

## CHAPTER 4: APPROACHING ANTIRACIST WORK IN AN ASSESSMENT ECOLOGY

In this chapter, I look closely at my own classroom's writing assessment ecology, which used a grading contract. My purpose is to make sense of what happened, to understand the class as a burgeoning antiracist writing assessment ecology. I did not design the course's writing assessment ecology to be antiracist, but believe in places it comes close. This chapter considers how my assessment ecology helped locally diverse students develop as readers and writers, and my discussion suggests ways for future pedagogical change that is inevitably personal and local. It offers useful ways to think through any writing assessment ecology in order to transform it into an antiracist one.

Up to this point, I've discussed racism in classrooms as larger, social patterns that we must understand and address in structural ways. But when a teacher steps into her classroom and people are present in all their diverse complexities, when students write and do all that they do, when our lives as teachers become tangled in the day-to-day workings of a course and academic life, racist patterns become less visible because life and people are messy and unpredictable. This is a part of Kerschbaum's (2014) point about understanding diversity's evolving character, best seen in relation to others. So this chapter is less about showing patterns, although some exist, and more about seeing the ecology. Doing so leads us to antiracist work. Let me be clear: An antiracist writing assessment ecology is a classroom that makes more visible the ecology since racist patterns are always less visible in real life.

In another place (Inoue, 2014a), I discuss how to use grading contracts in writing classrooms, highlighting three important themes or questions that guide students in my classrooms. These questions come up in this chapter, but I do not focus on them. In another study (Inoue, 2012a), I discuss the effectiveness of grading contracts on various racial formations in Fresno State's first-year writing program, finding that they do in fact have differential consequences on Fresno State's local Hmong, Latino/a, African-American, and white student formations. My past research shows that contracts that focus on labor as a way to calculate course grades helps most students of color and multilingual students perform well in writing classrooms. I theorize these findings in fuller detail for writing classrooms (Inoue, 2014b) by discussing the nature and distribution of failure based on quality and labor in writing courses. By focusing on labor as a way

to assess for development and produce grades, the nature and distribution of failure, particularly course failure, changes. With these changes, the assessment ecology becomes more antiracist. I've also discussed the ways that past grading contract research, which is very limited, has neglected to account for racial formations by not seeing students as racialized bodies in the classroom, thus not parsing the data by racial formation or making conclusions that consider race as a factor (Inoue, 2012b). All of this past work informs my observations and conclusions in this chapter. I'm not trying to argue for grading contract ecologies; instead, I wish to illustrate how any teacher might understand his or her classroom writing assessment ecology as potentially antiracist. Because grades are so destructive to student learning in writing classrooms and grades produced by quality (comparisons to a dominant standard) are themselves racist, grading contracts are the best antiracist solution I've found.

What follows is a description of the course and its work. I discuss the central part (artifact) and conceptual place of the course, the grading contract, which used labor and assessing as a way to organize and conceptualize the course and responsibilities. I discuss the way students engaged in labor, since labor was the primarily way in which course grades were determined, and the main way students constructed their own places in the assessment ecology. I then look closely at the assessment practices of students in order to show the main pathways of learning in the class that our writing assessment ecology produced. Finally, I end by considering students' exit from the assessment ecology. Throughout, I draw on students' writing and reflecting in the course, as well as my notes from that semester. All students gave me written permission to use their work, and were shown the chapter before publication. I use students' real first names, unless they asked me to use a pseudonym, which I note.

## **ENGLISH 160W**

In Fall 2012, I taught Engl 160W, an upper division writing intensive course at Fresno State, intended for third and fourth year undergraduates to fulfill their upper division writing intensive requirement. Most students who enroll in this particular course are not English majors. For instance, in Fall of 2012, there were seven fourth year (four females, three males) and 16 third year students (nine females, seven males) in the class. The 11 majors represented in the course were as follows:

- Psychology (4)
- Business (9)
- Business- accountancy (2)

- Viticulture (1)
- Communication (1)
- Political Science (1)
- Computer Science (1)
- Criminology (1)
- Health Science- Occupational Health (1)
- Communication Disorders- Deaf Education (1)
- Chemistry (1)

Because I asked students to introduce themselves as readers and writers in a number of ways in the first few weeks of class (in writing, in group work, on Blackboard, etc.), and because I introduced myself as a product of racial projects in my own school history, as a former remedial reading student in schools who attended public schools in North Las Vegas (a mostly African-American “ghetto” at the time) and who was always the only brown kid in class in college, they felt more authorized to bring up their own racialized experiences and *habitus*. I did not explicitly ask them to do this though. I learned the racial and cultural makeup of the class, as well as other aspects of their material lives that had import on their work in our course. As you’ll see below, the course in some ways encouraged students to talk about, draw on, and consider their own histories and material conditions that affected their work in the course. While I realize this can be a delicate set of discussions, some being more uncomfortable with talking about things like race than others, I tried hard to give students options. They did not have to reveal anything about their past or their own sense of racial, class, or gendered identities, but everyone did.

I contextualized the sharing of this personal information early and throughout the course by explaining how racial, gender, cultural, and other personal factors can influence the ways we read each other’s work and judge it, so while they do not dictate how anyone will read or value another’s writing, our racial, cultural, economic, and linguistic heritages inform our reading and writing and may offer reflective insights into how we value language. While I didn’t use the term, the point I tried to convey was that our racial *habitus* does matter to us and to those whom we offer judgments. Just because we identify ourselves as African-American, White, or Hmong, or from a poor family, doesn’t mean we are prejudice, it simply means we have important histories and experiences that bias us in necessary ways, which writers should know and readers might use to help explain why they value certain things in texts. I asked them to consider reading as an inherently biased activity, one requiring bias in order to make sense of things, thus it is good to know explicitly the biases that make up how we read,

even if only personally.

The students in this course were close to the larger Fresno State student population's racial makeup. Our course's ethnic breakdown looked like this, which amounts to four racial formations:

- Latino/a, Mexican America (7)
- White (7)
- African-American (3)
- Asian-American: Hmong (2); Chinese (2); Southeast Asian Indian (1); Laotian (1)

As you may recall, Fresno State is classified as an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), because it has a total enrollment of at least 25% Hispanic students. In Fall 2012, 38.8% of all students enrolled were Hispanic, 28.8% were White, 14.8% were Asian (mostly Hmong), 4.4% were African-American, 3.0% were International, and 0.4% were American Indian (CSU, Fresno, n.d.).<sup>39</sup> Thus the racial formations that made up the class was mostly consistent with students at Fresno State that semester; however, the class's African-American formation was out of balance with the larger percentage at the university. This was simply luck or happenstance, since in the last six or so years prior to the class, I had never had three African-Americans in the same course.

I designed the course according to the department's description of it in the catalogue, as a project-based course in which each student writes two research projects, each based on some question in her major or discipline. When I put students in their writing groups around week 4, which they choose to keep for the entire semester, I tried to shuffle the groups as best I could so that they contained different majors, were racially and linguistically diverse, and had a roughly equal number of males and females, which didn't always work, given that a few students moved in and out of the course in the first few weeks. The groups were between four and five students each. Most of their work on their projects occurred in the groups, so the writing groups made up much of the class's day to day work. For some students, the groups also ended up characterizing the class, and to some extent the grading contract, which I'll discuss below. Most important, in several ways that will become clear later, the writing groups were one primary ecological place initiated by me, but created, cultivated, and settled (colonized) by students over the course of the semester, and the place of their writing groups tended to determine a number of processes, use of parts, purposes for assessing, and even products.

The course was organized around formal labors, or processes of assessment that overlapped and connected to each other, scaffolding student work toward two culminating documents, their projects' final documents. Our course con-

sisted of several reoccurring activities. I am not calling them assignments since the philosophy and language of the course was that of labor, not products. “Assignments” seems too close to product-oriented writing assessment ecologies. However, I will admit that in the class, we did refer to “assignments” as much as we did activities, processes, or labor. It made things clearer for many students. It can be confusing to never talk explicitly about “assignments,” when in one sense we did have them. I would characterize this aspect of the course as being focused on writing assessment processes that have ideal parts (artifacts) in mind as their goals, but a student’s successful completion of those processes was not contingent on submitting an ideal artifact. Instead, the nature of “ideal” for our class in any given activity’s artifact tended to be defined in terms of time spent on the activity, length of the document, and whether the writing addressed the prompt or instructions in the spirit that the work was given (did the document accomplish its purposes?). So in some senses, we did care about the nature of the writing that students produced. We cared about quality all the time in discussions and feedback, but we did not use quality to determine credit for or a grade on an assignment, nor did we use it to determine if someone met some standard of our local SEAE or a dominant discourse of the classroom. The labor we did was the following:

- *Reading.* These activities occurred between class sessions. Every act of reading produced an artifact (part): some postings on Blackboard (Bb), a list of items, a freewrite/quickwrite done during or after the reading, a focused paragraph response or summary as one read a text, or an annotated passage or page from the reading. Each activity and its artifact had explicit purposes that connected that labor to students’ projects. I asked students often to consider where they did their reading and why they did it there, particularly in labor journals (see below), which helped them be conscious of the places that their reading labors were most productive or intense. I also asked students to consider all reading as a kind of assessment, a set of judgments they make about a text in order to make some sense or meaning out of it. Reading was assessment because it was a set of judgments for some purpose (i.e., to understand, to summarize, to find particular information, to make other judgments, etc.). We defined these activities, like all of the activities, in terms of the time spent on the activity and the kind of labor we expected to engage in. Instructions looked and sounded like process directions, or procedures with a description of the artifacts expected to be used in class.
- *Writing.* These activities happen at home and in class. I wanted the

places of writing to be varied, since the places of assessment would be. Students produced artifacts that were used in class, in groups, or to begin discussions. Depending on what we agreed upon, or where we were in the semester, our writing activities invented, researched, thought about, drafted, and revised their two projects. In most cases, I couched these shorter writing assignments as ones fundamentally asking students to assess and make judgments for some purpose. We decided together on parameters of these labors, and most of those directions were cues for timing (how much time to spend) and what to do in each stage of laboring (how to do the labor or how the labor should be focused). For the projects, we also conducted more formal rubric building activities (discussed below). Again, the prompts and instructions looked a lot like procedures. On average, we did one activity a week, taking a few hours to do, stretched over a few days.

- *Reflecting.* These were reading and writing activities done each week-end and discussed in the Monday session of the following week. Students read excerpts from their reflections that I chose, and the class sometimes discussed them, but usually we just listened. I wanted students to hear the good thinking and questioning happening in the class, and I wanted the classroom to be a place where their ideas and theorizing about writing and reading were center stage, were important, public, and explicit. I wanted to value all the writing in the class, so I made a point to keep track of who had read their reflections each week, with the goal of getting every student to read at some point. At times, students responded to a prompt that asked them to do some metacognitive thinking (e.g., “What did you learn about ‘entering academic conversations’ from your group this week? How did it come to you? What rhetorical patterns did you find occurring in the most effective written feedback you received?”). At other times, they were free to reflect on anything that was on their minds (and that pertained to our class). This reflective labor was defined most explicitly as self-assessment and assessing the activities of the class for lessons learned or questions revealed. The prompts for each weekly reflection activity was similar in nature as all the other activities. I defined each reflection activity by the amount of time students should spend reading and reflecting in writing, usually 20-30 minutes, then asked them to spend another 10-20 minutes reading other students’ postings. Finally, they replied to at least three others with something substantive and meaningful.
- *Labor Journaling.* In class each day, we spent five minutes freewriting

a journal entry about the labor for our course that we did just before that class session. The labor journals attempted to help students see and quantify exactly the labor they were doing for the course. Their entries were designed to help them determine whether the labor they were doing was enough and what its nature was (What were they doing when they were most engaged? What did that labor produce for them? How engaging or intense was it?). In my prompts, I tried to push them each week a bit more, little by little, to develop their labor habits into more intense, effective, and productive behaviors. Again, like their weekly reflections, labor journals were self-assessment activities, only focused on the nature and intensity of their labor. More recently, I've incorporated Twitter as a way to capture some of my students' labor practices during the week as it occurs, which I discussed in Chapter 3. In class we spend a few minutes looking over those tweets in order to write their journal entry for that day. Students can also tweet back to others in the class, as I sometimes do, if they so choose.<sup>40</sup>

- *Assessing.* If it's not clear already, assessing in a number of ways is the center of the course, the central activity. It was the way I articulated most activities and all reading and writing activities. At its center, assessing is about reading and making judgments on artifacts from frameworks of value and expectations for particular purposes. At around week six, the writing groups moved into full swing. Each week students did the reading and writing labors (above) that worked toward their projects (below). The assessing activities directed students through processes that asked them to read artifacts and articulate judgments in a variety of ways on those artifacts. To guide assessing labors, there were two sets of collaboratively created expectations or rubrics: a set of project expectations (what they should demonstrate in a final draft of the project) and labor expectations (what they should demonstrate in their labors in and out of class to produce the project), which I discuss below.<sup>41</sup> On average, I asked students to spend at least 20-45 minutes on each assessment activity (including the reading time) for each artifact being assessed (some drafts varied greatly in length). Near the end of the semester, students also wrote assessment letters to their group members, which their colleagues and I used in final one-on-one conferences, which I discuss later in this chapter. Instructions for assessments were similar to all other activities. I gave directions on how much time to spend on the reading of peers' drafts, and the writing of the associated assessment documents. Additionally, I provided general guidelines for what we expected students to produce in those

assessment documents, but at a midpoint, students helped decide this aspect of their assessing as well.

- *Projecting.* These labors were the culmination of all their work in the course (everything above). All the scaffolded activities led to two research-based, written inquiries on subjects in the students' major or discipline that dealt with some aspect of rhetoric. Usually the projects were traditional looking research papers, but one student did a report, while another student did a brochure. Another student attempted a video, but realized midway through how much more labor that required, so she changed to a traditional research essay. All projecting required the same amount of research and writing, which amounted to all the activities above—all labors fed into the projects' final documents, which tended to be multimodal constructions, using videos and images. Some produced six to eight page research papers, while a few produced 12-15 page research papers. In this grading ecology, all labor in the class was a student's *projecting* of her chosen research topic/question; her learning about writing and the question; her understanding and articulating of ideas, texts, and writing processes; her enacting of her own learning journey to exactly the place that she can achieve. My only limitations on the writing and research was that writers had to have an academic audience in mind, deal with rhetoric in some way, and use academic sources to help them engage with their projects.

## LABOR AND THE GRADING CONTRACT ECOLOGY

Engaging explicitly and self-consciously in discussions about the course's writing assessment ecology makes the ecology itself visible to students and is vital to antiracist work. We began this work by engaging in discussions of our grading contract as a part that articulates how course grades will be produced. These discussions were on-going and led to negotiations about the conditions and expectations of their labor, the codes we used to determine acceptable labor and behaviors. Reflecting and discussing our contract was the most obvious ecological place to start since I knew that most students would care about their course grades and would have some investment in determining them.

The scholarship on grading is almost unanimous about the unreliability or inconsistency and subjectivity (in the bad sense of being too idiosyncratic) of grades (Bowman, 1973; Charnley, 1978; Dulek & Shelby, 1981; Elbow, 1997; Tchudi, 1997; Starch & Elliott, 1912), and just as much research shows how grades and other kinds of rewards and punishments de-motivate and harm students and their abilities to learn anything (Elbow, 1999; Kohn, 1993; Pulfrey,



Buchs, & Butera, 2011). Thus grades as the primary ecological products of writing assessment ecologies often work against issues of language diversity and difference (e.g., class, gender, race, religious view, sexual orientation, ability, etc.), reinforce a norming to a white racial *habitus*, and the racing of academic places. For instance, conventional grading systems often construct a student's text as a place of norming to a white racial *habitus*. Grading uses a dominant standard, seen in rubrics and assignment expectations, to produce a grade for a writing performance. This creates the student text as a place, not of problematizing the judgment of language practices (both the dominant and the student's), but one of colonizing the student to a dominant set of dispositions, which are indirectly seen through textual markers. This is more the case with multilingual students and students of color, although white working class students surely feel colonized as well. In short, grading students' writing on its quality is a racist practice, despite the fact that it is arguably important for students to learn (about) dominant discourses.

But knowing how well one is doing in a class is important. One central grading problem that is revealed when one sees one's class as an antiracist writing assessment ecology is this: *when we value quality, particularly by assigning grades by using judgments of quality, we have no control over the valuing labor or processes; yet when we value labor and processes, we have an equally hard time valuing quality (as compared to a dominant discourse) as an outcome or artifact.*

However, if we can value labor and processes that have collaboratively defined ideal artifacts (parts) in mind, dictated by agreements that students and teacher make together that maintain and interrogate the difference inherent in the local diversity of the classroom (i.e., keep difference present), and keep grades out of the ecology, then it is possible to create productive antiracist borderlands in the course's writing assessment ecology because the parts can reflect the local diversity of language use while not penalizing students through ecological products like grades. These borderlands offer students landscapes to problematize their existential writing assessment situations, revealing how their language is judged and perhaps why.

I used a grading contract in this course similar to Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) in order to consciously value labor, processes, particular purposes for assessing the documents produced by those processes, and products. The grading contract was ideal since it almost always requires lots of discussion for students to understand it, and reveals the assumptions students and teachers make about grades. But I also incorporated the good use of democratic negotiation that Shor (2007) emphasizes in his contracts. Unlike both Danielewicz and Elbow, and Shor, I started the conversation of grading and course grades with the idea of labor. The idea of writing as labor, while intuitive at some level, is not intuitive for

many students when it is used to determine their course grades, or when helping them understand how well they are doing on a task or generally in the course. As Elbow (1997, 1999) has discussed in a similar way, most students are thoroughly conditioned to thinking in terms of documents, page counts, and grades rather than in terms of labor, quantity, time, and how to do an activity.

The grading contract (see Appendix A) was emailed to students a few weeks before the semester began, and was discussed on the first day of class. After the first day's introduction to the contract, I asked students to go home, read carefully the contract again, and mark it with questions they had and things they would like to negotiate or change. We discussed and negotiated the contract again on the second day of class, a Wednesday (the course met Monday and Wednesday at 4:00 P.M. for 80 minutes each day). After Wednesday's discussion, I asked them to reflect upon the contract and our negotiations, since I knew many at this early stage would have a hard time questioning the contract—and they did—but might open up when writing to their colleagues and themselves (this was an in-class freewrite).

