CHAPTER 4.

LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND THE INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY

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Throughout the disciplinary history of writing studies, from the establishment of composition courses at Harvard and other elite colleges in the late 19th century to the opening of higher education institutions through the G.I. Bill and open admissions in the mid-20th century to current scholarly examinations of language ideologies, linguistic justice, and communication technologies, we have seen the linking of language, literacy, and identity—whether implicit or explicit—inform discussions about ways of composing, the teaching and learning of writing, and the meanings of literacy, whether in the contexts of school, work, or the daily routines of life. In many of these early conversations, descriptions, complaints, or laments about the quality of writing, status of literacy, or decline in language proficiency were often proxies for the identities of writers, to imply without directly naming social class, race, ethnicity, gender, or other categories of identity as deficits, denying a sense of belonging, full citizenship, and dignity.

However, we have seen an explosion of scholarship in writing studies in the early 21st century that has reimagined the necessary and productive relationship between language, literacy, and identity. Archival work by scholars like Ellen Cushman and Romeo Garcia and Damian Baca has examined the writing traditions of Indigenous communities in the Americas, while qualitative studies by Kate Vieira and Rebecca Lorimer Leonard have looked closely at the relationship between migration and literacy in transnational contexts. Jacqueline Jones Royster, Beverly Moss, and Shirley Wilson Logan have considered the literacy and rhetorical work of African American people across time, while Victor Villanueva, Juan Guerra, and Aja Martinez have helped us to understand the language and literacy practices of Latinx communities. And in the work of Jessica Enoch, David Gold, and Laura Gonzales and Michelle Hall Kells we see language and literacy educators of color made visible, often working under conditions that challenged both them and their students but that also provided opportunities for the intentional and meaningful use of writing, rhetoric, and literacy.

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In my own work, I have explored the histories of literacy in Hawai‘i,[1] especially the experiences of immigrant workers from Asia and their families as they settled in a place where they had to negotiate among a white American elite, an Indigenous Native Hawaiian community displaced by settlers, and a range of people from different homelands from across the world. This created a complex social order, often marked by race, indigeneity, language, and social class. The emergence of Hawai‘i Creole English, colloquially known as Pidgin, provided a means of communication across communities but was also often used to enforce distinctions of identity. Those who spoke Standard English had privilege and power; those who spoke Pidgin or even English with an accent—not to mention ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (the Indigenous language of Native Hawaiians) or a language from an Asian or Pacific nation—were at a disadvantage. However, as attitudes about language have changed and Pidgin, other forms of English, or multilingual or translingual writing have become more present, we have seen the positive assertion of language, literacy, and identity that does not conform to Standard English ideology. My work has also taken up the rhetorical activity of Asian/Americans,[2] from petitions and claims for belonging and citizenship in the 19th century to the present as Asian/Americans respond to the rise in anti-Asian discourse in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. What I have tried to do in my own scholarship and also in my teaching is to explore the relationship between language, literacy, and identity, whether in the narratives created by writers who foreground identity or use innovative forms, or in the communities that provide contexts for understanding why and how language, literacy, and writing matter.

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1 In writing about Hawai‘i and its peoples and cultures I use and present terms and concepts as they are used in Hawai‘i. I have used Stephen Sumida's note "About Spelling and Capitalization" from his book *And the View from the Shore: Literary Traditions of Hawai‘i* and the *University of Hawai‘i Style Guide* for university publications for guidance in the use of Hawaiian words. Necessary to the spelling of Hawaiian words are the ‘okina, or glottal stop, which appears thus as a single open quotation (‘), and the kahakō or macron (-) to indicate elongated vowel duration. When I have quoted words that have appeared in published texts, they appear as printed. In my own text I spell Hawaiian names and words with the diacritical marks. When Hawaiian words are Anglicized, these marks generally are not used: for instance, the ‘okina is not used in the word "Hawaiian," which is considered an English word. However, the *University of Hawai‘i Style Guide* advises that the use of an apostrophe and an "s" is acceptable in forming English possessives of Hawaiian singular nouns (Hawai‘i's people).

