are, as Catherine Prendergast puts it, a "canary in the mines—the university site where demographic, cultural, economic and political shifts in the United States have hit first and hardest" ("Reinventing" 81). That Ruby's experiences in the writing classroom speak to wider campus transformations is evident through how her FYW course colored her broader sense of campus belonging. Specifically, that Ruby's writing course disrupted her educational pursuits—pursuits that included her desire to participate in the academic and social worlds of the university—reveals how writing

instruction can allow our campuses to remain spaces of whiteness, even as many administrators tout internationalization as a measure of diversity. For Ruby and my other research participants, the writing classroom withheld their access to the university's historically white intellectual and social worlds (see Prendergast, *Literacy* 97), becoming a mechanism by which the cultural capital typically bestowed by higher education remained out of reach for this new and non-white student cohort—and by extension a mechanism by which this cultural capital remained tethered to whiteness.

Troublingly, this all occurred even as these students' tuition dollars have enabled many colleges and universities to continue functioning while states have slashed higher education funding (see Fraiberg et al. 29). Indeed, my research participants' stories show a university whose hot pursuit of revenue-generating international students amounts to the conditions of *exception* that anthropologist Aihwa Ong identifies as a key feature of racial politics in global fast capitalism, where typically-marginalized groups are given partial access to socioeconomic benefits when their capital in some way benefits the racial majority (4). In US universities, this occurs as international students who can contribute short-term fiscal capital to their institutions are momentarily excepted from longstanding policies of racial exclusion, only to be later marginalized when a more lucrative market of student consumers becomes available. While such conditions of exception allowed Ruby and her Chinese conationals to enroll at the university, they were simultaneously denied the full access they desired to the university's academic and social worlds. And, as Ruby's narrative shows, her writing classroom in particular blocked this access, raising concerns for Basic Writing scholars about how our work might bolster global racial inequities as they play out on and shape access to our local campuses. In particular, the stories shared by Ruby and my other research participants force Basic Writing scholars and instructors to grapple with the following: How do we create opportunities for students on our internationally diverse campuses to position themselves as members of the university's intellectual and professional communities? Moreover, how can our classrooms help students dismantle barriers to and fundamentally transform those communities, in the process confronting the racial contradictions of the global university? In the conclusion, I outline how we might position our classrooms and writing programs to address these challenges and, in doing so, disrupt the monolingual ideologies that Ruby and my other participants developed in their writing classrooms.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR ASSESSMENT, ASSIGNMENT DESIGN, AND PROGRAMMATIC ADVOCACY

For Ruby, the writing classroom played a formative role in her academic and ideological development: It was there that she began to recognize the faltering promise of the US university, in particular as she began to develop a monolingual orientation that made her see her educational goals as unattainable. Stories like Ruby's, which emerged across my interviews, are unsurprising. As Jennifer Trainor notes, literacy education plays a central role for our students' in their "construction of consciousness," a reality that compels us to "engage in disciplinary investigation and critique to understand where our technologies of self-formation are working and where they go awry" (141). For Ruby and her Chinese peers, our classrooms were formative as they developed identities as cultural and linguistic outsiders at institutions where they have gained unprecedented access. The lessons of their stories are crucial for Basic Writing professionals as we seek to create classrooms that better serve new cohorts of international students *and* renew our commitment to the domestic student populations our programs have historically served. As I conclude, I want to outline classroom assessment mechanisms, assignment design, and programmatic advocacy that can empower students and instructors alike to publicly expose the institutional forces of exception (Ong) that, for a student like Ruby, were interpreted as individual cultural and linguistic deficit. It is my hope that, through these strategies, we can draw attention to institutional forces that, for many on our campuses and beyond, are too often invisible.