While there was, as usual, very little that changed in the contract, the discussions helped reveal three important questions that organized the course's writing assessment ecology as a semester-long historic bloc. These questions came from my students' writing, which I rearticulated to them in class since I had anticipated the questions, and in fact encouraged them through my prompting of their reflective writing. The questions were:

- What does labor mean in our writing class?
- How do we know how well we are doing if there are no grades?
- What does assessing mean in our class?<sup>42</sup>

It may seem odd that students inquired about the nature of their labor unless you take into account my prompting them in a number of ways. The grading contract is defined by the concept of labor, and I made a point to read and discuss this aspect of the course's grading contract on the first day. Additionally, one of the course's weekly assignments is a labor journal, in which I prompted them one to two times a week to write about what they experienced when they did the physical labor of the course that week, we discussed this as well on the first day. If labor is important to students' course grades, I argued, then we needed some way to see it, understand it, and reflect upon it—in effect, we each needed to evaluate it, only not for a grade or accountability, but in order to find ways to improve our own labor, making it more intense, productive, or effective. The contract also explains the grading of the course in terms of student labor and trust, stating on its first page:

This contract is based on a simple principle and a few import-

ant assumptions, which are not typical in most classrooms. First, the principle: how much *labor* you do is more important to your learning and growth as a reader and writer than the quality of your writing. Our grading contract calculates grades by how much *labor* you do and the manner in which you do it. The more you work, the better your grade—no matter what folks think of the product of your labor—but we assume that you'll be striving in your labors to improve, learn, and take risks. The other important assumption that this principle depends upon for success is that we must assume that all students will try their hardest, work their hardest, and not deceive anyone, when it comes to their labor. If we ask for an hour of writing at home, and someone says they did that and produced X, then we must believe them. This is a culture of trust. We must trust one another, and know that deception and lying hurts mostly the liar and his/her learning and growth.

Thus not only did I prompt them about labor in their writing and discussions, but I also planted the seeds of thinking about the course's assessment ecology in terms of their labor in the contract. Because the contract is the main articulation of how course grades are determined, it is central to the writing assessment ecology. It is the most important ecological part, which in other ways is an ecological place, a site of negotiation and orientation. In a sense, the contract was a place of norming, only not to a local dominant discourse or a local SEAE, or a white racial *habitus*, but to a negotiated set of practices and discourses about assessment and labor.

This norming in the place of the contract was not a one-way, hierarchical norming, but was a norming that students negotiated and had more control over than in typical academic places of norming and racing. In class discussions, I began by asking them: what responsibility do you have to your colleagues in our class and in your writing groups? What responsibilities do you expect of your colleagues around you? How does that responsibility translate into your own behaviors and labor in this class? What happens when someone doesn't meet his or her responsibilities to others in the class? These discussions, because they implicitly built a rationale for our writing assessment ecology, especially the places of writing groups, which originates in the ecological part and place of the contract, were crucial to my students' acceptance of the grading contract and to their abilities to do the labor required.

So, the grading contract and our discussions in the first week of the course dictated that the writing, reading, and other work of the course was conceived

of as labor, as activities, as processes, as doing things. We'd care most about the quantity of our labor, but increasingly about the nature of one's labor (more on this below). If a student met the contract's labor guidelines, she would earn a "B" course grade, no matter what. On the last page, the contract provides a table that sets out clearly the labor needed for each course grade and how we would tabulate that labor:

**Table 3. The grading contract calculated course grades by the amount of labor students produced**

	Absences	Late Assigns.	Missed Assigns.	Ignored Assigns.
A	4 or less	5	0	0
B	4 or less	5	0	0
C	5	6	1	0
D	6	7	2	1
F	7	8 or more	2	2 or more

Note that the assumption in my bookkeeping is that all students are doing the work appropriately and adequately. My assumption was, and I said this to the class, everyone will do the work, or is doing the work, to earn a "B." It is only when someone doesn't turn something in, or turns in something incomplete, that a mark in my grade book is recorded. Items #4, #5, and #6 in the contract explain the differences between a late, missed, and ignored assignment.<sup>43</sup> In essence, the main differences lie in how much time goes by before the assignment is turned in. In addition to the above table, the contract stipulates a "plea" or a "gimme," which amounts to a get-out-of-jail-free card. A student can use one plea at any time in the course to erase an absence, a late assignment, a missed (which becomes a late) assignment, etc.

Note that there is no difference between an "A" and a "B" course grade on this grid. This is because in this course, the number or quantity of assignments for students striving for "As" was technically the same as those who were okay with a "B," but if a student wanted an "A," then her two projects would have to be twice the length and depth as her peers shooting for a "B." This roughly amounted to 10 academic sources researched and incorporated into each project's final document and that document needed to be around 10-12 pages in length.

Negotiating the grading contract moved students away from focusing on grades, and refocused their attention on their labors, in particular on the processes of reading, writing, and assessing their own and others' drafts. My hope was that focusing on the processes of writing assessment in the course, processes

I was largely absent from (except in their design), would also reorient students to other kinds of purposes for their writing and emphasize other ecological products. Thus the assessment of writing framed the course at large through the contract, the writing group's primary activities, and the projects' activities. This re-orienting to new processes of assessment, assessment products, and purposes for writing and its assessment did seem to occur, and I consider it important to any antiracist writing assessment ecology.

Reorientation in the environment can be productive, unproductive, helpful, ambiguous, or harmful to students, but I argue that some kind of reorientation always occurs. And it affects the culture of the classroom and students' learning. In the next section, I discuss the way students oriented themselves in our writing assessment ecology, particularly through the renegotiation of the contract at the midpoint of the semester. The absence of grades and refocus on labor was central to this reorientation.

Most students reoriented themselves in the ecology by rethinking the nature of their labor, not the perceived quality of their texts. The labors of the ecology, of writing and reading (judging), are fundamentally ontological acts that connect us to places in the ecology, as well as to other people. It is through our labors that we experience inter-being, which help us negotiate the problematizing in the borderlands of the ecology—in fact, one critical labor is problem posing. Robert Yagelski (2011) offers a good way to understand the labors of writing as a way of (inter)being by describing his own act of writing:

As I write, I *am*—but not *because* of the writing; rather, the writing intensifies my awareness of myself, my sense of being, which is prior to but, right now, coterminous with this act of writing. And if I attend to my awareness—if I become aware of that awareness, as it were; if I focus my attention on my attention during this act of writing, as I am doing right now—it is not my sense of self as a separate, thinking being that is intensified but my sense of self as existing in this moment and at the same time “inhabiting” the physical place where I am sitting as well as the scene in the coffee shop that I am imagining and trying to describe, a scene removed from me in time and space at *this* moment; thus, I am connected to this moment and those other moments I have been trying to describe and indeed to all those other selves I've mentioned and many I have not mentioned and the things around me now and those that were around me then and even you, the reader I am imagining who will, I think, at some point, really

*be* a reader of this text and thus be connected to me as well in a very real way through your act of reading at some future date, which means that this moment of writing right now somehow encompasses that future moment, too.

It is in this sense that I *am* as I am writing. The *writing* does not create me, but in the *act* of writing I *am*; by writing I reaffirm and proclaim my being in the here and now. The act of writing, in this sense, is a way of being; it is an ontological act. (p. 104)

I wish I could say that I showed my class this passage when discussing what labor means in our class, but I didn't. What I hope you can hear or see in Yagelski's rendering of the act of writing as a way of (inter)being in the world is that place is vital to a writer's or reader's inter-being. Place is vital to the ontological meaning of the labors we do in the class. I wanted students to see that the labor of writing, for instance, is the only access we have to writing. And if our goals are in some way to write more self-consciously, more critically, more problematically—to do *more than* write right now—then we must have access to ourselves as writers in the act of writing, and we must see the places in which those labors are done as part of that access, part of the labors of writing and judging. Thus is the nature of the inter-being of labor and place, of writing and one's acts of being that inter-are with where we write and who we write for.

And why is the notion of labor as processes of inter-being important to an antiracist writing assessment ecology? Because it allows locally diverse students and teacher to share in the ontological essence of others' writing, no matter how different that writing is from our own writing or from our expectations of it. It allows us to access place as part of the labor of writing and its judgment. It allows us to realize that no matter who you are, another reader, a very different person, can inter-be with you, and in fact, must inter-be with you, which provides grounds for compassionate problematizing, posing tough questions that come from a place of shared essence. It helps us feel as we judge. This inter-being of place, people, and their labors connects us in tangible ways through our labor, our work, our doing of things, through our bodies, not just our minds. Other's writing and its success and failure, then are our own successes and failures. When students share in the ontological essence of locally diverse writing, they have a good chance at confronting difference from a white racial *habitus* and posing problems about the nature of judgment to each other.

Still, you may be wondering why "labor" as the central metaphor for our grading contract and the classroom writing assessment ecology? Why not "work" or "process"? The idea of labor as valuable isn't that strange for most students.

U.S. culture rewards labor by paying for it by the hour, and the paradigm of mandatory labor hours and overtime hours are familiar to Fresno State students, most of whom work in labor economies. At some point, I wanted them to question these paradigms, question the idea that the rewards we get out of our labors correlate positively to the time and effort we put into them, that learning is a linear equation, that more time spent on writing can always be apparent in the development and quality of drafts, or even writers. I do not think this is entirely true, but it is not entirely false, and it is more true than false. So for the assessment ecology's purposes, it was safe to say that writing well and producing effective documents takes effort and time. Thus the dominant purpose of the ecology was not to produce grades as ecological products. It was to produce labor, which is another way of saying to produce sustainable places, which by their nature in this ecology would become borderlands of problematizing, antiracist places to inhabit.

I should note that in retrospect I see a problem with defining and discussing the contract's calculus for course grades purely in terms of the labor in capitalist market economies. While students get this metaphor easily, and usually agree with it philosophically, as a scholar of Marxian stripes, I can see how my contract may look like some version of exploitation, in which a ruling class (the teacher) expects a certain amount of labor for a lower price (course grade) than what might reasonably be expected from a subordinate class (students). The power dynamics work in the teacher's favor, labor's price is set by the teacher. There is no equal exchange or true negotiation, despite the fact that most (if not all) writing teachers do not wish to exploit their students.

Exploitation, though, is subjective. What I see as fair, my students may see as unfair and exploitative. Two white female students, Susan, a middle-aged woman returning to school, majoring in business-accountancy, and Jane, a former Minnesotan in her early twenties, majoring in business, voiced this concern, discussing it as fairness and too much work. Both were traditionally, high performers in classes, and both came into the course writing the local SEAE quite well. They each embodied well a white racial *habitus* in their writing and reading dispositions.

As I've discussed in another place (Inoue, 2012a), students from white racial formations at Fresno State often have difficulty with the contract because they no longer automatically sit at the top of the grading pyramid in the class. The labors that required an "A" grade before are now insufficient, or seem so initially. Additionally, these students often feel it unfair that now "As" are more available to more students in the class (Inoue, 2012a, p. 92). Their "As" mean less.<sup>44</sup> These findings from Fresno State's first-year writing courses also align with other research on white student reactions to grading contracts (Spidell & The-



lin, 2006).<sup>45</sup> Susan's and Jane's concerns, along with a few other students, were important to our mid-point re-negotiations of the contract, and important to enacting more equitable power arrangements in the writing assessment ecology of the course by encouraging difference and conflict, and providing a method for the exercising of their own agency and power in determining their course grades. So when such resistances came up, even if they were the minority opinions, I made sure they were heard and discussed.

I'm not sure this alleviated the sense that the contract was not an exploitative one. I am sure that conventional teacher-student power relations are unavoidable, and so regardless of how I presented things or offered ways to negotiate the contract, it may still have ended up feeling to some as an exploitative contract, because some students may have felt coerced into agreeing with the contract and not voicing their real concerns. But even in conventionally graded classrooms, students are automatically placed in less powerful positions and more likely to be exploited. They get no say in grading. Students frequently mentioned in reflections how helpful and rewarding it was to construct or negotiate the course's terms. And as I show in the next section, monolingual Latina and white students in the class had uniformly positive orientations toward the grading contract ecology. The theme of labor was important to the sense of fairness in these orientations.

Allowing my students to negotiate the terms of the contract in weeks 1 and 10 (we have a 16 week semester) was my attempt to negotiate a "fair price" for their labor in the course. I reasoned that after a significant portion of the class had gone by, after students had experienced the contract in good faith, they would be more comfortable and inclined to negotiate the contract or make a judgment on its fairness at that point. And so, my students were given multiple opportunities to be involved in the setting of the terms of their labor through the contract as an ecological part, an artifact that represented what labor meant and what its consequences were in our ecology. In week 10, we did make an important change to the contract. The original contract allowed for three or fewer late assignments in order to meet the contract's guidelines for a "B" course grade, but after discussions, the class agreed to five or fewer late assignments, with the caveat listed below the breakdown table (see the contract in Appendix A). The caveat attempted to reward in some fashion the significant number of students (the vast majority of the class) who were still meeting the original contract guidelines and expected to meet them by semester's end. In fact, when all was said and done, 16 out of 23 met the original contract's guidelines for a "B" grade.

But philosophically, there is still tension with the economic metaphor of labor. There is something about using grades as the unit of exchange in an assessment ecology that doesn't do justice to what we usually attempt to accomplish in a writing classroom. If students accepted this as the main way our contract



worked (and I cannot say with certainty they did not), then one might say the contract created an ecology in which students were somewhat alienated from the ecological products of their labor, that is, alienated from learning, alienated from the reading and writing practices they were expected to improve. Students would be focused on grades as products, not attaining better writing or reading practices, not laboring with increased awareness of that labor's intensity or productivity (i.e., its ability to generate future learning products). But one can also make this same criticism of any conventional grading ecology because in both cases, it's not the focus on labor that is the problem, it is the focus on grades that alienates students from the real products of their labor. The surrogate product of grades substitutes a student's purposes, swapping out the goal of laboring to learn (about their writing and reading practices) for laboring to earn (a grade). I asked my students to labor to learn, not labor to earn, but it was up to them to accept.

Labor is also traditionally the productive activity that results in a child. To be in labor is to be giving birth, to be generating, to be creating. Creating and generating is at the heart of all writing classrooms. And when we create things, difference and originality are most valued, even expected or assumed. No two babies are alike, and no one would ever say they were. Even with identical twins (I am an identical twin), people look for differences as often as they look for similarities. Difference is valued and assumed. Thus, labor in childbirth suggests to me the unknown or unexpected consequences of our energies because that labor is associated with creativity, originality, difference, and the unexpected, all of which are embraced as the norm.

Similarly in the writing classroom, we ask our students to generate readings of texts, to form arguments, to create feedback for colleagues, to create texts of all sorts. Usually, these creations, like babies, take on a life of their own when they are distributed and read by others. There is no better way to see this than in a writing group in which readers interpret or judge a text (a peer's or a published one). Each reader sees or argues for something different, sees different things in the text. These readings are the life that comes from the original text, whose author may not have intended at all those discussions, yet there they are. A focus on labor in the ecology, as a painful, generative, exciting, and unknown activity, keeps students from thinking in terms of grades and simple, less-useful rewards, and moves them to embracing and problematizing difference in language use. This alone makes grading by labor an antiracist assessment practice.

While he doesn't use the metaphor of childbirth or labor, Alfie Kohn (1993) makes a supportive argument against grades and other hierarchical rewards in education, work, and parenting. In fact, citing educational research and research in behavioral psychology, Kohn finds that students learn more when they are asked to reflect and self-assess on their work but aren't graded (Brophy & Kher,

1986, p. 264; as quoted in Kohn, 1999, p. 156). Furthermore, Kohn explains that students who are “led to think mostly about how well they are doing—or even worse, how well they are doing compared to everyone else—are less likely to do well” (1999, p. 156). Using the metaphor of labor, particularly the labor of assessment (reading and judging), makes more visible several elements of the ecology: the processes of reading and assessing; the places created in the ecology that connect, norm, shock, and change people; and the people around us who labor together and whom we are always trying to connect to because we already feel our latent inter-being, or to use Burke, we try through our rhetoric to identify with others (1969, p. 55).

I’m not saying that we can escape giving course grades (I didn’t in this class), but I am saying we can pay attention to the power and influence that grades have over our students, and ask our students also to pay attention in order to explicitly form critical stances against grades. This work begins with revealing the ecology as structured by grading and assessment. I tried to cultivate places in our conversations in which I inserted this problem, which is central to the second question students developed in their initial thinking on the grading contract (“how do we know how well we are doing if there are no grades?”). The assessment ecology we created did focus most students’ attentions on their labor, thus implicating it in their purposes and in the dominant purpose I articulated in the contract’s language (to write and assess for its own sake). I would also argue that this refocusing of purposes changes the nature of any products students can get out of a classroom writing assessment ecology. The best way to see how students were able to explicitly form critical stances against grades, and perhaps problematize the judgment of their own language practices, is to look closer at our contract renegotiation processes during week 10.

## **STUDENT ORIENTATIONS IN THE WRITING ASSESSMENT ECOLOGY**

To say that most students changed their orientations toward their labor in the classroom writing assessment ecology from laboring to earn grades (a conventional purpose) to laboring to learn about the ways their language is judged is a significant claim. I argue that it happened uniformly, and we can see perhaps how it occurred by seeing the way various ecological elements intersected for students. It is in the intersections of various elements where the products of our assessment ecologies become clearest. These intersections are the places in the ecology that show the inter-being of elements.

The renegotiation of our contract in week 10 perhaps best illustrates the dramas in the ecology that revealed students’ evolving ecological purposes and

products. This significant moment in the semester when we consciously looked at and altered the most important ecological part of our assessment ecology, appears to suggest that most students did have productive purposes that came from the dominant one I offered (i.e., laboring to learn). However, these orientations to the writing assessment ecology also had patterns. They tended to congeal by racial-linguistic formations, mostly defined by their monolingual or multilingual statuses. But as I'll show later in their assessing of each other's drafts and the reflections on those labors and activities, these patterns didn't always hold up.

The monolingual students in the course usually experienced the contract positively and in unambiguous terms, however, several, particularly the white students, did mention grades as an ecological product they were striving for. Jane (a white student, mentioned above), for instance, says, "[t]he grading contract is something I was unsure of at first as well, but I actually love it. I love knowing exactly what I need to do in order to get the grade I want, no questions asked. It is a little stressful at times, but I would take our grading contract over the typical grading any day."<sup>46</sup> While she doesn't go into detail, she is unambiguous about the fact that the contract works for her, and this was clear in her enthusiasm and hard work in the course, particularly in her writing and class discussions. It would seem that Jane cared most about the grade, since that is where her reflection appears to be focused, but in the fuller reflection, this statement is surrounded by a discussion of her appreciation for her group discussions and the ways those processes worked well for her learning. Still, Jane suggests a somewhat dual orientation in the writing assessment ecology, one that has one eye on the learning she gets in the ecological place of her group and one eye on what she has to do in order to get the product (grade) she wants.

Zach, a white student majoring in viticulture, a first-generation student from a farming family near the central coast, on the other hand, reflects in more detail:

First I want to say that I greatly respect and enjoy the contract because it provides me the ability to always do my best and makes me want to better my writing. Also it gives me the opportunity to write what I want to write and not feel as if it's going to be compared to everyone else's work, instead I get to discover my own capabilities and be completely unique in the way I put my ideas on paper. Lastly the greatest part of the contract is the idea of our labor being taken [in]to consideration, I have taken many English classes in my life and in most I know for a fact I have worked harder than some of my colleagues and yet be graded lower than them which has always discouraged me as a writer, but in this class It's finally

being recognized that if I work hard I still can be successful regardless if my writing is not considered the best in class. To be completely honest I really don't have any negative thoughts about the contract because none of the work in this class has made me feel as if it's unfair or I'm not capable of meeting the expectations. I do work very hard in this class, but my hard work is being recognized so there are no complaints from me.