2 Drawing from David Palumbo-Liu, I use Asian/American in order to distinguish between Asian and American and to acknowledge "the nature and national identity at once less stable and more dynamic" (3). As Monberg and Young have described, use of the *solidus* or slash "acts as both border and bridge and perhaps provides both a textual and graphic representation of movement, relationships and a reaching across and beyond–beyond the nation-state [and] beyond the mere representation of Asian American rhetorical legacies in the discipline" (N.P.).

For me, identity has been key to shaping my research: my identity as an Asian/American; my history of growing up in Hawai'i and the child of parents who themselves were raised in the two-tier public education system of English Standard Schools; and now as a scholar who has worked with a range of graduate students exploring the purposes of writing informed by their own literacy histories. However, my work as a scholar and teacher is built on a foundation provided by Anne Ruggles Gere, for her model of intellectual daring in examining the language and literacy practices of people and communities often marginalized, for her example as a committed teacher of writing and teacher educator, and in her generosity as scholar, colleague, and mentor.

From her earliest scholarship in examining the oral tradition in West African literature to exploring writing groups as a site for interaction to the theorizing of literacy as an intimate and constitutive practice in the lives of women, Anne Ruggles Gere has developed a robust theoretical framework to analyze the ways people have used language, literacy, and writing and their relationship to identity as shaped by historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. This framework has had implications for understanding the curricular work of writing in classroom settings as well as making visible writing and literacy in extracurricular spaces that have often served women, people of color, and others whose identities have limited their access to educational institutions. In this chapter, I consider how Gere's scholarship has provided a way to examine the intersections of identity through the range of language and literacy practices in diverse communities of writers. The capaciousness of her theoretical framework allows for a productive engagement in moving from examinations of the relationship between gender and literacy to a consideration of the sociomaterial implications of literacy in communities of color. In the case of my own research and teaching, Gere's scholarship has allowed me to think deeply about how language and literacy have shaped the experiences of people of Asian descent in the US, especially in the way their identities have been constructed through acts of writing to navigate the exigencies of racism and trauma or to express moments of belonging and joy.

ATTENDING TO LANGUAGE

In her 1974 dissertation, *West African Oratory and the Fiction of Chinua Achebe and T. M. Aluko*, completed at the University of Michigan, Anne Ruggles Gere focuses on two West African writers to examine the rhetorical uses of oratory. Such a consideration had its risks for sure since a range of scholarly traditions at the time would have read African literature and the African experience through Western critical lenses and expectations. The Western Gaze might read the

literature of African writers as anthropological descriptions of life or to identify exotic elements to attach to African identity and culture. For Gere, scholars reading West African literature through the Western Gaze reduced rich, complex, and highly culture-specific *literatures* to folklore and myths that allow them to make meaning *about* Africans without actually understanding the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts of African communities that inform the literary and rhetorical work of African writers.

While Gere does begin her own theoretical framing of oratory in Western rhetorical theory, beginning with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and then moving to Kenneth Burke's concept of identification, she does the critical work of situating the use of oratory in specific communities—Igbo for Achebe and Yoruba for Aluko—to examine the use of literary forms such as poetry or song and to disrupt beliefs about a primitive or preliterate culture prior to and under British colonialism. What Gere also argues is that Achebe and Aluko use oratory as a form to express alienation, performing a specific kind of rhetorical work that illustrates the relationship between language and identity. What I find especially important in this first fully articulated argument about language and identity by Gere is her attention to the work that needs to be done. Throughout *West African Oratory and the Fiction of Chinua Achebe and T. M. Aluko*, she does not concede that the lack of scholarship about West African oratory suggests that it has little value; rather she makes the case for why this work must be done and why West African oratory, and especially in specific historical, social, cultural, political, and linguistic contexts, must be theorized on its own terms rather than interpellated through Western critical lenses that will misread these practices in order to make them legible to Western readers.