Classroom Assessment

For starters, grading contracts that value student labor—and not a written product's quality (see Inoue, Consilio and Kennedy)—could decrease the likelihood that multilingual writers like Ruby leave our courses convinced that they are weak writers by virtue of the greater amount of time they spend on assignments. In particular, a contract could have valued the time and effort Ruby and my other participants put into their writing, effort that was not acknowledged in the more traditional modes of assessment common in their writing program at the time. Contracts also have the added benefit of creating a classroom infrastructure in which students and instructors can directly confront the monolingual ideologies that, for Ruby, were solidified in FYW. For instance, instructors can design contracts so that students are encouraged to strategically deploy different languages and dialects in their

writing—and then discuss such deployments in class. This would require a shift from what Susan Peck MacDonald describes as our field’s “erasure of language,” our turning away from “attention to the sentence level in order to focus on the text level” (586). In practice, this might involve classroom workshops and peer review sessions that supplement our attention to “global” concerns (like argument and rhetorical situations) with focused attention to language. Students might reflect on how they and their classmates negotiate the demand in academic contexts to write in “standard English,” perhaps by identifying instances where students’ linguistic moves might strategically defy the expectations of academic audiences. Doing so could help multilingual writers see their linguistic backgrounds not as evidence of deficiency but as resources for rhetorical agency (Lu, “Professing”; Shapiro et. al.), all while creating opportunities for others to reflect on their own implicit linguistic biases (Liu and Tannacito 371; Stanley 9-10). Importantly, these critical engagements with language could help students begin to confront the institutional and systemic roots of damaging language ideologies (see Schreiber and Watson 96)—rather than, as Ruby did, seeing language difference as a barrier to be overcome at an individual level.

Assignment Design

Assessments that value students’ labor and languages depend in many ways, though, on assignments and classrooms that cultivate students’ labor and direct it toward purposeful rhetorical activity (and, significantly, counter the felt sense of students like Ruby that they’re incapable of activating rhetorical agency in US contexts). While Ruby’s class in some ways laid a foundation for students to wield such agency, in particular through assignments that invited students to examine exigent campus issues related to race and identity, those assignments fell short of inviting students to indict the institutional forces and ideologies that excluded them. Ruby, remember, concluded from her research that the burden was on Chinese international students themselves to become more active members in the campus community, missing an opportunity to document the broader forces that relegated Chinese undergraduates to the margins of campus life. This occurred despite that the writing program at the U of I was, at the time, using a common syllabus whose ethnographic and archival research projects aimed to confront head on issues of race, discrimination, and identity at the university (Prendergast, “Reinventing” 83). In fact, the program’s common assignment set—which included exploratory writing about primary

sources ranging from archival documents to interviews, synthesis of published scholarly writing, and a final research paper—had been developed in response to the campus’s fraught racial history: The curricula’s focus on issues of race and identity first emerged when the FYW program began to offer themed “Race and the University” sections, designed “as a response to the unfavourable climate and ossified positions that had developed in the wake of a multi-decade debate over the legitimacy of the university’s Native American mascot” (Prendergast, “Reinventing” 82).

Despite this programmatic focus on race, Ruby and my other participants too often attributed the racism and segregation they experienced on campus to their own individual cultural and linguistic differences. In the classrooms I observed, the Chinese undergraduates, many of whom had spent entire semesters interviewing classmates about their struggles as international students, would ultimately write final research papers arguing that their Chinese peers needed to work harder at the individual level to break free of their ethnic comfort zones. FYW papers written by Chinese undergraduates in the university’s repository of research writing (IDEALS)—which I also collected and analyzed in the course of my project—often came to similar conclusions. In my classroom observations, this appeared to be the result of instructors’ and students’ discomfort addressing racial tension: Rather than interrogating student experiences of segregation, it was easier to attribute the experiences of students like Ruby to their own personal failures to take advantage of the social and academic opportunities afforded by a US university. Additionally, that the entire semester was oriented toward creating a final argumentative essay, for which students synthesized all of their course research, seemed to force them into offering somewhat simplistic proposals to the complex problems they’d spent the semester documenting. In Ruby’s case, the solution to the segregation she’d uncovered was simply participating more in class and becoming involved in student organizations.