Zach describes his past writing experiences as ones that did not reward or value his labor, his hard work. And Zach is not exaggerating about his hard work, something he likely learned working on his family's farm, which we discussed several times during the semester. This aspect of his labor, seen through each activity and assignment from the very first day, was characteristic of him as a student. He worked long and hard, producing copious amounts of text, and followed the directions for each assignment to the letter. So it makes sense that he'd find value in the way the contract focuses on labor and work, not on a teacher's judgment of the results of that work, or on "compar[ing his work] to everyone else's work." And for Zach, this allows him to turn his writing labors into learning products—that is, the contract "provides [him] the ability to always do [his] best and makes [him] want to better [his] writing." The emphasis in Zach's orientation in our assessment ecology is on the contract as a part, as an articulation ("the part of the contract I like most") of labor that defines the codes for success in the class. In effect, Zach focuses on labor and our processes of reading, writing, and assessing, which the contract asks the class to value first. Additionally, the absence of grades as one product and the presence of his labor as valued processes created for Zach a fair system. This is different from Jane's sense of fairness. Hers is more oriented toward a grade-product she wants and can clearly see how to attain.

Amanda, a Latina majoring in business-accountancy, discusses in a typical way for the class the grading contract in week 10's reflection posting:

My first initial response to the syllabus was, "shit, that's a lot of writing" and we've actually done a lot more writing than what the syllabus stated but the writing has come, surprisingly, fairly easy to me. I really do like the grading contract. It's fair enough and I like the degree of freedom given to us because of it. We don't have to be worried about being judged on quality so we can get away with stepping outside our boundaries.

Many other students commented similarly on the workload that the syllabus

and contract identified for the “B” grade. Most found it to be quite steep, more writing than they’d ever done before or been expected to do for a “B” or an “A” grade. Yet all that writing without being “judged on quality” allows Amanda to take risks, step “outside our boundaries.” Zach affirms Amanda’s comment in his reply to her: “It’s funny that you mention the ‘O Shit’ moment while reading the syllabus at the beginning of the semester because I said the same thing, I really thought at first I wasn’t going to be able to keep up. But as for most of us we found out this class isn’t really that hard it’s just a lot of work.” The other two students who replied to Amanda also affirmed her sense that the work was steep, but producing the amount of writing wasn’t actually that hard. Amanda and Zach’s exchange about the class not being hard but “a lot of work” is significant. What this identifies to me is the felt sense by these students around the tension in quality-based writing assessment ecologies that are less predictable for students. In those ecologies, the amount of labor involved in any writing assignment does not necessarily equate to success, credit, or a good grade. You can work hard but still do poorly. This unpredictability causes students to find writing in those courses “hard.” Thus, when Amanda and Zach say our ecology isn’t hard, what I hear them saying is that their labor is valued in predictable ways. They explicitly connect this predictability to fairness. Fairness seems constructed by a number of ecological elements working in concert: the contract’s guidelines and our use of them (an ecological part that regulates processes/labor), students’ participation in the negotiation of the contract (shared ecological power), and valuing in real ways the worth of student labor (ecological processes that lead to parts and products).

Kyler, a hard-working, white student majoring in criminology, in his reply to Amanda sums up the three most prevalent themes in that week’s reflections:

The way you first described the syllabus was the same way I felt, I mean 5-6 for a B and 9-10 for an A, like that’s a lot of writing. I agree with how easy it has become, at first I started off a little shaky but now with knowing how the process works I’m much better prepared. Not being judged on quality and rather on effort is nice, writing just is too subjective to grade.

Klyer identifies that there is a lot of labor for “A” and “B” grades, however that labor, which seemed daunting in the beginning has turned out to be easier than expected. The question underneath this statement, I think, is one about exploitation, but he moves quickly to a positive outcome of his labor. It feels good not to be judged on quality, not to be judged against a white racial *habitus*.<sup>47</sup> Judgments based on quality (as compared to a white racial *habitus*) produce grade-products in assessment ecologies that are often unfair or unwanted (writ-

ing is “too subjective to grade”). Kyler senses these contradictions. In one sense, Kyler is voicing the same argument that Zach, Amanda, and Jane seem to be making, that the lack of grades, despite the heavy workload, makes for less exploitation because it’s fairer than grading on quality. Why? Predictability. Their labor is directly rewarded.

Kyler ends on a good point that hints at larger institutional conditions in which all my students must work. These grading conditions are not new or hidden to those in the fields of writing assessment or linguistics. Many studies have been done on the unreliability of the grading of student writing over the last 100 years (Diederich, 1974; Finkelstein, 1913; Starch & Elliott, 1912), but locally diverse students complicate further this unreliability in grading because of the complex *habitus* they embody when writing.

Paul Diederich sums up these conclusions best when describing the famous factor analysis study done by John French, Sydel Carlton, and himself in 1961 at ETS, and it illustrates an insight about the “subjectivity” of grading that students, like Kyle, can figure out. Diederich and his colleagues presented 300 college papers to 53 readers, and asked them to grade the papers. They found that 101 papers “received every grade from 1 to 9; 94 percent received either seven, eight, or nine different grades; and no essay received less than five different grades” (1974, p. 6). The median correlation, or agreement among all the readers, was a very low .31—that means, their model could account for or predict only 9.6% of the variance in grades. Most of the variance was unknown, or as Kyler says, “too subjective.” Moving from class to class, teacher to teacher, students, even white students like Kyler who arguably share more in a white racial *habitus* (the norm), feel this unevenness in grading and perceive it as unfair, unpredictable. More important, this unevenness affects students’ abilities to engage deeply in writing, and orient themselves appropriately in each writing assessment ecology. This affects their abilities to learn, their ecological products. Clearly students, if given the chance, can see this unfairness, and make productive (as in producing ecological products) sense of it if the writing assessment ecology offers the conditions to do so. In our classroom, we used reflection on the contract to help us build these conditions.

Diederich, however, also explains this problem from the teacher’s side of things. In his next chapter when concluding about a different ETS study done by Benjamin Rosner on the effects of bias in grading practices, Diederich says, “grading is such a suggestible process that we find what we expect to find. If we think a paper came from an honors class, we expect it to be pretty good, and that is what we find. If we think it came from a regular class, we expect it to be only so-so, and that is what we find” (1974, p. 12). This is a phenomenon that I have found to be true at every institution at which I’ve taught, where the bias does

not just come from a stamp on the student's writing ("honors" or "regular"), as in Rosner's study, but comes from an association with the body of color and that body's assumed linguistic capabilities, particularly those of Latino/a and Hmong students (at Fresno State).

In fact, Shaughnessy (1977) makes this association to the basic writer explicit, suggesting some historical precedent of such associations. She describes remedial students as "true outsiders," "strangers in academia," all from "New York's ethnic or racial enclaves," who speak "other languages or dialects at home" (1977, pp. 2-3). Otte and Mlynarchzyk (2010) describe Shaughnessy's rendering of the basic writer as "above all as urban and 'other'" (p. 49). The association of race to language use and its differential valuing by others is a finding that linguists have confirmed in several studies (Richardson, 2003; Greenfield, 2011), and those in rhetoric and composition have reported on and discussed already (Gilyard, 1991; Kubota & Ward, 2000). And it is also a phenomenon closely tied to the norming and racing of places, classroom places, textual places, and remedial places, as others have suggested about the assumption of the remedial student as a student of color in institutions (Soliday, 2002; Stanley, 2009). The biases in judging that create racist patterns in classrooms, however, may be hard to see by individual teachers in their own assessment practices. We need our students to tell us about the degree of fairness in our assessment ecologies, and we need to ask them to help us investigate the construction of fairness in the ecology.

To get a sense of the grading conditions at Fresno State that influence my students, like Kyle, Zach, Amanda, and Jane, consider the grade distributions of different colleges. In these grade distributions, there appears to be an association between grades and the particular racial formations in those colleges. In Fall 2012 for example, 92.8% of all grades given in the Honors College, an ecological place where mostly white students inhabit, were A's. Meanwhile, in the School of Business, where a large number of Hmong students take majors, only 22.1% of all grades given were A's and 35.9% were B's. In Criminology, where there are more majors than in any other department, and the vast majority of them are Latino/a, just 35.2% of all grades were A's and 35.5% were B's.<sup>48</sup> Of course, there are many factors that go into a course grade, and given the wide range of courses involved in these numbers, it's hard to know what exactly could be common influences. I'm not arguing for a causal relationship here.

My point is not to suggest that grades are determined by racial bias in teachers' grading practices. Certainly there are more factors that go into those grade distributions. I merely wish to show that throughout the institution's assessment ecologies, where grades are conventionally given to student writing based on quality (or comparisons to local SEAEs and a white racial *habitus*), students experience uneven terrains that are not easily predicably by them without ex-



plicit attention to the way each assessment ecology constructs grades—and in part, constructs them by processes of norming to various versions of the domain discourse. Their own racial *habitus* affect this unevenness and their immediate success or failure, despite the good intentions of teachers. The results of the pervasiveness of these grading ecologies is for students to be hyper-conscious of grades and how their writing is graded. They see and feel the unpredictability in it all. I take this deviation from Kyle's orientation in our writing assessment ecology to point out how complex his response, which seems straightforward, really is, and how interconnected our writing assessment ecology is to others at Fresno State. Perhaps one lesson from this a teacher might take is that no teacher ever grades on an island. Students experience the inter-being of the various assessment ecologies they move through, and their membership in one ecology likely will affect their movement in another.

Interestingly, Kyle's reference to grades is one of the two or three explicit references to any actual grades in all of the reflections during that week. Most students in my class discussed the contract in terms of work, effort, or labor in the above ways, and what it produced for them as readers and writers. This suggests that in fact our writing assessment ecology had shifted their ecological purposes and re-oriented monolingual students to other products by first focusing their attention on the assessment processes, which asked them to labor over drafts and texts in the course, staying away from using quality as a way to measure success in any given writing or reading activity.

It should be noted also that Jane, Zach, and Kyler were white students that I would consider conventionally higher performing students at Fresno State, while Amanda was a Latina who also was high performing in the same ways. I'm not saying that all of them came into the class as superior writers of academic discourses in their fields or of our local version of SEAE, but I am saying that they each were highly motivated students, following the contract very carefully, doing all the work according to the directions, always highly engaged in class discussions and group work, and were each from monolingual, dominant English-speaking households. So the amount of labor to be done to earn the same kind of grade they typically received in other courses might reasonably be the most noticeable difference from other courses. Thus orienting themselves by their labor and the absence of quality-based grades on drafts is not surprising to me.

Yet most if not all of the monolingual students, who were almost all white and Latina in my class, found the contract's emphasis on labor as a fairer system than quality-based, conventional ones that produce course grades. Monolingual students also tended to orient themselves in the assessment ecology toward the labor processes of the class and against quality judgments of writing produced by those processes, like Amanda, Jane, Zach, and Kyler. They voiced enjoyment and



engagement. They were usually unambiguous about their feelings toward the contract system. And they all mention in some fashion alternative products for the labor processes of reading, writing, and assessing. For example, Jane explains in the same reflection cited above that “[r]eading my peers papers also lets me evaluate my own writing and gives me ideas on how to improve”; Zach mentions the products of “always doing his best,” and “discover[ing] my own capabilities”; Amanda finds she attains “a degree of freedom” in her writing so that she can “ste[p] outside our boundaries”; Kyler later in his reflection on the contract says that it helped him to be more adventurous in his revising, “[i]ncorporating new concepts” into his writing. Beyond the implied purpose of achieving course grades as direct products of our assessment ecology, monolingual students tended to articulate their purposes as simply being involved in a fairer, predictable, more democratic system, one that values their hard work, and provides freedom to explore and take risks, and this ecology was in stark contrast to other writing assessment ecologies they inhabited in the past.

In contrast, consider a few of the multilingual students, who likely had difficulties meeting the SEAE and white racial *habitus* expectations in school and who may have had trouble engaging as deeply as Amanda, Zach, Jane, and Kyler in past reading and writing activities. Multilingual students had more uneven responses to the grading contract, and tended to orient themselves toward different ecological elements in the assessment ecology, which allowed them to articulate a variety of purposes beyond the dominant one. They were still mostly positive in orientation to the contract, but those orientations had more tension in them, often because of the multilingual aspects of their own *habitus*. In the same week’s reflection on the contract at midpoint, Ashe,<sup>49</sup> a quiet, soft-spoken, multilingual, Hmong, female student, majoring in business administration-management, seemed more ambivalent than most students in the class:

After meeting with Professor Inoue, I seem to be on track with my previous assignments. I plan to continue to turning in assignments on time. This second assignment doesn’t seem easy as other classmates may say, things still are the same. Researching, outlining, drafting, and deciding whether what you’ve done is enough ... is still a complicated matter to take on, in my opinion. I guess I need to continue to read and write to get use to writing in college. The only thing that I think bothers me at the moment in regards to the Grading Contract is the amount of work that we do (pages of writing that we produce) determines our grade. The subject that I chose to do my first project, I would say limited me to pro-

duce a large amount of writing. I wrote as much as I could to prove my point, but then again, I guess it may challenge me to find other ways to go around proving my topic.

It would appear that unlike many of her colleagues in class, Ashe still needed me (the teacher) to validate her progress and labor in class—that is, she had yet to judge the effectiveness of her own labor and thus the fairness of the contract. She leaned on me to make those judgments. Unlike all of the monolingual students, Ashe wouldn't make that judgment without citing my approval. It would seem then, for her, that power arrangements in class flow from the teacher, perhaps her way of giving me respect. The writing assessment ecology had not shifted as much power and agency to Ashe as it had to the monolingual students. And Ashe contrasts her difficulties with Project 2 to what "other classmates may say" about the ease of the labor asked of everyone. She's aware that her position in our assessment ecology is different in nature than other students, perhaps a lingering effect of all those other institutional assessment ecologies in which she was normed in the past. She was quiet and shy, not often willing to talk in class or even in her group, but was highly engaged, doing each assignment fully and carefully. My sense is that Ashe was very aware of her linguistic difference from the local SEAEs expected in college, hence the comment, "I guess I need to continue to read and write to get use to writing in college," and her contrasting of her difficulties to her classmates. This is perhaps one example of the psychological effects of Matsuda's "myth of linguistic homogeneity" on multilingual students in writing classrooms, a need to compare one's own performances to others, particularly monolingual peers.

However, Ashe concludes that this demand of more labor in our assessment ecology, a demand of many "pages of writing that we produce," can challenge her to "find other ways" to prove her topic, to urge her to invent other writing strategies. Despite her needing my validation, her orientation in the ecology, like her colleagues, is *not* concerned with grades, instead it is about what labor she needs to do and what she can learn once she's validated that labor with me. This, I think, is a step in the right direction. The products of the ecology for her are true learning products, not grades. They spring from her sense of her subject position in the place of her writing group, and her knowledge of her capabilities as a multilingual writer in a writing class that still assumes a local SEAE and dominant versions of disciplinary discourses (for her, business), all of which come in part from her contrasting herself to her colleagues.

However, I may be assuming wrongly that Ashe requires full, unfettered power and agency in order to develop as a writer and reader, that my validation is somehow either unnecessary or harmful to her. I've made these arguments to

students before, but Ashe complicates these assumptions. Her reflection suggests, I think, that maybe this isn't the best assumption to make about what's best for Ashe's growth as a writer. I might be leaving her without any oar or anchor in a choppy sea of discourse if I didn't offer some ideas and validation, validation that none of the monolingual students seemed to require from me.

While it seems that our assessment ecology allowed Ashe not to have unfettered agency, she still claims her learning in useful ways. Similar to the monolingual students, Ashe focuses on ecological products and the power to determine things in the assessment ecology, even if tentatively ("it may challenge me to find other ways to go around proving my topic"). She ends her reflection this way:

I am not sure that I have developed as a writer, I still feel like I am still the same as I was before. What has been challenging for me is the layout of this new approach in a English course, such as the power that we have to create our own rubric. As a writer, I would like to have readers understand my writing, but that I know will still take years and years to get across; with more reading and daily writing incorporated in my life, hopefully it can happen. I think I may have to set a schedule of the labor needed for specific homework assignments to keep myself from procrastinating and losing track of time.

Despite her own admission to not seeing any growth in her writing, Ashe offers an elegant theory of learning to write, which comes from the labor-based assessment ecology of the course. Her theory is based on "years and years" of work and "a schedule of the labor needed" to accomplish writing that her "readers [can] understand." Thus even though she doesn't seem aware of any learning, Ashe demonstrates a reorientation in the ecology to labor that has a particular purpose for her and a learning product, revolving around her future writing practices. The contract set the grounds for such self-assessment and reorientation. The rubric and the contract may be "challenging" for Ashe, and she may still feel that she has "years and years" to go, but she is making these claims about her learning on her own and in spite of the "challenging" "layout" of the course. This to me is healthy agency and an exercise of her power to control the products of her labor in the class.

On the other hand, Gloria, a multilingual, Latina, who was a third-year student majoring in psychology, offered a more optimistic reflection on the fairness of the grading contract, but like Ashe, moves to discussing the assessment ecology's products, only this time through a discussion of what she learned as a

reader/assessor of her colleagues' drafts:

As far as the contract goes, I think it has expectations that we can meet as students. It has been very helpful that the contract puts emphasis on the labor the we do, and not in the quality of our work. Although, I do believe that because we have been given flexibility, we are developing as better writers. Thus far, as a reader I have learned how to provide better commentary to someone's writing; not judging the quality of their work, but by providing commentaries that will induce the writer the reader's understanding of the writing, while at the same time invoking critical thinking on the writer to better develop their work.

Like the majority of the students in this class, Gloria didn't talk about grades as products explicitly when asked to reflect upon our grading contract and any problems with it. Instead, she thinks about the assessment ecology and its learning products (i.e., "flexibility" and "developing as better writers"), and affirms that it is a fair environment ("it has expectations that we can meet as students"). Most important to Gloria are the products of her labor, the labor of reading and providing descriptive feedback to colleagues, feedback that stays away from evaluating quality in drafts and focuses on "invoking critical thinking." These are the day to day processes, expectations, and artifacts that help form each writing group as a place in the assessment ecology. Most interesting, Gloria does not argue that the writing assessment ecology produces better documents. The environment's "emphasis on the labor [that] we do, and not in the quality of our work" gives "flexibility" in the ecology to "develop[p] as better writers." So the products of the writing assessment ecology, at least for Gloria, centers on developing *students* through assessment processes, not documents. This important insight, a learning product itself, is a result of the focus on labor, something she mentions above. Because Gloria wasn't thinking of assignments as points or grades to be acquired, she could instead focus on what she was doing each week, moving her to focus on herself as a writer, which then revealed this insight.