Gere's attention to language continued in her co-authored study, *Attitudes, Language, and Change*, with Eugene Smith, published five years after the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication statement on "Students' Right to their Own Language." Here Gere and Smith focus their attention on the teaching of English and how attitudes about language inform how and what teachers do in the classroom and how and what students learn. Turning away from the impulse to fault students for their uses of language, Gere and Smith instead look to understand broader attitudes about language and how these attitudes shape beliefs and practices in the classroom: "We believe the examination of attitudes is part of our urgent business as English teachers, that the route to better language teaching lies in serious attention to attitude. What do we and our colleagues believe about language? How can we scrutinize these attitudes? Should we change any of our attitudes about language?" (ix). Using these last three questions to frame their project, Gere and Smith provide a useful survey and discussion about the language myths that are often the source

of attitudes that make value judgments about people based on the quality and features of their spoken and written English. While these attitudes exist in our broader culture and society, they are often most strongly felt in classroom settings where students are subject not only to the curriculum but also to the beliefs of their teachers, which may conflate language, identity, and student performance.

What is fascinating about *Attitudes, Language, and Change* is that Gere and Smith take up as their charge the transformation of teacher attitudes, providing a framework for teachers to have conversations about language, to become researchers about language in their own classrooms, and to invite students to engage in this research as a way for them to develop their own understanding about how language works, how language and writing are related, and how language may provide students with the tools for communication in a variety of rhetorical situations. Even more importantly, Gere and Smith argue for structural change by creating opportunities for conversations about language in professional contexts, from in-service training in schools and districts to the development and distribution of research by professional scholarly organizations. They also recognize the need for change in community attitudes, which seems even more pressing today as we see rising violence against communities marked by race, ethnicity, culture, and language driven by discourses of white supremacy and authoritarianism.

In attending to language, Gere has demonstrated an ethical and compassionate approach to understanding how language as an activity is used by people across communities in intentional and purposeful ways. For Gere, the contexts that shape the use of language, writing, and literacy are part of a rich and complex story that may include struggle, trauma, and sadness as well as joy, excitement, and anger. Language is embodied and is expressive of the feelings and experiences of people no matter what their background. To engage language in this way is to engage a community and its history and culture. And in my own work, this attention to language and care for community has allowed me to understand what value exists in researching the literacy and rhetorical practices of Asian/Americans and to understand that the knowledge created here is knowledge that can apply more broadly and should not be reduced to the ethnic enclaves, borderlands, sub-disciplines, or area studies that often function intentionally or unintentionally to contain difference.

WRITING COMMUNITY

Gere's attention to community has been central to her scholarship. In her 1987 *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, she presents an important introduction to the history of writing groups that provided a useful context for the

collaborative learning and peer workshops that became central in composition instruction. Building on this work, her 1993 chair's address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication at its annual convention offered an innovative and complex theory for the work of composition both within and beyond academic settings. Based on this address, in "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," Gere acknowledges both a long history of writing in communities often ignored and the extracurricular sites where writing instruction and practice occurred because the communities were often denied or had limited access to formal education, or were engaged in writing to address exigencies that were often viewed as inappropriate subjects to take up, especially if addressing social or political issues. What Gere theorizes is a way to understand how writing is developed, whether in formal or informal settings, and driven by a need to write. As she describes:

> In contrast, my version of the extracurriculum includes the present as well as the past; it extends beyond the academy to encompass the multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their own writing; it includes more diversity in gender, race, and class among writers; and it avoids, as much as possible, a reenactment of professionalization in its narrative. (80)

I find Gere's resistance to a "reenactment of professionalization," in particular, to be insightful and powerful since the professionalization narrative is often invoked to delegitimize writing that is not produced in formal settings under the instruction of experts. This is reminiscent of her work to change attitudes about language and to contextualize writing in order to acknowledge its purpose and presence. For Gere, the extracurricular "is constructed by desire, by the aspirations and imaginations of its participants" (80).