While the common assignment set in Ruby’s FYW program offered a starting point for serious investigation of racism, then, students were not always provided the space to fully grapple with the complexity of the issues they researched. Our classrooms might better address such issues, I contend, if we were to deemphasize the argumentative nature of academic writing and instead create opportunities for our students to engage in longer and more open-ended processes of inquiry. This would mean leaving the door open for a student like Ruby to *not* offer specific (and perhaps premature) proposals for how she and her Chinese peers might overcome their campus isolation. Instead, we should urge students to engage in sustained inquiry

about the sources of their social positions, how their experiences are similar to or different from those of their peers, and who benefits and loses from campus segregation. Importantly, such inquiry might also incite a process of “turning toward activism” (Conner 59) that could do more in the long run to expose and disrupt campus segregation and racism. In her qualitative study of today’s student activists, Jerusha Conner found that there is rarely a singular transformational experience that compels politically-engaged students to activism. Instead, college students’ activist sensibilities are formed after multiple encounters with and ongoing critical engagement with their causes. Her findings suggest that the critical goals of our classrooms might be better met by creating space for long-term encounter and engagement, perhaps by deemphasizing argument and instead urging students to document in their full complexity the issues they research and write about. Rather than offering proposals to address racial issues in a final project, for instance, students could instead identify questions that remain unanswered and possible directions for further research and action, something more akin to a research report than an argumentative essay.

Perhaps as important, the process of “turning toward activism” led Conner’s participants to forge alliances across racial, class, ethnic, and linguistic lines that resulted in more effective advocacy. For Basic Writing instructors and scholars, the lessons of Conner’s study are thus twofold: First, we need to recognize that our classrooms are but one site in what is hopefully an ongoing journey toward activist engagement. Secondly, we must realize that we may not see the results of this work—in terms of actual student engagement—in the one or two semesters that students are in our classrooms.

Yet, I see much promise in this ongoing and coalitional activist identity development, and I’d like to point to a January 2019 incident at Duke University as an example of the potential outcomes of such work. Dr. Megan Neely, a faculty member and graduate director of Duke’s biostatistics program, wrote an email encouraging Chinese students in that program to “commit to using English 100% of the time,” saying that department faculty had complained about students “speaking Chinese (in their words, VERY LOUDLY)” in department breakrooms (Wang). Neely also warned that students may have internship opportunities and letters of recommendation withheld if they not speak in English. After the email circulated on social media, diverse constituencies on campus—including the Graduate and Professional Student Council, Asian Students Association, and Duke International Association—mobilized to demand an institutional response and draw media attention to the incident. Together, these groups secured Neely’s

resignation as graduate studies director, forced an apology from Neely and the biostatistics chair, and compelled university administrators to affirm their “promise to value the identities, heritage, cultures, and languages of every individual at Duke” (Price).

Where Ruby and my other participants routinely saw segregation and discrimination as the result of their own individual failings, this student coalition called on the university to take responsibility. Where Ruby felt rhetorically powerless as a result of her FYW class, these students engaged the campus community through position statements, open letters, and engagement with local and national press outlets. Of note for Basic Writing scholars and instructors is that this diverse student coalition garnered an official university recognition of the issue of linguistic discrimination. By emphasizing sustained inquiry in our classrooms—and by resisting the temptation to require students to synthesize a semester’s research and writing into a tidy, final argumentative project—we might start students down a path that results in the engagement that attracted so much attention at Duke. Importantly, teaching students the importance of ongoing inquiry would also give them the time and space to learn more about their campus rhetorical contexts, perhaps removing the anxiety that accompanies writing to a campus audience as first-year students (which left Ruby feeling rhetorically powerless). Again, this would require that we deliberately shift away from the language of argument in our assignments and classrooms, instead privileging inquiry processes that not only look more like our actual research processes but also incite processes of activist identity development.