The presence and importance of the people in the writing assessment ecology was a major theme for most multilingual and many monolingual students reflecting on the contract in week 10. But arguably, it was a stronger way that multilingual students oriented themselves in the writing assessment ecology. Lyna, a multilingual, Cambodian student, majoring in business, who often produced a lot of text in her assignments, had lots of language issues that often tangled up her sentences, more so than Gloria or Ashe. However, both Gloria and Lyna center on the consequences for the people in the assessment ecology. In Lyna's

reflection, she focuses on the writing groups, how helpful and encouraging they were for her as a writer, then moves to her own difficulties in writing:

It is appropriate that we all help one another be on the same track. The power of determining the contract help ease the tension of whether or not we are able to reach our goals. Personally I actually enjoy working as a group more than I can ever re-call at college level. In some ways that I have grown is that I am more accustom to having my peers reading my issues with out having an overly extorted anxiety of having my papers read other than an instructor. I just realized now we work in a group in a way of a support group to help one another with our issues and share our concerns. I more used to writing in my own style. This is typing away as what my brain works. What makes sense to me does not always make since to others. One main reason is that I happen to work in how my ideas flow. Upon reading it to myself, I would fine it a paper that I can say put forth my ideas until some one comes along (usually my English teacher in High school) would tell me the sequence is not in a "logical" order. There are many orders you can go buy because there are many styles you can use. But sometimes I forget that we don't write just to write. But we must write in order for our readers to understand our work. If our readers do not then the paper would be useless. You not only lose your readers but your reasoning is also lost too. I find it the hardest when I actually plan for my paper to flow a certain way but only to realize it would not meet my readers like I expected to do. Like having your work nearly down but to only have to rebuild it. I find this task the most challenging and the most disheartening thing in writing. Does not matter if this is just a leisure piece that I am writing or an assignment that is given in class. Correcting things when they are small can save you a lot of time than catching it way later in your paper. But there are so many things that can affect our writing that I just find it horribly overwhelming .... I'm going to have to do much more research than I originally did. I only wish my researching skills were up to par in my writing like I would find in finding new recipes and searching what would work for me and I should remind myself I should not cripple myself in writing.

It is revealing that one of the two or three writers in the class who had the most

challenges with meeting conventional notions of our local SEAE, when asked to reflect on the grading contract and how well it was working at week 10, discussed most substantively the people (her group), the processes of her labor, and their direct products (good and bad) for her in the ecology. She begins her discussion by couching everything in terms of students having the power to determine the grounds by which their writing will be assessed, and that this ability helped students, or at least her, meet their goals (i.e., “The power of determining the contract help ease the tension of whether or not we are able to reach our goals.”). Power is something, I’m guessing, Lyna has rarely felt or exercised in writing assessment ecologies, as suggested in her parenthetical aside about past English teachers identifying her writing as “not in a ‘logical’ order.” Not so surprisingly, being able to exercise some degree of power is key to Lyna’s success. I imagine the norming and racing enacted through the place of her writing, the documents judged by past teachers and those at Fresno State in other classes, was reduced tremendously in our class. And I think, to some degree, Lyna is aware of the ecology having people, processes, products, and power relations that affect her ability to write successfully. Hers is the most developed reflection in this way, offering the fullest sense of the way negotiating the contract’s details about the labor requirements allowed groups to do more effective and supportive work, which in turn, reduced anxiety on her part because a grader, a teacher, was not the primary assessor of her work.

Her comment about past teachers judging her writing as illogically arranged is particularly interesting to me in the way it reveals the dynamics of past writing assessment ecologies, suggesting the paper as a place of norming and racing in writing assessment ecologies, particularly for multilingual students of color. Like Kyler, other assessment ecologies affect Lyna’s movement in ours, only her lessons are different. They are more comparative. It is a strong power move by a teacher to make such claims about a student’s text, regardless of the evidence offered in support of such claims. And because such claims about her text likely were in the context of grades as motivators, Lyna was forced to worry about grades first, then about her writing (her logic and arrangement only mattered because it was graded). Perhaps she saw the indirect products of her labors, labors which likely were never rewarded or acknowledged, as anxiety.

Since this reflection was typical of Lyna’s writing in the course, I’m guessing it was typical of her past writing. I would not characterize her writing, however, as lacking a logical structure. It has transitions from one idea to the next, and all the things discussed are related. Logic is not Lyna’s problem here. Her ability to use a locally accepted SEAE does create dissonance and tangles in her sentences (particularly around sentence boundaries). Her natural inclination to write associatively may lead some teachers to see a lack of organization, since this isn’t

a top-down, topic-oriented discourse. Her associative logical arrangement may cue some readers to hear/see a non-white racial *habitus* in her discourse. When a teacher (either knowingly or not) associates this kind of text to her material raced body and slightly accented speech, the teacher likely will categorized Lyna as remedial, as the literature tells us. Logic will not be found in the remedial, error will.

But Lyna acknowledges that she has her own “style,” one that mimics the way her “brain works,” and she realizes that not all readers understand this style. Her group as an ecological place helps her to write to them. Through the power arrangements and the local place of her group, constructed by our labor processes and the people engaged in those labors, Lyna has some room to begin writing from her own associative discourse without an immediate comparison to a white racial *habitus* as norm that previously devalued her writing and labor. Her own discussion of these issues, stemming from past teachers judging her texts, is evidence of this self-awareness as an ecological product. Her orientation to the ecology is positive, connected to the positive experiences in her group, but comparative to other less positive experiences with teachers correcting her writing, so her ecological products (her orientation to labor) is not without its tensions.

Norming to a white discourse is, I think, important to reading Lyna’s reflection and her relations to other people in the ecology. Lyna continues by focusing her positive comments on the place of the writing group, a place in the ecology that is relatively anxiety-free for her. She explains that the writing group was a “support group” and perhaps offered a less stressful set of readers than a teacher. This leads her to discuss her own writing anxieties and problems in the past, realizing that “we don’t write just to write ... we must write in order for our readers to understand our work” —how beautifully Burkean her theory is. I would argue that perhaps one might read Lyna’s progress, which I think this reflection shows, as progress predicated on her needing to physically know and interact with her readers, which is most directly and materially her group members, something akin to Ede and Lunsford’s “audience addressed” (1984). Furthermore, Lyna’s focus on the place that her writing group created in the process of writing, reading, and providing feedback, which always included face-to-face talking over each other’s drafts, suggests an interesting translation of Ede and Lunsford’s good criticism of the audience as addressed position. And place as a site of norming and racing is important to this translation.

Ede and Lunsford criticize those who only consider audience as addressed in writing processes by saying they miss “a recognition of the crucial importance of this internal dialogue, through which writers analyze inventional problems and conceptualize patterns of discourse” (1984, p. 158). Furthermore, they say that the audience-addressed position misses the fact that “no matter how much



feedback writers may receive after they have written something (or in breaks while they write), as they compose writers must rely in large part upon their own vision of the reader, which they create, as readers do their vision of writers, according to their own experiences and expectations” (1984, p. 158). Thus, writers need or do already address real, material audiences and invoke imagined ones simultaneously. Lyna exemplifies this dual nature of audience. Lyna’s construction of her readers is a product of her experiences and expectations that are formed by her multilingual, Cambodian heritage, and the deep, semester-long discussions with her writing group members.

Lyna’s group was locally diverse, and so not a unified audience, which I find many teachers, perhaps even Ede and Lunsford, assume to be the audience for any writing assignment in classes.<sup>50</sup> Her group consisted of Amanda (from above); Kevin, a monolingual, fourth-year basketball player from Florida but originally born in Jamaica, majoring in communications, who had a girlfriend and a small child, whom he took care of, which took up much of his limited time after class; Claudia, a multilingual Latina, majoring in communication disorders—deaf education; and Rachel, a monolingual, Latina, majoring in chemistry who was quiet but an astute reader of her colleagues’ work. Lyna’s group consisted of all students of color, with four Latinas and one African-American male. There was a spectrum of multilingual and monolingual English language users in the group, and everyone had a different major from the others. It was a diverse group in many ways. These locally diverse *habitus* make her audience plural, which complicates the way Ede and Lunsford explain writers conceiving of invoked audience. This complication comes from Lyna’s interaction with her addressed audience. So not only is there a gap between Lyna’s addressed audience and her invoked audience, but there are gaps among her addressed audience members and potentially how she translates those variations into a set of invoked audiences. Lyna, however, seems unworried about this. Then again, to be fair to Lyna, I did not prompt students to discuss such issues.

Arguably just as important to her group dynamic was the absence of a white student in the group. I’m not arguing to exclude white students from groups or writing courses, or that they taint in some way writing groups for students of color. I am saying that because Lyna’s group had a textured set of non-white racial *habitus*, a range of multilingual and monolingual writers in the group, and a range of majors represented, the group could resist simply being a place of norming to a white racial *habitus*. There was no representative of a white racial *habitus* in the group, which made their group a place that had an easier time problematizing writers’ existential writing assessment situations since any criticism of the dominant discourse in the rubric or a text might more easily be criticisms of discourse outside the place of the writing group. It was a safer place



to be critical of the dominant white discourse. It was a borderland.

Additionally in the group, there could be some assurance that most group members, maybe all, shared a felt sense of the influence of norming to a white racial *habitus* in past judgments of their writing in school. Their discussions could be more open to exploring whiteness, even if covertly stated. This made it a less stressful and more productive ecology for a multilingual, female writer like Lyna, who was a little shy in class, but not in her group, who had difficulty with producing local SEAE texts but no difficulty doing the labor of the course and producing lots of text and thinking, even if that text may not be conventionally arranged (topic-oriented) or follow local SEAE conventions. The place of her writing group, then, was a racialized location, a place in our assessment ecology unlike any of the other four writing groups in the class, each with their own dynamics. And because the ecology placed as top priority the processes of assessment each week and the labor individuals did in preparation for each day, there was no need to compare and rank writing performances against a white racial *habitus*. Lyna's writing could be valued and she could be a valuable member of her writing group, not a hindrance. And all of this hinged on Lyna's getting to know intimately her group members as a pluralized primary audience.

Our rubrics also resisted norming to a local dominant discourse, although not completely. So I don't want to give the false impression that somehow Lyna's group didn't attempt to discuss local dominant academic conventions or expectations that matched a white racial *habitus*. Like all groups, they did. So I'm not claiming that conventional norming didn't occur in Lyna's group, or that there wasn't pressure in peer assessment activities to compare and thus norm Lyna to our local white racial *habitus*. Yes, this surely happened. But the fact that it happened in a locally diverse group of non-white students, slowly over time, in which grades were not the products of assessments of drafts, but working and laboring was, something Lyna could do very effectively, made the difference for her. She could show her value to the group, and offer publically valuable texts.

Lyna doesn't let herself off the hook though. Her orientation to the ecology is still filled with tension. Much like Ashe's contrasting to her colleagues, Lyna assumes a tacit monolingual, white racial *habitus* as norm, which she must stack up against. She knows she has difficulty producing writing that meets such expectations. She focuses on her struggles mostly in her reflection on the contract. The process of the class, of drafting, redrafting, reading others' drafts and writing up feedback, then revising, and redrafting is "challenging" and "disheartening," since it feels like "rebuilding" each draft. Much like Ashe, Lyna's tension in her orientation to the assessment ecology stems from her accepting a comparison of her writing to a local dominant discourse, which is informed by a white racial *habitus* that other teachers in her past used to devalue her writing. In a reply to

Lyna, Rachel, one of her group members, attempts to reassure her:

I feel like I have very challenging courses and this class is one of the toughest. The material is not that difficult but the amount of work and time in each assignment is very challenging. I also wrote in my reflection that I liked being in groups the most because it clears up confusion and questions I have for my peers. My group is very supportive when I mess up and I am grateful for that.

Interestingly, the only person to reply to Lyna's long reflection, of which the above is only part, is Rachel, a monolingual, Latina group member. Perhaps Rachel felt obligated to reply to Lyna, or maybe she was looking to read her group members' posts first and found Lyna's worth a reply. It's hard to know, but it is interesting that most other students' posts received replies from students outside their writing groups, but not Lyna. Rachel shores up this problem, proving Lyna's point about the supportive nature of the place of her group. While Rachel does not reply directly to any comment or item in Lyna's original post, she does implicitly comfort Lyna by agreeing about the challenging workload. But she ends on the supportive nature of their group, which mimics Lyna's "support group" discussion. And the nature of that group, Rachel reminds Lyna, is one of clearing up confusions and questions. In essence, the job of their group is to help rebuild drafts.

At the end of her reflection, Lyna makes an interesting, and I think productive, comparison to her own more organic research practices around recipes and cooking.<sup>51</sup> Would she have come to these insights without the grading contract? Perhaps, but what about in a different writing assessment ecology, one not characterized by the labor of drafting and redrafting that create places like support groups, or assessment in a locally diverse place that was less influenced by a mandatory norming to a white racial *habitus*? It is less likely, especially for a multilingual writer who might find her private receipt research and writing quite effective and productive, but not worth a comparison to academic research. However, in our ecology, she sees a connection.

Interestingly, groups also offered an ecological place that produced learning products for an introverted, mature (in his mid-to late- 20s), white male student, Dwight, a business major, who explains: "the good thing about this class so far is the interaction in our group circles. I feel more comfortable talking in front of people the more and more I have been doing it lately. I really really really struggle with talking in groups, I get really nervous and awkward and I do not know how to fix it, but I can say lately it has been better." Dwight focuses on his own locally diverse group (consisting of Ashe, a monolingual Latina,

and another monolingual white male student) as a place that offered him ways to more comfortably talk to people, but he doesn't link his writing group with writing or reading products as Lyna does. I think it is significant, however, that Dwight's group is mostly monolingual students, and perhaps suggests the ambiguity of Ashe's reflections on the grading contract. Ashe and Dwight's group wasn't as racially or linguistically diverse as Lyna's. In fact, Dwight's reflection on the contract describes his future work on project two as mostly changes in his individual effort and labor practices, not in what his group offers him. Dwight orients himself differently than his multilingual colleague, Lyna, even when they find value in the same ecological place in the assessment ecology.

It wasn't just multilingual or introverted students who found the groups most helpful in creating ecological places where they could thrive. Jane, who was extraverted, lively and outspoken in large class discussions, also found the groups the most valuable aspect of the writing assessment ecology: "I enjoy our group discussion the most, I always leave class in a great mood and have lot of laughs. Reading my peers papers also lets me evaluate my own writing and gives me ideas on how to improve. I think by going through the evaluation process in such an in-depth way, my writing has really improved." As Lyna's, Dwight's, and Jane's reflections suggest, group work offered ecological places that produced unexpected consequences for them, products that were more than grades, which came from processes, recognized labor, and power arrangements that gave students more flexibility and control over what they did. However, as Ashe and Lyna's reflections show, there was tension in multilingual students' orientations to the ecology, which tended to stem from their own self-norming to the white racial *habitus* often expected of them in their writing.

The way the monolingual Latina and white students (e.g., Amanda, Zach, Jane, and Kyler) oriented themselves in our writing assessment environment is striking next to the way all the multilingual female students did (e.g., Ashe, Gloria, and Lyna).<sup>52</sup> As my analysis above shows, the monolingual white and Latina/o students tended to orient themselves in the ecology by the power and freedom (usually from stress or writing constraints) generated through the class's labor processes and the absence of grades. Often they focused on the negotiation and creation of ecological parts to articulate this power, such as the contract negotiation and rubric creation processes. They also tended to articulate the dominant purposes I had offered for our assessment environment (i.e., laboring to learn). The multilingual Latina and Asian students tended to orient themselves by their own purposes for the assessment processes and their relationships with people in the places cultivated by their writing groups. As ecological places, the groups also arguably provided multilingual students valuable tensions in several areas: between addressed and invoked audiences, among locally diverse

addressed audiences, and between past norming by teachers and our classroom's more complex norming and counter-norming. In some ways, one could say the ecological place of the groups, when they were locally diverse, provided tacit ways for students to problematize their existential assessment situations, even white students like Kyler and Zach.

I'm convinced that most students understood at some significant level these elements of the writing assessment ecology we were creating, even though we did not talk explicitly about them in these ways. Gideon, a tall, monolingual, white student,<sup>53</sup> majoring in computer science, who always sat in the middle of the room, nicely sums up what most of the students were saying, but does so in terms of the contract as an ecological part of a larger system of related elements, namely purposes, processes, and products, which help people (students):

The grading contract is one of the most interesting things. At first I saw it as just the grading guidelines and it bored me. But really it's about the process and constantly considering and re considering how to construct a more professional and effective message on paper. It is a lot less about the grade than I initially took it to be. It's more a reminder to work work and re work your writing, because there really isn't any reason to let a piece of writing rest as if it were perfect and there was no room for improvement. At least for us at this level. In other courses you write, get your grade, and then move on and never look back. This course has reminded me to carry over the attitude of constant analysis and criticism of my life efforts into my written communications.

Gideon was one of those students who didn't initially seem that motivated or interested in the class, but as the semester moved on, his level of engagement in groups and on our Bb forums, such as in this reflection, quickly became more intense, producing insights like this one. He captures exactly the way I saw our ecology, one that did produce course grades, but was mostly about doing reading and writing labors and processes, about "work work and re work" for other learning purposes that help students in their "life efforts."

But Gideon makes an astute observation, one we had not discussed in class, that any piece of writing can be improved, and that if we are here to learn how to write, then we have no reason to let any piece of writing sit idle. There is always work to be done, places where we can continue to learn, labor to do. The contract isn't about grades, but about changing orientations toward many other elements in the writing assessment ecology of the classroom. And perhaps most interestingly, Gideon contextualizes these insights about our contract by con-

trasting them with “other courses” ecologies. He illustrates how more meaningful our ecology became, how more productive when students had opportunities to compare it to the way other ecologies treat them and their writing, which is a first important step in problematizing his existential writing assessment situations.

The labor of the course, as articulated in the ecological parts of the contract and our discussions of it, was arguably accepted by most students by week 10 and articulated as well or better by them. This can be seen in their orientations toward labor in the ecology. Their power in the negotiations and renegotiations of the contract, determining the ecology itself, was critical to their orientations. The writing groups also were important because they were ecological places that were personalized, semi-private, and characterized by the local diversity of students. This created productive (counter)hegemonic places of norming and counter-norming, which upon reflection offered some students ways to begin to problematize their assessment situations, but not everyone. The places of writing groups provided the borderlands needed for posing problems about judgment, their language practices, and the dominant white racial *habitus* they had come to expect to be compared against.

The ecological products of such places were sometimes unanticipated, but were connected to the dominant purpose of the ecology (i.e., laboring to learn). These places helped students orient themselves in the ecology in productive ways, ways that could produce antiracist products, and certainly opportunities to problematize their existential writing assessment situations. As Gideon’s reflection above illustrates, students appeared to reorient themselves in the ecology because of the grading contract and how it changed fundamentally their orientations toward most of the ecological elements of the course. For the most part, students labored to learn, instead of laboring to earn. The ecology was more visible. Because of this visibility, students could more consciously create the places they felt they could learn in and from, which made the ecology more antiracist in its nature.

## MORE INTENSE, ENGAGED, AND PRODUCTIVE LABOR

My focus on the ecological processes (labor), parts, and purposes in all assignment instructions, particularly those that constituted the writing and feedback cycles in the class, was intentional. These were the ecological elements I thought students would quickly understand and take advantage of. They were also the elements I wanted students to reflect upon periodically in order to pose questions about the nature of judging language. Focusing students’ attention on these elements, asking them to help create them, negotiate them, and reflect

upon those processes and their use of them, did begin to work toward antiracist ends. Most important, focus on these elements in this way gave students opportunities to problematize their own existential writing assessment situations, which some were able to do. My assumption was that if students focused mostly on what they had to do in any given week, how long they had to do it, and why they were doing it, then the parts (the artifacts) would improve, as would their reading and writing behaviors, the real ecological products we were aiming for. Additionally, by focusing mostly on processes (labor), students could slowly build over the semester more effective, intense, and productive labor by reflecting upon that labor in labor journals and weekly reflections. This would, I thought, translate to better writers, but not necessarily, as Gloria suggests above, better documents.