While this address to our primary scholarly organization of researchers and teachers of composition served as a call to the profession to broaden its understanding of what writing instruction looked like, where it took place, and who engaged in creating the curriculum and extracurriculum, I experienced her invocation in a different, perhaps more personal way. When Gere delivered this address, I was in my second year of graduate school at the University of Michigan where I was a doctoral student in the Joint Ph.D. Program in English and Education. I applied to the program on the recommendation of my advisor at the University of Hawai'i, Jeffrey Carroll, who had been Gere's student at the University of Washington. To be honest, I didn't know much about Gere's work. However, as an undergraduate writing tutor, steeped in Kenneth Bruffee's ideas about collaborative learning, and with an identified interest in rhetoric and writing already, I saw Michigan and Anne Ruggles Gere as an opportunity that

I might only dream of. When I got to Michigan I took every class I could with Gere and became immersed in her thinking and research, including a seminar on gender and literacy and an interdisciplinary seminar on literacy co-taught by Gere, Deborah Keller-Cohen, and Walter Mignolo.

"Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms" was an early articulation about the power of the extracurriculum and the places of writers and writing beyond academic institutions. Her 1997 book, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920*, was a fuller argument for the relationship between gender and literacy as demonstrated in the range of women's groups who used their writing to make arguments in the public sphere. During this time, I started to see how the fragments of ideas I brought with me about people doing writing in Hawai'i might come together to make an argument for the intention and purpose of their writing in expressing identity, claiming belonging, and addressing injury.

Gere's theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between gender and literacy helped me to develop a framework to understand the history of literacy in Hawai'i and its enduring legacy in attitudes about language, the development of literary culture in Hawai'i, and a complex multilingual landscape. In *Intimate Practices*, Gere's historical work also provided a way for me to understand how literacy work was also cultural work and how this evolved under conditions of the late 19th century and early 20th century, when the US was undergoing enormous transformation through global expansion and rising immigration. This period also coincided with the rise of restrictive immigration policies that excluded immigration from Asia and barred naturalization of people who had lawfully immigrated from Asia before these restrictions were put in place.

What began as a very vague idea about language in Hawai'i became the basis for my dissertation, *Literacy, Legitimacy, and the Composing of Asian American Citizenship*, which examined literacy narratives as forms that do cultural work to create a sense of identity and belonging through acts of language, literacy, and writing. This dissertation became my monograph, *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*, which expanded on the history of literacy in Hawai'i through the consideration of my own personal literacy history growing up under conditions that structured social relations through language, race, social class, a sense of place, and the dispossession experienced by the Indigenous people of Hawai'i by American settlers who then transformed the islands through immigration, capitalism, and U.S. nationalism.

While my own experience of literacy growing up did not include the trauma of earlier generations, the legacy of these policies still shaped attitudes about language and literacy. As I moved through school there were subtle messages in the curriculum to signal that we students were still being marked by language: a

specially designed curriculum to address students' use of Hawai'i Creole English or the constant reminders to remediate our accented speech. But a high school English teacher chose to include a short story by a local writer that relied on dialogue in Hawai'i Creole English, or Pidgin as we all called it. Here the language of the community was made literary, and I saw for the first time that we could be writers in our own voices, we could tell stories that reflected our lives, and we could believe that our language did not limit what we could do or who we could become. This was a response to Hawai'i poet Eric Chock's impassioned question, "If there is no such thing as a Hawaii writer, how can you teach a Hawaii kid to write?" (8).

I also considered the literacy narratives of Asian/American writers who transformed commonplace references to physical difference (bodies), unintelligible gibberish or silence (language), alien status (citizenship), and unassimilability (identity) invoked to do damage upon Asian/Americans, into productive sites of rhetorical activity for Asian/Americans to make claims on their own terms. These narratives often created complex discussions about the relationship between literacy and identity, whether in *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, whose innovative memoir used story to unpack questions about gender, race, and generational trauma, or in *America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan, whose working-class narrative challenged the promises of the American Dream by revealing the difficult lives of migrant laborers.

While the influence of "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms" and *Intimate Practices* on my own work is undeniable, for providing theoretical frameworks to use in examining literacy and identity, I have begun to realize the broader influence of Gere's entire body of work even if much of it was unknown to me at the time. In remembering my training as a graduate student and reflecting on my scholarship, I can see more clearly how Gere's attention to language and its complexity, theorization of the social contexts for writing, and embrace in understanding the literacy and language practices of diverse communities on their own terms have created the contexts for my own education.