Instructor and Programmatic Advocacy

Beyond cultivating pedagogy that prepares students to confront and dismantle campus racism, public activism like that in which the Duke students engaged can likewise guide the advocacy of Basic Writing instructors and administrators, especially in our moment of contracting access and internationalization. In particular, we might confront how fast capitalism has remade university recruitment and admissions initiatives—and, in the process, campus race politics—by finding again Basic Writing’s *public* voice. We should widen the audience of our persuasive work to include those outside the university, making publicly visible admissions policies that privilege wealthier students while also foregrounding our responsibilities to the international students who have kept universities fiscally afloat. Doing so can tap into growing national concern about college affordability for a

broad spectrum of the US populace, an area of concern that can create the same kinds of coalitions that led Duke's administrators to for the first time recognize and condemn linguistic racism. On Ruby's campus, for instance, such public engagement could tap into a growing sense that Illinois students are being squeezed out of the state's flagship campus, a reality that has disproportionately impacted African American students but has nonetheless been broadly felt (see Cohen and Richards, *Des Garennes*). Such activism can take the form of organizing a coalition of student groups and student support services committed to increasing access and dismantling racial barriers. This coalitional work could confront head on public hostility to remediation and support by highlighting issues often invisible to the public, such as enrollment practices shaped less by a concern for the public good than by the bottom line. At their best, these advocacy efforts can create a public demand for admissions policies and student services that better serve diverse student groups—including those like Ruby whose tuition dollars have kept US universities fiscally viable. Perhaps most significantly, doing so can again make Basic Writing a driving force in the public conversation fifty years after Open Admissions put our classrooms at the center of the fight for access.

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Notes

1. In *Saving State U*, Nancy Folbre reviews declining state appropriations for public higher education since the 1862 Morrill Act. By 2005, "state and local funding per student at public colleges and universities, adjusted for inflation, was at its lowest level in twenty-five years" (45), with state funds covering less than 10% of the operating costs at some institutions (47). Financial aid—whether from institutions themselves or federal/state grants—has failed to keep up with the tuition increases that accompanied this decrease in public support. The result has been a widening gap between the number of underrepresented students who

- graduate from state high schools and those who attend a state's public universities (Baumhardt).
2. In response to growing Chinese demand for Western education, many universities have implemented recruitment practices targeting students from China (Abelmann and Kang 386); at U of I, such efforts have included orientation sessions held in three major Chinese cities (Romano).
 3. In 2009, 1661 Chinese international students enrolled at the University of Illinois, compared to 5825 in 2019. Nationally, 127,926 Chinese international students enrolled at colleges and universities in 2009, rising to 369,548 in 2019.
 4. In 2011, 16 sections of Basic Writing were offered at the University of Illinois. In 2014, only 8 were offered.
 5. Yuki Kang and Kelly Ritter have written about the impact of these demographic shifts on the University of Illinois writing center (Kang, "Translingual Approaches") and first-year writing program (Ritter, "Undergraduate Rhetoric").
 6. At the time of my study, test scores were the sole placement mechanism at the University of Illinois. International students scoring over 103 on their TOEFL could enroll in Rhetoric 105 (the campus's "mainstream" writing course) or a parallel class offered in the communications department. International students scoring under 103 on TOEFL were required to take the English Placement Test (overseen by the university's Linguistics department) and were placed into an ESL course depending on their score ("Division"). A score of 103 is higher on average than what most institutions utilize for placement, meaning that international students at the U of I were placed into ESL and developmental courses at higher rates than other institutions (see Ross).
 7. Relatively few of China's universities are considered worth attending by Chinese undergraduates in the US, and the intensity of the college admissions processes makes prestigious institutions like Peking University or Tsing Hua out of reach for the majority of Chinese students (see Wong).
 8. In addition to emerging in nearly all of the 28 interviews I conducted, concerns about cultural and linguistic barriers also appeared in much of the student writing I collected.
 9. China's rapid urban expansion—coupled with the relaxation of the country's land leasing regulations—has led to an expanded and profitable construction industry (see Hsing).

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