However, while the course's discussions used the concept of labor to describe and acknowledge the degree of effort expected in the class, which was articulated as time, discomfort (occasionally), and hard work, I made it clear that students should be increasing each week the intensity, duration, or productivity of all their labors. At times, it should be painful if they were doing the labor right, maybe not all the time, but sometimes. For instance, when one labors hard at anything one is often in physical pain or discomfort. Lyna's and Dwight's recounting of the painful processes of writing and speaking exemplify some pain in the processes of the class. Amanda's and Zach's "oh shit" moments suggest the discomfort from the expectation of more time in their labors. Additionally, many of my students said things like, "it's always been hard to read textbooks," or "I've often found writing for school painful," or "I haven't really enjoyed writing in school," so I wanted to acknowledge the sensual and emotional aspects of the labors of reading, writing, and receiving assessments of their writing, not to change students' minds about how they feel about the labor, but to acknowledge and potentially explore those feelings that accompany any labor, and perhaps allow those feelings to be some initial indication of productive labor. I reasoned that most students have such experiences with writing, reading and assessment in school because of unreflective, hegemonic, and often racist, writing assessment ecologies that those labors usually exist in. What multilingual Latino student would find reading or writing for school engaging when the ecological places that construct him and his educational products are formed in a racist assessment ecology, when every part and place norms him against a white racial *habitus* that often is ill-fitting?

In another very real sense, focusing on the labor as labor was my way of asking students to pay attention to the way writing and reading (or assessing) are ontological activities that give students something worthwhile in the doing of them, as in the way Yagelski (2011) discusses writing as a way of being. Tacitly, I

was asking them to just be in the labor, to stop trying to be somewhere else when they write or read, stop trying to think about the final product or what they were to produce, or how hard it is, or how uninteresting the text is, and try to be in the physical, sensual, and emotional experiences of the reading and writing processes of the course. Just be in the writing or reading labors, just labor, and the ecological products will already be there. If it is boring and uninteresting, notice that that is your feeling of the text at that moment, then in a non-judgmental way ask yourself why. What's boring me here? Why is that boring to me? These answers can be valuable to understanding and managing one's labor.

If they were doing our processes right, their labor would often be uncomfortable and painful, but at some point that discomfort should give way to pleasure in a job well done, in feelings of accomplishment, in satisfaction, success, pride, growth. Pain and discomfort can signal the quality of work and effort put into something, and my students, many of whom came from families who were seasonal workers, laborers, folks whose family members did honorable, hard, sweaty work, understand and usually respect this kind of labor. The class generally saw the value and honor in such labor, and our discussions were meant to connect writing with that kind of hard, sometimes painful, sweaty doing of things, because it should be that kind of labor. We write and read with our bodies. And it is hard, tough, exhausting, fun, exciting, and energizing labor.

If labor was at the center of what students experienced, and if we expected to look closely at those labors in order to make them more intense, engaged, and productive, then we needed some public articulation of labor as much as we needed a public articulation of what the goals of that labor should be in their projects' culminating documents. So over several weeks near the beginning of the semester, we inductively created two rubrics, a project rubric, explaining the dimensions of writing we expected to practice, judge, and explore in project drafts, and a writer's rubric, which articulated the labor we expected from writers as they worked on drafts and engaged in the assessment activities that accompanied each draft. The writer's rubric would be the way we figured out how intense, engaged, and productive our labor was, while the project rubric would give us our textual goals for our labors.

We started with the project rubric since it was a more familiar kind of rubric to most students. Using similar inductive processes that I have described in another place (Inoue, 2004), we began by reading some of the students' own researched articles from their projects in order to identify how those published articles in various fields accomplished their purposes (e.g., made and supported claims, appealed to audiences, displayed past discussions on the topic, introduced their arguments, used sources, etc.). In the broadest terms, each student reread a published article from her research, asking essentially: What aspects or



elements in this piece of academic writing do I want to practice in my own project drafts? I was not asking students to explicitly think about what made these articles good writing, although those discussions did come up quite a bit. I asked students to read looking for rhetorical and academic moves that they wanted to explore in their own writing. Students annotated their articles in focused ways, then they discussed those dimensions in groups, both the ones that seemed common to all and those that seemed particular to a writer or a discipline.

We inductively created the project rubric by gathering each writing group's observations, then through a similar but simplified process as Guba and Lincoln's (1989) fourth-generation evaluation process and Broad's (2003) dynamic criteria mapping, formed the categories we cared most about and what those broad categories meant more specifically. This gave us an articulation of the dimensions of writing we could see in drafts, judge in some fashion, and discuss with writers. It was not a scoring guide or even a rubric that delineated "developing," "proficient," or "advanced" categories of performance. It was a rubric that identified the broader dimensions in their writing that they wanted to explore, understand, and problematize for their writing purposes (see Figure 2 below). Thus the project rubric was a place of norming to a locally generated SEAE and a white racial *habitus* represented in the articles students used to induce writing dimensions. I do not deny that there is this feature to all rubrics, including this one. But the project rubric came from students' concerns, and did not tell students how exactly to value each writing dimension. It was an articulation of what we wanted to explore and problematize.

In some ways, our rubric activities and the artifact they produced, fit Bruffee's (1984) definition of normal discourse. Citing Rorty, Bruffee explains normal discourse as that discourse that

everyone agrees on the "set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it." The product of normal discourse is "the sort of statement that can be agreed to be true by all participants whom the other participants count as 'rational.'" (p. 643)

However, our project rubric was a rubric negotiated by students that explicitly attempted to include disagreements and areas of tension. Students' exercise of power to create the rubric gave some room for the rubric not to be simply another exercise of disciplinary hegemony, or just another teacher telling students what he wants in their writing. It was not simply a document based on some false sense of consensus in the ways that Myers (1986) and Trimbur (1989) criticize Bruffee's (1984) consensus-based collaborative pedagogy being. It was



a set of writing dimensions that we later had to figure out through our reading labors how to ascribe value to and what our expectations for those dimensions would be. It was a rubric that offered dimensions of writing to be understood and explored in locally diverse ways by locally diverse groups in projects. It was not a conventional description of “good writing,” instead it was an articulation of dimensions of academic writing that we wanted to practice in our drafts, explore ways to enact, and discuss in assessment activities. It was a point of origin, not an endpoint or outcome.

The project rubric evolved into four broad categories or dimensions, with lists of more descriptive but contentious features underneath each category. The categories were imperatives, actions, which oriented writers (and readers) toward laboring and our labor rubric (the writer’s rubric). Some of the features describing each category were specific and told the writer directly how to accomplish the dimension in their writing, such as, “offer a conclusion that summarizes the argument/discussion.” Some features were less specific, only providing a general idea of what we wanted, such as, “address multiple perspectives,” which were often areas of less agreement in the class. We chose to articulate the features this way because these were the statements we could most agree upon, providing flexibility to writers and readers, but were not definitive of the dimension in question. This, as well as competing features attempted to preserve difference of opinion and conflicting ideas about categories.

The bottom line is that we tried hard not to simply agree on everything, although students still wanted to agree more than find differences. I asked the class to try to preserve options and the diversity of opinions and perspectives on writing we found existing in the classroom, no matter how small. I encouraged students to disagree, even asked them at times to list disagreements in their groups, explaining that the point of our conversations and rubric-building wasn’t about finding a consensus, but creating *hard agreements* that we could all live with, preserving those ideas that may seem out of place, wrong, or too radical for us. Hard agreements offer a way to move on with the business of the class, to move forward with the labor, but preserve the sense that some of us do not agree about the details that create value and expectations in our writing. And those disagreements are somehow acknowledged and captured, so that they can be used later because they may help us rethink and revolutionize our practices.

This was my attempt to use Trimbur’s idea of dissensus as a method to create our rubrics, particularly since I understood writing assessment ecologies and their parts, such as rubrics, as functioning often as places that norm students to a white racial *habitus* and race non-white students and discourses as remedial. I wanted our rubrics, even if only in method, to attempt to work against these hegemonic structures. I wanted our rubric processes to be ones of problematizing

our collective existential writing assessment situation, to model what I hoped they would end up doing on their own. Through Trimbur's explanation of dissensus' function in abnormal discourse, he explains the method I was shooting for:

Abnormal discourse is not so much a homeostatic mechanism that keeps the conversation and thereby the community renewed and refreshed. Instead, it refers to dissensus, to marginalized voices, the resistance and contestation both within and outside the conversation, what Roland Barthes calls *acritic* discourse—the discourses out of power. Abnormal discourse, that is, refers not only to surprises and accidents that emerge when normal discourse reaches a dead end, when, as Wittgenstein puts it, “language goes on holiday.” In the account I'm suggesting, it also refers to the relations of power that determine what falls within the current consensus and what is assigned the status of dissent. (1989, p. 608)

So our method for honing down the possible meanings (features) of each writing dimension (broader category) on our rubric was not to form a consensus about what each category meant, but to find statements that everyone could reasonably see could define some aspect of that dimension in question, see the *acritic* discourses, the languages and ideas that were “out of power” as much as those in power. We called each set of features “the range of possibilities” that we might be looking for as readers when judging drafts, but we would be on the lookout for new ways as well. The purpose for this activity, then, was to engage in the process of finding, explaining, and agreeing upon the writing dimensions we wanted to practice, explore, and problematize as a local racially diverse class of various majors, who are each working on different disciplinary projects. How we valued each dimension in actual drafts would need to develop in the group assessment discussions. In locally diverse places, as Anzaldúa reminds us of borderlands, values often come from the clash of different people and the contradictory outcomes of their labors. When ecological parts rub and wound one another, producing tension, questions, and problems, they become borderland-places where problematizing clashes can occur.

In retrospect, I could have done more to help students develop the abnormal discourse incorporated in the rubrics, and problematize their existential assessment situations through the processes of creating and using the rubrics. Students often talked about and used the project rubric as if it was a more conventional rubric, one that told them what to do in their drafts, perhaps one like other rubrics they had used in other classes. This makes sense, and is helpful for students

at one level, but doesn't offer them much critical perspective, and thus ways to see the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic in the language practices they are asked to demonstrate. The fact that our rubric looked like all those other rubrics to some degree didn't help matters. So while it wasn't a scoring guide by any means, it did appear to be a list of expectations, not a statement of hard agreements about the normal and abnormal discourses we were attempting to explore and problematize. I did not have good ways to help them better see these aspects.

A good start might have been to change the codes and artifact of the rubric. We might have included in the rubric a dual listing of normal and abnormal expectations for each dimension, maybe list the dimensions as questions, not topics or statements. I could have prompted them with different purposes for their assessment processes of various drafts, such as asking readers to look for and discuss the abnormal discourse (e.g., what is the abnormal discourse in your colleague's draft? How does your colleague's draft problematize or complicate a dimension on our rubric?). I could have asked writers to take that feedback and rewrite a section of their drafts, creating an abnormal draft. The difficulty with doing such activities is that many students didn't have a firm handle on the normal discourse of their fields, so it might be difficult for some to see what is normal and abnormal in any disciplinary discourse. Regardless, we attempted to include both normal and abnormal expectations in our rubric by including room for an articulation of differences in what dimensions meant.

To illustrate the presence of difference and disagreement in the project rubric, one must look closely at the features. For instance, when creating the dimension, "Clearly Structure and Focus the Document," there was lots of disagreement about what "focus" could mean, and what kind of "structure" should the class most value and expect from writers? Some felt that a classical pattern that began with a thesis statement was best, since that was what most others outside our course expected. Others felt we needed more room for other organic organizational structures, perhaps allow the thesis to be the conclusion, or be implicit. Some wanted very explicit and unambiguous wording, while others thought that was too confining—there were too many things excluded when we got too specific. So we carefully crafted two features: "focus on one research question (topic) and present the question early in the document (within the first three paragraphs)"; and "offer a conclusion that summarizes the argument/discussion." Some did not agree with these features, hence the parenthetical additions. I also reminded them that these features were merely reminders to students about the discussions we'd had concerning the broader category, not hard and fast rules that all had to go by in order to meet expectations. The features listed were to give us a sense of the range of possibilities, so they were not pre-

scriptive, as in scoring guides or conventional rubrics.

This could mean a writer might find an effective way to include her research question in the first three paragraphs of her paper, but there was an understanding that maybe someone might find another ingenious way to focus her paper. These features described the dominant ways the class understood the category, a mixture of normal and abnormal discourse. However, I must admit that it was mostly normal discourse, an acceptable statement that most agreed upon (Bruffee, 1984, pp. 642-643) and that came from examples in their researched articles. I'm not going to pretend as if most students tried to consciously work against this feature, to find abnormal ways of accomplishing focus or clear structure in their project drafts. They mostly attempted what Bruffee sees as normal discourse, but we did have the conversation, and that conversation carried over into their writing groups and discussions on drafts (discussed below). What I wanted first was for students to be aware of how they created focus and how they structured their drafts, where those ideas and practices came from, and their choices as writers—to see that they had other choices, even if those choices might create drafts that were confusing. I also wanted them to see that their ability to have choice, to disagree, to exhibit difference from the norm, in our ecology was acceptable and accounted for in our rubric-building processes.

Another instance of disagreement was in the third feature in the same category, “personalize the subject or inquiry.” In the first few iterations of the rubric, this feature wasn't there at all until Jane and Gideon's group asked this question: “What's the right balance of research and personalization? Is there a limit as to how much personalization can be included in your paper?” When the class asked them to explain a bit more, they said they wanted to know whether we expected writers to leave themselves out of their papers or include some personal references. Could they refer to themselves (e.g., use “I”)? Was it okay to use personal experience to illustrate or provide examples? Or should we make a rule that writers not do this in the class's academic writing?

In the same activity, Kyler's group also brought up a related issue. They asked two connected questions: “What happens if we want to compare and contrast an article (non-scholarly) to a scholarly source?” and “[m]ultiple perspectives, how do we address those?” The second question was referring to the second feature in the second category of the rubric (see Figure 2), but it and their first question related to the first group's question about the personal. I suggested that both groups were asking important questions about how to treat evidence and information that writers felt were important to inquiring about their topics. I asked them: if you are interested in your research question, is it reasonable to think that you will have some personal connection or experience with your topic? Is the source of your interest a part of your perspective on the question? What value do we place on the

Project Rubric (what should we demonstrate in writing?)	Writer's Rubric (what should we do to write?)
<p><b>Clearly Structure and Focus the Document</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on one research question (topic) and present the question early in the document (within the first three paragraphs)</li> <li>• Offer a conclusion that summarizes the argument/discussion</li> <li>• Personalize the subject or inquiry</li> </ul> <p><b>Use Rhetorical Methods, Purposes, and Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use rhetorical methods by discussing or incorporating in some fashion the concepts from class (e.g., Kairos, ethos, pathos, logos, stasis, etc.)</li> <li>• Address multiple perspectives</li> <li>• Attempt to provoke a purposeful response in readers</li> <li>• Use and discuss appropriate examples that help illustrate and/or complicate the ideas of the project</li> </ul> <p><b>Provide Multiple Perspectives Fairly</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen closely and respect the ideas of others, especially those who disagree with you (the writer)</li> <li>• Address or acknowledge multiple sides to the issue or question and substantiate those experiences with research</li> </ul> <p><b>Use Appropriate Format, Grammar, and Mechanics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cite appropriate sources (no non-scholarly sources)</li> <li>• Format the culminating document in a way that is appropriate for the question and research conducted</li> <li>• Use appropriate grammar and mechanics, so that readers can clearly understand the project's ideas</li> </ul>	<p><b>Drafting and Revising</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outline your document</li> <li>• Illustrate the ideas of the project and incorporate rhetoric</li> <li>• Reread your essay with a purpose in mind (purposefully)</li> <li>• Spend time formatting and editing your documents appropriately</li> </ul> <p><b>Doing Research Continuously</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start your research early and follow up on it (update your research)</li> <li>• Read and acknowledge what is out there before coming up with your own position/argument</li> <li>• Explore different areas and multiple perspectives on the question (look for different ways to answer the question)</li> <li>• Find and use peer-reviewed articles (academic articles), especially opposing viewpoints</li> <li>• Research your research (don't settle on the first idea or perspective)</li> </ul> <p><b>Receiving and Giving Feedback</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share your draft and ask for different perspectives (readings) of it from colleagues</li> <li>• Listen to and respect diverse opinions on your draft and writing (learn from and do something with their feedback)</li> <li>• Challenge the writer in your feedback on drafts</li> </ul>

*Figure 2. The project and writer's rubrics offered evolving dimensions from hard agreements among students.*

personal as one of the multiple perspectives we already say we must engage with?

Some students felt that including the personal was too much, possibly too revealing, too intimate. They were not comfortable doing that. For example, Barry, an African-American, third-year student around 20 from an affluent, Southern California family, and majoring in political science, who was in Jane and Gideon's group, was not sure he wanted to include the personal in his writing, while Jane was okay with it. Some students loved the idea and felt that it was a way to engage more deeply with their questions, while others felt that it was a good rhetorical strategy to draw in readers, and still others didn't know or were not sure. It was an irreconcilable set of opinions, a clear borderland we had created in the place of our rubric, so we included it. In follow-up group work, a different group, Lyna's, offered the articulation of this feature that the class felt most comfortable with, and we put that version on the rubric.

If the project rubric identified what students wanted to practice in drafts, the writer's rubric was a public articulation of the expectations they had for their labor. It was a set of behaviors and orientations to labor that they expected of each other to practice over the course of the semester, things they'd reflect upon (and had been reflecting upon already) in their labor journals. Most of these behaviors were difficult to directly see in any draft. They were things they had to talk to each other about. The process for this rubric was similar to the first, except that they also had the first rubric to consider. Our conversations that led to the writer's rubric essentially asked students to articulate what they felt was reasonable labor. What will they need to do in order to accomplish the goals of the first rubric and the course? I asked them also to look at our grading contract since that established the ecology of the course, and set out some assumptions and expectations of labor that we'd already agreed upon. The writer's rubric they settled on had three categories or dimensions of labor that they cared most about, that they said they wanted to practice and get better at doing. And like the project rubric, each writer's rubric category had a list of evolving and contentious features.

Thus by week 10 after several revisions, our two rubrics were combined for easy use in class and in writing assessment activities. Figure 2 shows the way in which the rubrics were joined and displayed for our use. The statements in both rubrics were conceptual placeholders for the on-going classroom discussions, feedback activities, labor journal entries, and reflections. The rubrics were not posed to the class as a final statement on what we wanted out of the projects' culminating documents, nor what we expected writers to do in their labors. They were a way to focus our discussions and assessment processes toward particular dimensions that we had inductively come up with and negotiated as a class. They were an ecological part constructed through our differences, an articula-

tion of hard agreements.

The statements of labor gained meaning contextually, slightly changing over the semester. For instance, “doing research continuously” initially meant the third, fourth, and fifth items listed; however, at the start of Project 2, when we revisited formally the rubrics, students decide to add the first two items, “start your research early and follow up on it (update your research),” and “read and acknowledge what is out there before coming up with your own position/argument.” These came from reflections on their assessments and labor practices, in which many students tended to start writing with a thesis in mind, which stalled them out, and limited what they could explore. Ashe’s earlier reflection on the contract and its labor hints at this problem when she reflected, “The subject that I chose to do my first project, I would say limited me to produce a large amount of writing. I wrote as much as I could to prove my point.”