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES, COMPOSING A LIFE

I have recalled here the impact that Gere's scholarship has had on my own scholarly career, from the direct influence of taking graduate seminars at Michigan to reading the work that she created from the conversations and ideas that were shared in those classrooms to the direct mentorship and advising she provided whether in small gestures such as a birthday card or in the hard conversations about a difficult job market. But in all of these experiences, I perhaps best remember her as a writing teacher, as someone who demystified scholarly writing, saw

potential and value in the turn toward narrative that often allowed me to express the ideas I was still trying to develop, and treated me as a peer.

While I had been fortunate enough to get a couple of pieces published early in my graduate career, I would hesitate to call them significant: an Instructor's Manual to a textbook, *The Active Reader: Composing in Reading and Writing,* written by Anne Ruggles Gere and Jeffrey Carroll (which was my first introduction to Gere), and an essay in a conference proceedings. When Gere offered to co-author an essay with any interested student for a collection of essays she was invited to contribute to, I jumped at the opportunity. The collection, *Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature: Politics, Curriculum, Pedagogy,* was edited by James F. Slevin and Art Young and sought to reimagine what the teaching of literature might look like during a time when the nature of reading and the contexts for writing were undergoing a dramatic shift away from the text itself to the contexts under which texts were created. At the time, I was taking a seminar with her titled, "The Teaching of Literature, The Literature of Teaching," in which we read a variety of work including *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. When we sat down to discuss ideas for the essay, I suggested we consider Silko's *Ceremony* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* along with *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. We soon settled on examining how these writers had been institutionalized through critical scholarship and became cultural institutions because of their positions as women of color writing during a time when representation of women of color in the literary canon was sparse.

These three writers provided an important opportunity to consider how identities intersect—in this case identities involving gender and race/indigeneity—and how these intersecting identities informed innovative narrative strategies. The work was exciting and gave us an opportunity to also consider the relationship between literature and composition, between texts and the composing of those texts. But what was most profound to me in this experience was writing alongside Gere. We were collaborating in a time before Google Docs or other platforms that would allow easy collaboration. We were literally sitting side by side reading drafts together and making decisions about the form of an argument, style, and other matters for revision. It was in this moment that I experienced what Gere had been researching, theorizing, and arguing in her work: that writing was a social experience, that writing is collaborative, and that writing is a dialogue that allows for the development and revision of ideas and arguments. It was also a moment of demystification, to understand that a revision might be as simple as making a different choice of word, or a rephrase of a sentence, or simply cutting something if it doesn't work. While these are

practices that we all share with our students, such practices are easier said than done when the stakes feel high. In this case, I felt the pressure to produce, to not disappoint, and perhaps to not allow the anxiety of imposter syndrome to create paralysis. But this experience revealed to me that the stakes are not so high when we understand our purpose for writing, trust the process and our collaborator, and believe that what we have to say is important. Gere helped me to see all of these things in her generosity to write with me, to write alongside of me, and to share in a conversation that we both felt was necessary and important.

In this way, I was able to compose a professional life, to weave together a personal and cultural history of literacy, a critical awareness of the intersections of language, literacy, and identity, and a developing sense of myself as a writer. When I work with my own graduate students, I often ask them, "What is the story you want to tell through your research?" The research they pursue is often informed by stories that they have either heard or experienced in their own lives and that they begin to see in the lives of their communities and students. They have told stories about the use of rhetoric by people with disabilities, the creation of community writing groups for adult learners, the development of linguistic justice awareness by instructors, and the imagining of Nigerian national identity, among the many others that bring visibility to vulnerable people who have often felt that language, literacy, and writing were gatekeeping tools used against them but who then found that they could use language, literacy, and writing on their own terms to meet their own needs. This is what I have learned from the work of Anne Ruggles Gere and that I hope I have been able to do in my own work as a scholar, teacher, and writer.

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