Some students felt that promoting labor that started early by reading the research before writers attempted to write would help them write more informed questions and drafts. These two added features also seemed to give a slightly new purpose to our annotated bibliography and a research question assignments. For some in class, “updating” research literally meant rethinking and revising those research questions to be more about inquiring than about proving a pre-existing idea in their heads. To others, it meant finding related research that helped them consider claims they originally made in drafts and assumed to be true. To students, these actions were more connected to their behaviors, their research, reading, and writing labors, rather than to the products they were shooting for.

In retrospect, I missed opportunities to take full advantage of the writer’s rubric as an ecological part that developed more intense, engaged, and productive student labors. I missed this because I saw it more as a part, rather than a place of problematizing, a borderland. I could have used the writer’s rubric’s language and dimensions as cues for later week’s tasks and processes. This would have shifted the power arrangements in the assessment ecology even more, allowing students to directly dictate processes and purposes of the ecology. If I had used the writer’s rubric’s dimensions as goals for each week’s activities, then students would have literally created the labor expectations and the activities. For example, I could have asked writers to locate key claims or positions they were making in their papers, then research and find an alternative argument to those claims. I could have couched this activity in terms of the labor they articulated on the rubric (i.e., “[f]ind and use peer-reviewed articles (academic articles), especially opposing viewpoints”).

When discussing in groups the assessment documents that provided writers with feedback, I could have asked each writer to end each discussion by asking her readers for opposing ways to read or judge her draft from those just given,



which would draw on the rubric feature, “[s]hare your draft and ask for different perspectives (readings) of it from colleagues.” So readers would be obligated to provide the writer with opposing or contradictory judgments about the draft, discussing both as reasonable ways to see the draft. In a very tangible way, this would have been an exercise in *dissoi logoi*, which we’d discussed already (the first six weeks of the semester focused on readings and discussions on rhetorical concepts). These activities not only would have helped writers and readers see the merits and flaws in their drafts but in the various judgments on their drafts, problematizing those judgments, all of which coming from students’ expectations about the labor of the course.

Ultimately, the rubrics, like the contract, functioned as an ecological part with biases toward our local SEAE and a mostly white racial *habitus*, yet they produced processes and places we created together that were meant to problematize students’ existential writing assessment situations by continually creating borderlands of conflicting values, judgments, and reflections on those judgments. The rubrics, like all rubrics, were places of norming to discursive behaviors and dispositions, but by employing dissensus as a method for creating the rubrics and having the purpose for such processes be to articulate hard agreements (a mixture of normal and abnormal statements about writing and labor expectations), the rubrics were not simply places of norming to a white racial *habitus*. They were also places of conflict, hard agreements, borderlands in which locally diverse students attempted to articulate a fuller range of values and expectations. Were we completely successful? I doubt it. But these purposes and processes were explicit, which gave us grounds to reflect upon them, and I argue, offered students the possibility of stronger future labor practices by being more aware of the contingent nature of how texts are judged and valued by various, locally diverse readers.

I had at least another missed opportunity around the rubrics, one equally important to an antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology. As I discuss through Gramscian hegemony and historic bloc and the Marxian dialectic of base and superstructure, part of being critical surely is being able to see the structural influences in our language practices next to the way language also is experienced as personal choice and subjectivity. There are points, of course, where the structural or social are different from personal or individual choice, yet at other points, these two things inter-are, as in how the rubrics’ seemed to agree with the ways students personally value certain kinds of texts or labor. In other words, the degree to which the rubrics felt right or accurate to individuals was simultaneously the degree to which those students’ values and feelings about writing were consubstantial to larger, dominant discourses, such as our local SEAE and white racial *habitus*. Questioning this aspect of the rubrics, problematizing our

writing assessment situations from the rubric, might have given us ways to see the structural and the determined in our individual and diverse practices, or see the ways we colonize ourselves through consent to a white racial *habitus*. Additionally, much like the way the rubrics themselves are both ecological parts and places, students are both people and parts that norm and race each other. They embody shock, conflict, and negotiation.

Problematizing ones existential writing assessment situation, as a practice, offers a way to investigate the rubrics and the labors they embodied as “limit-situations,” which would have offered my students more ecologically productive labor practices. To see this better, Freire explains the coming to critical consciousness by explaining the way humans become “conscious beings”:

As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: the “limit-situations.” Once perceived by individuals as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality. Men and women respond to the challenge with actions which Vieira Pinto calls “limit-acts”: those directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the “given.” (1970, p. 99)

Thus, the key to critical consciousness, for Freire, is a person’s separation from the material life of his limit-situations, and one good way to separate one’s ideas and feelings, one’s experiences of the world, is to abstract them into language. The rubrics were in some sense an embodiment of students’ separations from their discursive worlds, a set of rhetorical abstractions about writing academic texts, about laboring to create those texts. The processes and labors we focused on were processes of objectifying their values and feelings about writing. I did not make a point to discuss or prompt them about this separation and abstraction of labors and outcomes. I should have. It would have given us a chance, as Freire says, to locate the seat of our decisions in ourselves and in our relations to the world, in other places that determine (limit and pressure) what we end up valuing in our classroom and the ecological parts we focus our attentions on. This would have helped us see the project rubric, for instance, as an articulation of limit-situations that revealed the concrete historic dimensions of their own writing realities in and outside our classroom. This would have offered us a chance not simply to passively accept the rubrics, which I’m not arguing hap-

pened, but could have easily.

The kind of liberation Freire discusses comes from a very different context than mine. My students are not Brazilian peasants struggling to read and write in order to gain political rights and voice. They were U.S. college students, who are mostly of color and multilingual, at a large state university in California. So the kind of liberation through critical consciousness I see possible through our antiracist writing assessment ecology is in one sense trickier to accomplish, since one could argue that becoming completely normed to our local SEAE and white racial *habitus* is the key to liberation, at least at the individual level, if we define individual liberation as power and access to the dominant discourse, yet it is this very dominant discourse, a white racial *habitus*, that oppresses many (most) of my students because they don't quite have mastery over it. The hegemonic forces us to consent, while that consent reinforces the hegemonic and people's own oppression in the system.

What I'm arguing, and what Freire, Villanueva, and many others would agree with, is that individual economic success, while wonderful (and likely a part of most of my students' goals for their education) is not liberation from the aspects of the hegemonic that produce social inequality, larger patterns of poverty and imprisonment that pool in populations of color in the U.S., or liberation from the way certain kinds of language are perceived and used as a reason to keep jobs and other opportunities away from many non-white, multilingual, poor, or working class citizens. These tensions between the social and the individual, between the structural determination in our lives and our own freewill and agency could have been questioned through the place of the rubric—that is, through seeing the rubric as a place and not a part in the ecology. The writing assessment ecology was set up perfectly for it. I just didn't take advantage of it. The method to do so could have been reflective activities that considered the dual nature of the project rubric as (1) a list of conflicting values and expectations created by us and (2) a borderland-place that normed and raced us to a dominant discourse. What do inhabitants of this rubric-place look and sound like if everyone is doing what we think they should be? Do any of us look and sound like this ideal person? Yet the rubrics incorporated hard agreements, abnormal discourse, acratric discourse, locally diverse ways of languaging that countered this one-way norming. If this is true, how did our rubric allow for heterogeneous inhabitants in the rubric-place?

The action, the labor of the rubric-place would be reflection and dialogue among students. Freire too understood dialogue among people as central to investigations of "limit-situations" that produce critical consciousness. Freire believed that only through dialogue can one understand fully "the word," which has two important, dialectical dimensions: "reflection and action." Once these two dimensions of the word are realized in educational settings, then praxis

occurs, and praxis is the product sought after, since it leads to change and liberation (Freire, 2000/1970, p. 87). In a footnote on the same page, he offers this equation for what action and reflection involve: “word = work = praxis.” Thus implicated in the word’s dialectic, in reflection and action, in words, work, and praxis, is the individual in community, is people dialoguing, using words, and laboring. There are no words without people, and people are not people without words. Freire makes this last point clear later in the chapter in his discussion of animals as distinct from humans because humans can reflect upon their actions, thus without words humans are simply animals that are “unable to separate themselves from their activity” (2000/1970, p. 97). This is strikingly similar to Burke’s (1966) famous semiotic definition of humanity. And so, our rubrics were artifacts composed of students’ words, which came literally from their dialogue and interactions, places of separation. But the rubrics could have been more if they had been more explicitly ecological places where the limit-situations of students’ words and judgments opened discussions that investigated the ways larger disciplinary and other structures determined (i.e., limited and pressured) their own values and expectations in drafts and writing labors.

And as Freire’s articulation of the process of critical consciousness references, the rubrics were also a “reflection” of students’ values and expectations for their writing. In Marxian traditions, the concept of reflection first referred to the dialectical relationship between the economic base of material practices and the philosophical superstructure that imagined or described those practices (Williams, 1977, p. 93). So one might say the superstructure encapsulated in the project rubric reflected the material classroom’s drafts (base), while the superstructural articulation of the writer’s rubric reflected the students’ labor practices (base). At another level, the two rubrics mimicked their own dialectic: the project rubric (superstructure) reflected students labor practices (base). Thus we might see why Freire defines “true words” and praxis as synonymous to each other and to reflection and action (2000/1970, p. 87). The act of reflecting, of seeing a word as both an abstraction and as an embodiment of one’s existential and material situation in the real world, one’s relations to the world and others, is the process of engaging with the Marxian dialectic of base and superstructure, the process of critical consciousness. Thus both rubrics were necessary to be fully critical in the way Freire describes, and I’d add to be antiracist in action. They allow us to confront the paradoxes in our ideas about writing and our material practices that produce our real-world drafts.

Williams (1977) explains that Adorno provided a way out of the dilemma that the concept of reflection created when trying to understand the relationship between base and superstructure, providing a replacement term, mediation, which Freire’s account does not use, but would benefit from. And this helps us see

why rubric-building processes are vital to writing assessment ecologies that aim to create critical places for students to do antiracist work with language. Williams describes mediation as an inseparable process between base and superstructure, between my students and their rubric. It is a “positive process in social reality, rather than a process added to it by way of projection, disguise, or interpretation” (Williams, 1977, pp. 98-99). So like Freire’s incorporation of reflection into word and praxis, the concept of mediation also assumes a consubstantial essence of base and superstructure. This means that if the rubrics are a reflection of students’ values and labors, then they are not external to those processes. They dialectically re-present and influence—they mediate—writing and assessing processes. They inter-are those ecological elements. The ecological people (students), the parts they generated (rubrics and assessment documents), and the places of their writing groups mediate each other, making them inter-be. This is what complex system theory tell us is inherent in open systems, flux and change, interconnection of parts within the system (Dobrin, 2012, p. 144). My missed opportunity was not finding ways to help students see our rubrics in these ways, as places of mediation among our values-drafts-selves-labors-groups that in turn led them to interrogate limit-situations that the rubrics pointed us to.

Perhaps I could have asked them to engage with the structural in the rubric and in their drafts. What institutional and disciplinary sources or origins might they see in their drafts, in the kind of decisions they make, in the way readers interpret and value certain kinds of textual patterns and practices? What structural or disciplinary origins might we find in our project rubric’s dimensions, such as, “clearly structure and focus the document,” and why do individuals agree with such ideas? Who does it serve to have such a concern or value in discourse? Is it really that this is a universal “best practice” in writing or could there be other sources for such a value, or other textual values? And if there are, then why do we promote these particular ideas in our writing? And of course, I could have introduced some of the research on whiteness, allowing us to ask: How similar to a white racial *habitus* is our rubric and our ways of translating it? Are there ways in which it does not match up?

Regardless of how I might see the missed opportunities, the opportunities I did not miss were to focus students’ attention on the labor in the ecology and to make visible the elements of the ecology. These things began with our negotiations of the contract and moved to our work on the rubrics, which self-consciously defined and reflected upon the labor and texts of the ecology. This created the conditions for students to engage in stronger, more aware—and perhaps more

critical—labor practices, which by their nature have the potential to be antiracist.

## STRONGER, MORE AWARE LABOR

These stronger future labor practices began with students making sense of the rubric-creation activities, which I asked them to do in reflections on the rubrics. My goal in these reflections was to encourage students to be more self-aware readers and writers. During the later stages of refining our rubrics, I asked them to reflect upon the entire process, comparing it to their past experiences with rubrics and writing expectations. Zach offered a typical reflection:

[I]n the past the instructor would just hand us a piece of paper with a prompt and all the guidelines expected to be incorporated within the assignment. Furthermore it meant for the class there were no choices or decisions to be had or discussions regarding the assignment because we were just simply expected to write about what was on the simple piece of paper. For our class it was much more engaging do to the fact that we had complete freedom on the topic/question in which we are going to be writing about in addition we were in full control on what standards and expectations as a class we were going to have to meet in order to complete the assignment.

Zach makes clear he saw the class more engaged in understanding the guidelines and prompt for the projects because they had more control over the “standards and expectations” of their writing. While perhaps not seeing that the rubric represented the range of possibilities, just a point of origin, and not static standards, it should be remembered that this was still in the later stages of the rubric-building process, midway through the semester. We had not yet officially used the final versions of the rubrics on drafts. So his coming to awareness of future practices that might question the white racial *habitus* of the rubric, something that Zach himself benefitted from, being a monolingual, English-speaking, white male, starts with seeing and feeling shifts in power in our writing assessment ecology. Furthermore, seeing this shift in power provided Zach with more agency, which in turn pushed him to labor more intensively and productively in his assessment documents on colleagues’ drafts. In one sense, I read Zach coming to his own problematizing of his past writing assessment situations, but at this early stage this problematizing is seeing problems in the assessment of his writing in the past, not in the present or future.

Several others in the class agreed with Zach’s comparison. Barry takes Zach’s

ideas one step further. He replies,

After careful thought I do agree with your opinion. Giving students the ability to critique and critically think about the rubric which they will be judged on does sound reasonable. It also makes it more exciting for students. I also agree with your idea about voicing our opinions. This not only allows for creative thinking and discussion, but this type of activity allows us to become better adults.

Interestingly, Barry sees the control and power exercised in our ecology, located in the part-place of the rubric, as not just producing products related to writing, but “makes it more exciting” and produces ways to become “better adults.” What he means by this is less clear, but it does appear that becoming a better adult is associated with the exercise of power and control in constructing the rubric, in making decisions about expectations, and in critiquing and thinking “critically” about the rubric. In short, being a better adult, for Barry, appears to be about exercising agency through one’s labors in meaningful contexts and understanding the significance of that agency to expectations in the community.

Lyna also explains how pleased she was with the rubric creation process, discussing how students could give themselves an advantage by having control over the rubric:

Being able to create our own ‘rubric’ was a first for me. Just like negotiating our social contract it was pretty much a new thing to me. Besides being new it almost felt foreign—very foreign indeed. Even though the course is a writing workshop it much different from taking a critical thinking class that challenge and stimulate our mind. Then again this is a writing workshop class and we, students, are our own instructors and we are able to set our own ‘standards’. It is nice being able to set our own standard without manipulating too much to give ourselves the upper hand.

It almost sounds as if Lyna is voicing a bit of dissonance in friendly terms. Creating the rubric and being in control of their own standards “without manipulating too much to give [themselves] the upper hand” admits that they could have set the rules of the game in their own favor, and that they had the power to do so. But like Barry suggests about being a better adult, the power of creating the rubric allowed them not to do this—that is, it gave them the opportunity to be adults and make a decision that eventually will help them learn. Lyna reinforces



this idea of power and being an adult by proclaiming that “we, students, are our own instructors,” suggesting also a level of responsibility to both teach and learn. Like Zach and Barry, Lyna’s critical awareness of future writing and assessing practices comes from the way exercising power to control expectations provided her with ways to act responsibly and conscientiously.

And Lyna’s labor journal reinforces these responsible and self-aware labor practices. In the labor journal entry immediately after the rubric revision activities that asked them to discuss their own assessment labors on their group members’ Project 2 explorative drafts, Lyna offers a long discussion (786 words) about her labors. She explains her process for reading her colleagues’ drafts and creating the assessment documents needed for class discussion:

I have to admit I took more time than I originally like to have. For each of my group’s draft I took an hour writing up their responses though the content was short. Now I know that with the additionally time I took in my peer’s draft. I know for sure to add this to my new calculation of how long it will take me. I thought long and hard about what to write [concerning] their paper. I did not realize that one of my mates did not post theirs up until later. I actually had them read the previous evening. I had them out on display to read once again in the morning. I found this much easier. My flaw was that I did not check Blackboard again in the morning to see if she had posted her inquiry or not. It turned out she did but it was under a different section than I had checked. I checked in the Literature Review part and did not check any other part thoroughly.

Surely the place in the ecology created by her writing group (her support group) was important to Lyna’s sense of responsibility to her colleagues. It seems clear to me that she saw her labors of reading and offering feedback as more than an assignment. She was conscientious about her reading labors, doing them twice, and managing her time so that she could sleep between both readings. Additionally, Lyna produced just as copious discussions in her assessment documents to colleagues. For instance, her discussion of Claudia’s 857-word explorative essay was 475 words, over half the length of the original essay. Lyna’s labors, similar to Zach’s, improved, got longer, more carefully planned, and more productive. These more intense and longer labors in their assessment activities I attribute to Zach’s and Lyna’s self-conscious awareness of the way they labored and why, and having control over most of the ecology in which these labors were situated.

Ashe, however, had a harder time shedding the yoke of past writing experiences and the feelings of being a substandard writer of multilingual heritage, which likely came from the constant norming and racing that occurred around other rubrics in other ecologies at Fresno State and in her past. She was the only one who had these kinds of struggles. These struggles affected how she could talk about her labors in complex ways. In the same reflection activity after the revision of the rubrics, Ashe explains:

The process we engaged in class as we produced the rubric was in different, first of all, is we get to make our own rubric, that clearly is not normal in any class! Compared to my last English classes, there were rubrics that the teachers designed themselves, or none were provided at all, just a set of guidelines of what not to do.

My expectations in my past course were to get an A or of not then a B on my essays. This motivated me to write better. I was able to kind of move away from my nonstop fragment sentences and be able to write in complete and meaningful sentences. However, I had no interaction with other students with my writing. The only person who criticized my writing was my sister, I took all of her criticism to heart. I felt that I had gradually improved with the help of her criticism over every little thing that I did that didn't make sense to her or would make me sound like a motor [moron?]. In this class, I think it will allow me to start writing again, I have not written paper all summer long. This has caused me to lose my sense of writing. I recently wrote an essay and it felt like high school again, my writing has worsen over the summer, not writing. I think this class will help me enhance my writing again, with, not only the criticism of my sister, but my classmates.

It is fascinating that Ashe, a Hmong student, discusses her sister's help—the only student who mentioned help from family members—but it is not surprising. In a survey of 265 Hmong students at Fresno State in the Spring 2013 (the semester after this course), about 70% of the respondents said they lived in their parents' home, and 92% said they lived with family members.<sup>54</sup> So Ashe appears to be calling upon common material conditions of the Hmong racial formation at Fresno State. Der, a Hmong female, third year, pre-business major, affirms Ashe's claims about her sister: "When it comes to someone looking over my essays I do think that an older sibling is very useful. They are at times very truthful as to what we write." It is unclear if Der is referring only to Hmong students in

the final “we,” but Gloria, a third year, Latina, psychology major, offers the only other response to Ashe’s reflection, and it suggests differences in the material conditions of Hmong and Latina students. Gloria replies, “Ashe, I don’t usually have anybody criticizing my writing at home, especially since I’m the first one in my family to attend college. However, my writing has been criticized at my work. I can really say that the criticism from my coworkers, has really helped me develop my English writing skills as English Learner.”

While both Ashe and Gloria are multilingual, first generation college students, Gloria reveals different conditions in her home, but then offers the comment about her writing being criticized at work, the result of those criticisms is the same as Ashe’s experiences with her sister. Her writing improves. For Ashe, Der, and Gloria, our rubrics may still call up past writing problems, but they see them in the context of their own material conditions, not as static problems with their writing outside of the material conditions and contexts of their family and work lives. This finding, one that connects Hmong students’ writing practices with the material conditions of their lives, has been duplicated in a recent study I completed with a colleague on Hmong reflection practices (Inoue & Richmond, in press). In that study, we found that female Hmong students always contextualized lessons learned in reflection letters of final portfolios in terms of the material conditions of school and home. Additionally, the lessons they learned, like Ashe’s and Der’s lessons, were ones that were about the tensions they saw and felt between their own racial *habitus* and the white racial *habitus* expected of them in the classroom, which often revolved around gender and cultural expectations and language practice differences.

For Ashe and Der, the success or failure of their writing appears to be connected to the other people around them in the ecology, which for Ashe (and maybe Der) includes family members not in the class, and for Gloria, coworkers. Gloria ends her own reflection on this very note, connecting the processes we used the rubric for to the purposes she must figure out for her writing, and its assessment: “Using this rubric will not only help me understand what and how I’m producing my writing, but I think that most importantly, by collaborating with my group and classmates, it will help me understand why I’m producing my writing.” The ecological product of “why I’m producing my writing” seems to be also her purpose for writing. This evolving purpose, for Gloria, is produced through her interactions with the people who form the ecological place of her writing group, which seems also to involve others outside the classroom, coworkers (or family members for Der and Ashe). Gloria’s labor becomes more aware through her interactions with her group members. It isn’t clear how strong or aware Ashe’s own labors are. Yet her labor in the class, similar to Der (the oth-

er multilingual, Hmong writer of the class) was always very copious and dutiful.

Despite the difficulty that Ashe has with acknowledging or voicing the power and control of ecological parts and processes, she does articulate writing-based purposes that seem productive for her. But her labor is disguised in her reflection, more so than her colleagues, which makes me wonder if the writer's rubric worked in the same ways for Ashe as it did for most of her classmates, both monolingual and multilingual. Ashe reflects in her labor journal just after our rubric revisions:

On Tuesday, after I came home from school (around 6pm) I read one of the Inquiry Paper of my colleagues. I was in the kitchen, everyone in my family were doing their own thing. I started on one of the papers and when I opened all of the three documents of my colleagues I knew that it wasn't going to be the same, they were all different lengths. So the first one I responded page by page.

On Wednesday morning, in my quiet-dark room, I finished the second paper, since it was shorter compared to the other ones. I responded by every two paragraphs. In the last paper, I had to respond by every three paragraphs. What I think I did better here was actually being able to connect with what each person was writing about. In addition, I was able to ask more questions that I wanted to know in terms of each of their topics.

In part, her short labor journal entry could be due to her need for more time to generate text (we spend only five minutes or so in class writing these entries), or it could be related to Hmong cultural issues around the sanctity of language and its valuing of concision. What her labor journal entry does offer is a self-conscious, contextual method for reading and producing her assessment documents. Each paper is read differently, taking different lengths of time, and she concludes that this time around her labors have provided better products, "more questions" that pertained to her colleagues' topics. Yet the question of how effective or more intense her labors were in the class is more difficult to ascertain, as is her acceptance of power and her articulation of control over most elements in the assessment ecology. She does, however, seem to grow in awareness of how she labors, which is a good first step.

Do Hmong students, or multilingual students, labor differently from their white, Latina, African-American, or monolingual peers in our writing assessment ecology? Perhaps. Ashe may have been a special case. It's hard to know.

Der, the other multilingual Hmong student in the class, in her reflection on the rubrics, is more optimistic than Ashe, more similar to the rest of the class, focusing on power in the ecology, as well as the methods and the labor that the class expects in order to achieve their goals. She offers a different narrative of the intensity of her labors. In similar ways as her monolingual colleagues, Der describes past experiences with rubrics forced upon her by teachers:

The expectations for those classes were always “write what the teacher would want you to and do a good job at it”. Most times, it is simply to just follow what they want us to write, but it was not very influential of a practice to do. It was very hard to get into the topic, so it was hard to get a good start on the paper ....

The process of making this rubric makes me feel, as a writer, more in tune with what I would like to write about for the class. I seem to know more as to how I should go about with my writing with this class. Writing in this class, even though it may have prompts, seemed more freeing and flexible. Going through the ways in which we get our end results is very different from any class I have ever gone through. Most classes do not focus at all at how we get to where we are at in the end. This class gives us the time to reflect on things.

Der sees the writer's rubric as crucial to understanding the labor and processes of drafting and revising, which helps them “get to where we are at the end,” yet somehow, a focus on labor appears related to the time to “reflect on things.” I'm not completely sure what this connection is, but given Der's ability to produce lots of reflective text when prompted, this isn't a surprising product of her labor processes, which was more copious than Ashe's textual output. Was this key to Der accepting more power and being more aware, the fact that she could produce more text at will? It's hard to know for sure. Another possibility is the difference between Der's and Ashe's writing groups. Ashe's group contained mostly quiet students, a Latina, and two white males. Der's group was a diverse, mostly talkative group of students, consisting of Jane (monolingual white female), Gideon (monolingual white male), Barry (monolingual Black male), and Gloria (multilingual Latina). The places each group cultivated by their labors, which includes their discussions in class, surely affected the strength and awareness of their labor practices.

Still Der's reflection is ambiguous about the intensity of her evolving labor practices, which is unlike Lyna's more managed and longer labors, or even

Ashe's evolving labors that are contingent upon who she's reading. In Der's labor journal entry just after the rubric reflection activity, she explains her labors for assessing her colleagues' drafts:

When I was reading my group members' inquiry papers I felt like was half asleep or more so just half paying attention. I fear this is because I have been feeling a little lost in my own project at the moment. When I was writing up the responses I usually had questions as to how things will go or to what are they specifically going to answer. I fear that I maybe have been more lacking now then I was in Project 1 with the responses. But it might have been from the fact that most of my group members are still a little unclear as to how to approach their question or the question itself is going under some construction at the moment.

Thus, like her Hmong colleague (Ashe), Der seems to offer ambiguous information about the intensity or length of her labors. They changed and were contingent on what her colleagues gave her. She felt "half asleep" when she read, but maybe it was because her colleagues were "a little unclear as to how to approach their question." In much the way Lyna describes her group as a support group, it appears that multilingual Asian students in our writing assessment ecology were more affected by the contingencies and fluctuations of the place of their group than others in the class.

While there was some unevenness in the way students reacted to and used the project and writer's rubrics, all (except perhaps Ashe) found the process of generating the rubrics helpful in a number of ways, most noticeably in how they changed the power relations in the writing assessment ecology. In reflections on the rubric and our rubric building process, these changes were articulated as different ecological products for each student. Some found it liberating, freeing, and helpful in understanding what was expected, such as Zach, Der, and Barry. Some found the processes helpful in discovering labor practices that would make them better people in the environment, and perhaps better people period, like Barry and Lyna. Still others had more complex or ambiguous relations to the rubrics and the labors they represented, as Ashe's sparse discussion of her labor practices that produced more copious assessment documents and Der's connection between the class's rubric building activities and the time to reflect upon things.

There were no discernible patterns in monolingual or multilingual formations, except that the two Hmong female students in the class (Der and Ashe) both connected outside people (family members) to their labor processes, and

the other responding student, a multilingual, Latina student (Gloria), connected outside co-workers in her labor processes. This seemed to make ecological place and people important to how strong and aware their labors appeared to be in reflections. But for most students, the parts that we created, the processes that used those parts to write and assess each other's drafts, and the power that students claimed in the ecology helped them develop stronger and more aware labor practices that could be seen as ones that problematized at least past writing assessment situations. But for everyone, the key to more awareness about the complexities of judgment and the valuing of language was the frequent formalized moments of reflection on assessment, the rubrics, and our labors.

I still missed important opportunities to encourage students to explicitly problematize their existential assessment situations in the reflections by not calling attention to the limit-situations that the rubric afforded us. I missed opportunities to use the difference and borderlands existing in the rubric, our writing, our groups, and our labors, in ways that could have revealed the hegemonic, as well as racialized *habitus* that affect judgments on writing. I also missed chances to have students compare directly the ways that our rubric as our version of a hegemonic discourse, a white racial *habitus*, norms and races us and our writing already. This would have given us a chance to question our own reading and writing practices (our labors) as practices that constitute who we are, as ontological, as ways of being in our classroom and as locally diverse people.

## ASSESSING AS PROBLEMATIZING IN THE ECOLOGY

Up to this point, I've focused on the parts and processes of the assessment ecology as deeply involved in asking students to inquire about assessment and grading, which I feel offers students some way to be critical of how their writing is and should be assessed, and how grades affect their learning to write. But I have avoided showing any actual assessment documents, which was the meat of the course.

Like any writing course, assessment of student writing—in this case, students' assessments of their colleagues' drafts—is the engine that regulates the learning and development on drafts and in writers. This idea was explicit in my course, since we began with the assumption that if students can practice and improve their reading and assessing of colleagues' drafts, then they were learning to be better writers by their own measures. Part of the discussions on the grading contract in the early weeks of the class attempted to make this clear. In fact, the third question that students came up with directly addressed this assumption: "What does assessment mean in our class?" I've made this argument in at least two other places in different ways. I (Inoue, 2004) argue that when students



control the articulation of rubrics and reflect upon them, they do valuable intellectual work that helps them as writers and gives them necessary power to make their educational experiences more potent and critical. I (Inoue, 2010) also argue that teaching students the rhetoric of writing assessment, teaching them to theorize their reading and judging practices on each other's drafts, exercises the same competencies that is valued in the academy through dominant discourses.

Now, I add to these discussions a third argument for such a focus or theme in a writing classroom: by giving explicit access to such rhetorics of assessment, teachers can help students become more critical of dominant discourses in much the same way (through contrast) that the grading contract makes explicit potentially harmful assumptions in other conventional assessment ecologies. In other words, posing the problem of what does assessment mean in our class is a way to confront students with their existential writing assessment situations as racialized situations, as situations mediated by a hegemonic discourse. I'm not saying I did this in my class, but it is a possibility that I see now. So I am not arguing that my students in any uniform way challenged significantly the dominant discourses of their fields or the class, or that they were able to critique the local white racial *habitus* effectively. They mostly did not, and I take the blame for this, since my ecology's purpose wasn't explicitly asking students to problematize their existential writing assessment situations. I didn't develop the explicit problem posing activity in Appendix B until after this course. But a critical stance, like those promoted by Freire or Marxian critiques, is difficult to accomplish in just sixteen weeks for anyone. I didn't expect this. I merely wanted to plant the seeds of critique, to give them glimpses of a critical stance they might grow into.

Most of the time, the processes of assessing were to respond formatively, and the activities were structured so that all responses in a group were similar in format and focus, but different in what they discussed. Students made no overt judgments about how they valued drafts in binary or final ways (e.g., "this is good," "that is bad," "I like X," etc.), instead I guided them to make descriptive judgments. Assessment documents began with observations that could be debated (e.g., "this sentence is clear to me because," "I'm confused in paragraph 4 when you say," "the statement about Wilson feels judgmental by using the words," etc.). In terms of stasis theory, these were still judgments of quality, only starting from questions or statements of fact or definition.<sup>55</sup> Our assessment documents usually asked students to do three things (in this order) in some fashion:

- Provide a judgment or observation that states carefully the view of the reader about the document, page, or section of text in question (sometimes generally, sometimes regarding a rubric dimension),

- Support those observations about the text with quotes or references to the actual text of the writer, and
- Reveal assumptions that allowed the reader to judge or see things in the above ways (why do you read the text in that way? What assumptions about the rubric dimension in question are you making, or how do you understand what it means?).

It is a typical, academic discursive pattern, a set of moves that we also found in the articles we used to build our rubric, which I pointed out. Most importantly, in all assessment processes, I asked students *not* to offer advice on how to revise anything since writers must decide how to revise on their own after considering all the assessments from their peers. Telling someone what to do in a draft tends to prematurely stop the writer from reflecting on the meaning and value of a particular observation about her draft, or creates an unnecessary debate between the writer and reader about what the text should say or do. Instead, I wanted to encourage critical, subjective conversations between readers and writer, situating all observations in the subjective stances and *habitus* of readers. This made the third move above most important.

In one sense, the assessments of colleagues' drafts were equally about learning how the reader reads and values texts herself. To help everyone keep these ideas in mind, we had two mantras that came from our early reading of a chapter from Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1973): (1) explain to the writer how you experienced her text and why you experienced it in that way; and (2) writers make decisions, they don't follow orders, so do not give orders to writers.

I designed several processes or methods for the weekly assessment activities that students conducted on various drafts. During the first project, I developed the processes for them, but later gave them more freedom to determine their own processes, but required everyone in a group to have the same purposes and processes. So they had to discuss and agree upon the best purposes, processes, and parts for their writing groups. Often groups chose to follow one of our established processes for assessing, while others designed ones that better fit their group's evolving purposes for their assessment documents. A favorite process of most students was the first one:

### **METHOD 1: STOP AND WRITE**

Read carefully your colleague's text. While you read, stop at the bottom of each page (or after every 2 paragraphs) and do some writing. Spend 2-3 minutes just writing. Talk to the writer directly. What did you just read? What are the ideas, concepts, or questions that come to your mind at this pausing point. Most important, do NOT tell the writer what to do,

or how to revise things, or even how well the writer has or has not accomplished the goals described in our rubric. Try not to judge how good or bad your colleague's writing is in your responses. At this early stage, instead, your job is to help the writer consider what is on the page and what expectations you think the rubric's dimensions demand. In other words, show the writer what you, as a reader, hear and see, as well as how you feel or respond to those ideas, in the text she/he has created. You should pause a total of 3 times to write about what you just read. Here are some questions that may help you start writing at each 2-3 minute pause:

- What did you just read? Describe to the writer what you think the last page says and what ideas are most important.
- What did the last page make you think about?
- How did you feel when you read particular parts, paragraphs, or sentences on the last page? Point to them. What responses did you have as a reader?

Your final product should consist of 3 separate paragraphs, 1 for each stopping or pausing moment in your reading. This should extend your reading of each draft by about 9-10 minutes.

The most important thing to see in these instructions is that it focuses students' energies on the process they go through to first read, then write about their colleagues' drafts. Assessments are not thought of as documents but as ecological processes that happened to produce a document. In middle and later drafts, they did end up making judgments that were organized by the rubric dimensions, which I asked them not to do in this method, which we first used in early drafts, where our dominant purposes revolved around formative assessing, generating ideas, and creating more complex analysis in drafts. In general, the dominant purpose of every assessment process was to generate discussions of some specified kind, first written by readers then discussed face-to-face in groups in class, that reflected back to writers the experiences of readers. In the process, writers were to look for ways these discussions led to rethinking, adding to, and changing their drafts. Later on, we slightly altered this same procedure so that we could focus on one rubric dimension only, but the process remained the same.

In most assessment ecologies when things are working well, drafts tend to function as parts (artifacts) that reveal some of the learning and development of students. But by their nature, they are incomplete records of learning, especially learning to write. Drafts are like ancient artifacts that an archeologist digs

up and examines. They tell the scientist something valuable of the society and people who made or used the artifacts, but they only give incomplete or indirect evidence of how those artifacts were made, and more important, of the social and material practices around those objects (e.g., how were they used? What did people think of them? What was their significance to people in their daily lives? etc.). If we are interested in the ways people develop and learn as writers, how students make drafts, what significance and learning they take from that labor, then it is the social and material practices that we should care most about, not the draft itself. Drafts, while important, are in many ways incidental to learning to be a better writer. The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing's* (CWPA et al., 2011) emphasis on habits of mind instead of textual outcomes speaks to this need in writing instruction and its assessment, as does the importance of reflection and self-assessment over other classroom documents (Dewey, 1910; Yancey, 1999). My research on failure (Inoue, 2014b) that reveals the powerful role that non-cognitive dimensions of writing play in success and failure in learning to write also suggests how insignificant creating perfect documents (as a pedagogical goal) are to learning to write.

In the present course, the assessment documents, because they document the reading and judgment practices of students, and because they are often reflective in nature, tell us more directly what and how students learn, although they will still be incomplete. To use the archeological analogy again, assessment documents as ecological parts are akin to diaries, journals, and travelogues, in which the people of an ancient society speak directly about their social and material existence (in this case, about reading and judging writing). This isn't to say that all assessment documents will function in assessment ecologies in this way, but as should be clear from my description of just one assessment process and its part (the stop and write method above), I attempted to make these assessment documents function as reflective parts that might become productive places of learning, ecological places where students might experience borderland clashes between individual judgment and hegemonic structures of valuing texts (e.g., structures of a white racial *habitus*, of local SEAEs, of the local dominant discourse of our classroom, of subaltern discourses read and written in drafts, etc.). Since this class, my labor instructions are more explicit about being labor (i.e., steps in a process), so they make visible our labor as processes that we can abstract. When labor is visible, students can see their own drafts mediated by a base of practices.

Assessment documents can also be places where readers and writers focus on problematizing the existential writing assessment situations of readers and writers by exploring the judgments made and their sources. A small tweak to the second of the three questions that students respond to at each pausing point

would be needed, asking something like, “why are the ideas you summarized most important on this page? What ideas or values do you have as a reader that make those ideas important? Where in your life and education did you acquire these ideas about language and writing?” This could allow writing groups to discuss how readers came to judgments, revealing assumptions and *habitus* active in their group, which can be compared to each other, not as a process of finding right and wrong, but as a way to reveal different places (or subject positions) within the place of the writing group, or the place of the draft in question. In this revised process, the purpose of writing assessment changes so that the center of discussions is not the writer or her draft, but the readers and their reading process, their *habitus*. I think this works best when students see the draft and the writing group as ecological places, not parts or collections of people. Places can be borderlands, sites of contestation, and require understanding perspectives.

The clearest example of a student who attempted to problematize his own existential writing assessment situation was Zach. He enthusiastically took to the assessment processes of the course from the beginning. He also shows the typical ways most students tended to develop as assessors and struggle in the borderlands that their assessment documents created. As mentioned in the previous sections, Zach initially gained some agency by recognizing how power shifted in the writing assessment ecology of our class from those in his past. I suggested that this translated into stronger more aware labor for him, seen through his reflection on the rubric building process. In his next labor journal entry after the rubric revision activities, and as we began the drafting of the explorative essays for Project 2, Zach explains his process of assessing his colleagues’ explorative drafts in which I assigned the above stop and write method:

I directly highlighted certain parts of their text that I found to be interesting, informative, and valuable. By doing so it helped me make notes on what was being said during the sections that I broke off in each inquiry. Lastly I wrote the paragraphs on each of the sections as the assignment asked of me, what I discussed was 1. what I read in the text. 2 if I felt there was significance to what was understood or presented. 3 how it could be argued or what questions I might have regarding the text. Lastly I took this assignment much more seriously this time because I know that this early state is what’s going to determine how my group members are going to further structure and create the rest of their document.

Zach rearticulates his reading process in slightly different terms from the instructions, and makes the assessment practice his own. According to his labor journal

entry, these annotations on each draft took him about 12 minutes each. Figure 3 below shows what Zach produced for the first page of Cristina's paper, which was typical of him for all three pages and all four colleagues in this round of assessing. Zach's labor worked well for him and Cristina, a multilingual Latina, third year student, majoring in Business. It was intense and productive. It is clear he took this process more seriously this time around because of its implications to his colleagues' future project drafts. He felt more responsible for Cristina's success.

Walking through the entrance of Walmart have you ever noticed the Missing signs of those who have not returned to their homes for whatever reason? When we hear the names Laci Peterson, Chandra Levy, or Natalee Holloway we can somewhat describe who they are and what

**Section 1**

In this first section you bring up many great points and examples of different people involved in serious tragedies. Also you mentioned the difference between the ones that made headline news and the ones that did not. Furthermore you made a statement that asked whether or not race was a role or reason some made headline news and others did not. As for this section it seems you are on the right track, maybe you could go into a little more detail regarding the situation/story of each of the names and could compare and see if the same things happened or didn't happen to each of the individual mentioned. A great way to complicate what you brought to attention would be to see if there are differences in the case situations and explain maybe the reason for receiving headline news is due to the severity of the crime committed to these individuals. Or you might find that race does have a role and all the crimes were exactly the same just white, middle class, females get all the attention. Lastly you could also see if the same goes for white, middle class, males.

happened to them because of their tragic stories which made headlines for months. Do you recognize the stories of these women: Evelyn Hernandez, LaToya Figueroa, or Tamika Huston? Just like the first names that were mentioned previously, these women's lives also ended tragically and deserved national headlines, based on the circumstances. You may also notice that the first names are of white, young, beautiful, middle classed women. The other names mentioned were the names of a Hispanic woman, African American/Hispanic woman, and an African American woman. Why is it that the majority of us recognize the first names, but not the second list of names mentioned? Is it because of their skin color or is it much deeper than that.

With this in mind, I then asked myself, how does race play a role in the media coverage of victims of crime?

*Figure 3. A page from Zach's assessment document for Cristina's Project 2 that began to problematize his own existential writing assessment situation.*

In his assessment document (Figure 3 above), Zach focuses first on describing what he reads in the draft, then on the significant details, which he had highlighted first in his reading labors. While he moves to telling Cristina what

to do, these details lead him to thinking with Cristina about rival hypotheses for why there is more media coverage of white female victims in news outlets, and why there might be a lack of coverage of victims of color. His attention is not on making Cristina's exploration of her question, "how does race play a role in the media coverage of victims of crime?" simple or easy to answer, instead Zach tries to find ways to "complicate" what she has begun to think about. Finally, it is interesting that he ends on a suggestion for future inquiry that implicates himself, asking her to investigate the coverage of white, middle class males. I'd like to believe that our course's assessment ecology's attention to difference and constructing borderlands in the rubric and in our discussions of drafts (the assessment processes) allowed Zach to make this dangerous proposition that implicated himself in Cristina's project. This would be a kind of problematizing of his own existential situation. No matter the impulse, Zach's labors seem not only to be self-aware but racially problematizing in nature. Assessment becomes a critical process, a process that implicates Zach's own subjectivity in his colleague's writing, a potentially problematizing process for both Zach and Cristina.

These impulses toward questioning assumptions and claims of texts and ideas began to develop in Zach's own writing of his Project 2 drafts. It should be noted that like Lyna, Zach produced a lot of text for assignments, and always followed our process directions carefully. But while he was very good at reflecting on his work and assessing his colleagues' papers, like Lyna, Zach had trouble managing the dominant academic discourse of his field (viticulture), and the conventions of our local SEAE in his own project drafts. It appears that when he felt free of the obligations to make "arguments" or write a research paper, Zach could think clearly and cogently, ask good questions, and ponder tentatively on the page, as his reflections, labor journal, and the above assessment document show. However, in project drafts, his language was often riddled with errors, oddly used words, and tangled syntax. He was less sure about how to cite and quote sources appropriately, as well as integrate them into his own thoughts and ideas. And yet there were moments of more clarity and a coming to "appropriate the discourse" of the academy (although I would not say Zach was equally appropriated by his academic discourse), as Bartholomae (1985) has said. In his later drafts, which I'm arguing are linked to his assessing practices, Zach tries to question and manipulate sources, practices he migrated from his assessment processes.

A few weeks later in the second full draft of Zach's Project 2, he explores his research question, "what are the cultural perceptions of the wine industry and how does the media play in those perceptions," by looking at one example, the movie *Sideways* (2004). Late in the draft, Zach incorporates his assessment pro-



cess as a rhetorical pattern into his project's draft:

One example of media directly relating to the wine industry would be shown by the devastating wine market change from the release of the movie "Sideways". "The movie *Sideways* was released on October 22, 2004, nominated for 5 Academy Awards on January 25, 2005, winning one (best adapted screenplay) , and closed in theaters on May 19, 2005. In the 30 weeks the movie was in theaters, gross domestic ticket sales were over \$70 million with worldwide sales reaching just over \$100 million, making it the 40<sup>th</sup> highest grossing movie of the year." (Cuellar, Karnowsky, Acosta, 2009) the reason this is being presented is to show the magnitude of the movie, also it represents the size of audience that viewed the film for those who have not seen or heard about the movie. "In the movie *Sideways*, there is a memorable scene in which the lead character adamantly refuses to drink Merlot ... the effect of the move has become folklore in the wine industry and has even started what is known as the "Sideways effect". (Cuellar, Karnowsky, Acosta, 2009) ... After the large study being done by those in the particular article being represented the "Results suggest that *Sideways* did have a small negative impact on the consumption of Merlot while increasing the consumption of Pinot Noir. However, far from having a "devastating" affect, the positive impact on Pinot Noir appears greater than the negative impact on Merlot. For example, while the sales of merlot slow following the movie, sales of Pinot Noir Increases significantly." (Cuellar, Karnowsky, Acosta, 2009) Now as we can see that this is a prime example of media and its power to change the perceptions of a whole industry more specifically the wine industry. As we can see just by a couple of lines form a movie has the power to take sales of two products and drastically change them. As for the perception goes the movie was able to negatively portray Merlot, and glorify Pinot, in result the public perception followed.

Zach has trouble with the local SEAE and citing and incorporating sources into his own thoughts, but he does make the right kind of rhetorical moves that most academic discourses expect. And these moves mimic what he did well in assessment processes. This was also something the dominant translation of our project rubric seemed to be prompting students to explore in their drafts. Our project

rubric asked students to “provide multiple perspectives fairly,” and suggested it might be seen in a project as “[a]ddress[ing] or acknowledge[ing] multiple sides to the issue or question[ing] and substantiat[ing] those experiences with research.” From the feedback that Zach received from his group members, it appears they all accepted this dominant way to translate the rubric. And Zach attempts to use sources in his text, but he tends to lean on one. Still, he uses a quotation from a source, inserts a parenthetical citation in APA style, then explains what readers are to make of the quoted material. While there are issues with each of these moves in his draft, the details he brings to bear on his question about the media’s influence on people’s perceptions of the wine industry are all relevant and appropriate.

More important, Zach uses the same rhetorical pattern provided in the process instructions in the stop and write assessment method, which amounted to three moves truncated to two moves: (1) point to a source text which offered the claim/observation about the “Sideways effect,” then (2) explain or analyze that source. What he still lacks is enough contact with academic discussions that would provide him examples of the kinds of appropriate and meaningful things to say after those quotations, or the kinds of counters an academic audience might reasonably have to the “Sideways effect.” The fact that he truncates his own observation is also a problem, but a minor one in this early- to mid-draft. The discourse has not appropriated him, nor has he fully approximated it. But this is where Zach is at, which is much farther along than where he began the course, and he is conscious of it, since he made these same rhetorical moves consistently throughout his paper.

While Zach transfers the course’s assessment processes to his drafting processes, I wonder about his ability to problematize his existential situation in his own writing. That is, does he question his role as a white male with some affluence (his family does own a farm and he has aspirations to be a grape grower and winery owner)? What is his stake in his essay’s question? Perhaps expecting a discussion from Zach along these lines is unfair. It would require a cultural studies orientation to this project that he likely was unprepared to undertake. It may also have required him to change much of his purposes for his project. But he could problematize his writing labors as ones that are informed by a white racial *habitus*. He could see the rhetorical moves he makes as ones that are in some way implicated in the hegemonic that he simultaneously takes advantage of (white skin privilege) and is penalized by (in his own inability to fully mimic the dominant discourse of the academy). Again, these are difficult problems to pose for any student because they are paradoxes.

Note that I’m not making the argument that Zach’s paper was mimicking well the academic discourse expected of him, nor am I saying that his paper was

one of the best in the class. Instead, I'm saying that these judgments of success, like "better papers" or "improved drafts," whatever that may mean in any given assessment ecology, are less important to Zach's appropriation of the dominant academic discourse, a discourse he wanted to appropriate. And it was less important to his success in our writing assessment ecology, less important to Zach's ecological products, his learning, his coming to critical consciousness. Zach's academic goals were never to be an academic. They were to help his family with their farm and open his own vineyard and winery. He and I had several discussions about these goals. So entering academic conversations and reproducing fluently our local SEAE—being appropriated by an academic discourse—are mostly intellectual exercises that, to his credit, he valiantly attempted, but were not on his career horizon, at least as he saw it at that point in his life. Zach's purposes for writing in the course and for the assessments on his writing, then, were to produce some other learning product. This is the case for the vast majority of college writing students, particularly those in first-year writing courses.<sup>56</sup>

For the above draft, Zach's group decided to use a version of the stop and write method for assessing, only they used the comment feature in Word. Like Lyna's group, Zach's group exhibited a locally diverse character. Susan, an older, white, monolingual, third-year student, whom I mentioned earlier in this chapter as vocal about grades, was a strong and articulate assessor and a strong writer of the local SEAE. Her assessments on Zach's draft focused often at the sentence level, whereas his other group members tended to offer their annotations after each paragraph or page. At the end of the above paragraph, Susan comments: "This whole paragraph is really good, but again, check your grammar and use of certain words. Sometimes the misuse of a word changes the intended meaning." And in her overall comment on his draft, she explains,

I also felt like some of your points could use a little further discussion by way of examples or research. You talk about owners being passionate and I would be curious to know what causes that passion. Since you are majoring in this field, you might consider discussing your own passion and what makes you want to own a vineyard. Is it tradition? I know your family farms but not wine grapes, so where did your passion come from?

Susan is pushing Zach to do at least two things in his draft. One, she wants him to look for those errors in his attempts at the local SEAE so that his meaning comes out clearly; and two, she sees a need to have alternative voices, perhaps ones that challenge the ideas or claims he already has in his draft. One place he might start, she thinks, is his own reasons for his passion for the wine industry.

The use of more voices, more “examples and research,” is a common theme in his other colleagues’ assessments. Adam, a monolingual, African-American business major, a junior with a wife and two children, offered this comment on the same paragraph: “The discussion about the movie is a strong point for me. What other sources agree or disagree with its said impact?” In his global comments on the draft, Adam makes similar observations about his own expectations: “I don’t see an end to the paper right here. A good argument to me would be discussing if there is another influence over the wine market. What else creates perceptions other than the media?” Additionally, Adam wonders if Zach might be able to criticize his sources more, “attack them fairly,” and asks, “do you agree with all of your sources or do you feel that they could be wrong? If so I would like to hear about it.”

Cristina, a multilingual Latina, in similar fashion as Susan, mentions Zach’s troubles with the local SEAE, but focuses her overall feedback on her interest in knowing more about Zach’s position in the project, and perhaps on the ideas he quotes from others. Cristina explains: “What I would have like to have read more about was your opinion. You had a lot of great information about your topic, but being able to see where you stand in your arguments would show us the reader why you are so passionate about viticulture and your take on the arguments being discussed.” His assessors were uniform in their readings of his draft as not meeting the local SEAE expectations, and wanting more perspectives represented, particularly ones that challenged the ideas he had in the early drafts. He received similar kinds of comments from his colleagues on his Project 1 drafts, but at this point in the semester, Zach held on to his own purposes for his writing. He wasn’t, for example, trying to force a purpose like perfecting a local SEAE in drafts, and perhaps he wasn’t sure how to insert his own ideas and opinion yet. But the ecology allowed him to ignore or put aside these suggestions. Things seemed okay to him. He could have his own purposes for writing.

However, when Zach tried to force-fit our dominant purpose into his assessment and drafting processes, it seemed to cause him a good deal of frustration and cognitive dissonance. In a reflection around the same time as the above draft was submitted to his group, he reflects on the differences between his colleague’s assessments of Project 1’s later draft and my assessments of it, focusing on the contradictory ecological products of those assessments:

So after reading my reviews that my colleagues wrote about my project one I truly didn’t seem to find anything said to be constructive. All of the comments that were left were basically checking off to see if I meet our rubric or not. According to 2 of the 2 individuals that read my paper I have indeed

completed my project according to the rubric. So this leaves me with a bigger question “where do I go from here?” I do understand that there are probably a lot of grammar errors to be fixed. And I’m sure there is some part of my project that’s weak and could use some more attention. So my bigger concern is what areas does my project need some improvement. This leads me to the comments left by Dr. Asao, which were very constructive but yet made it very clear that I was no where near meeting any of our rubric benchmarks which is the contradiction. So I do respect what was said about my article by Dr. Asao, but at the same time I feel that all of the group work in class has just been a huge waste of time. To clarify, I do respect my group members and feel as if they have helped me in many ways, but I just don’t understand how I can be so close, but way off at the same time. For the future I plan on going through my document and closely analyzing it to see how I might be able to make the changes needed to get me back on track. And hopefully change a few things to make my project to be more rhetorically acceptable. For my future project 2 I have no idea on how I will be able to change my writing practices but for now I just plan on working hard and continue to improve day by day.

Zach appeared to be unsure of what to do. He was frustrated. He saw a contradiction in the assessments of his writing, between what I said on his Project 1 draft, which was mostly about helping him come closer to the dominant academic discourse, and what his colleagues had said, who appeared generally to be less concerned with those things. Because they used versions of the stop and write method, and because I had coached the class not to make judgments about passing or meeting expectations in assessments, instead I asked them to make observational judgments, ones that described their reading experiences. Zach’s colleagues’ assessments didn’t include the binary judgments mine did (i.e., “meets expectations” or “does not meet expectations”). Keep in mind, this frustration is a true frustration about learning, not earning. Grades aren’t a part of assessments, as our grading contract stipulates. Zach knows that no matter what folks think of his writing, he’s getting at least a “B” course grade, and probably an “A,” something he makes a point to mention in his final self-assessment letter in the course. So the real issue here for him is “how I [Zach] can be so close, but way off at the same time”? His concern is about what to make of the locally diverse set of readers’ judgments of his writing.

What was difficult for Zach, and many of his colleagues in class at this point, was how to read and use assessments that didn't try to grade or judge his writing as passing or not. Instead, colleague assessments presented writers with a series of ambiguous decisions that were framed in personal terms, as Susan's, Adam's, and Cristina's assessments of Zach's Project 2 illustrate above. This creates a borderland for Zach, which he experiences as conflicting judgments on his writing when he gets my assessment. In my assessment documents, I explicitly listed the project rubric's codes, the dimensions, and stated a clear judgment of "meets expectations," or "does not meet expectations." But the rest of my assessment document looked similar to Zach's colleagues' documents, in that I attempted to describe my experience of their texts and my expectations as a reader along each dimension.

The simple act of judging whether they met or didn't meet my expectations created a lot of confusion and frustration in the class. I seemed to be saying dramatically different things than their colleagues in groups. Additionally, I seemed to say contradictory things in my judgment and discussion of each dimension. And in a way, I was. When placing a judgment like "does not meet expectations" next to a descriptive assessment that may say similar things as their group members' assessments of their writing did (as in the case of Zach), a writer cannot help but focus on the binary judgment, even a student as dedicated as Zach. That judgment feels and acts much like a grade, a final, summative decision, even though it wasn't a part of the calculation of course grades.

My students, even after 10 or so weeks in our class, reacted to the codes in my assessments (my summative judgments), in ways they had been acculturated to do in school. The other writing assessment ecologies were bleeding into ours, affecting the ways in which they read my feedback. They reacted to them as parts, not as borderland-places of negotiation and conflict. If they could see the contradictory assessments of their drafts as a place, a landscape of judgments, then they might see a dialogue, a conversation about their writing that is equally about readers' different *habitus*.

Instead of using the differences between my assessments and their colleagues' as an opportunity to investigate the differences in assumptions and how those differences may help them as writers to problematize, my students tended to see the differences initially as a result of a flawed system. Why listen to students when they cannot read like our teacher? Isn't it all just a "waste of time" if the teacher says something different from our colleagues? In retrospect, while my summative judgments did offer students like Zach a chance to dwell in a borderland that was uncomfortable and dissonant, shocking, one he would eventually emerge from, I'm not sure that all the angst and frustration in the class was necessary. Perhaps I should have prepared them for my assessments before

they received them. Maybe I should not have provided the judgments on each dimension. One thing is for sure, our classroom writing assessment ecology did not prepare them well for my binary judgments, but the confusion and angst that they created in most of the class was productive for many. It posed a problem about the judgments on their writing.

Like many in the class, Zach's cognitive dissonance occurred because he had difficulty rectifying the two seemingly contradicting sets of assessments on his writing. For instance, my assessments of Zach's project focused on the same two issues that his colleagues' assessments did on both of his projects (i.e., his issues with our local SEAE, and his need for more sources or counter arguments). But as the stop and write method illustrates, readers framed their assessments in personal ways, drawing on their own inventories and feelings about the text in order to translate the rubric's dimensions (e.g., "[a]ddress or acknowledge multiple sides to the issue or question and substantiate those experiences with research"). This was intended to produce assessment documents that offered a variety of interpretations of what the draft was doing and what the rubric dimension meant, which could lead to investigating assumptions and values that inform those personal judgments. The assessment ecology, then, worked as I had planned it, at least initially. But because I didn't incorporate critical consciousness raising activities to explicitly investigate the borderlands created by the conflicting assessment documents, students may have dwelled too long in those borderlands without any way to navigate them and see the structural in the personal feedback of their colleagues. What Zach's reflections suggest is that he saw my feedback coming from larger, structural and disciplinary sources, but didn't see his colleagues' feedback in the same way. Their feedback seemed to be more personal in nature, maybe even random or merely idiosyncratic, but certainly less relevant than mine.

Additionally, I think, Zach and the class may have been looking for direction at this point, a point in the semester when teachers typically give direction to students, but our assessment ecology resisted providing this to him in an unambiguous way. He was not able to simply follow my orders. Ideally, I should have offered some additional ways to help students like Zach through the borderlands that at this point stymied and frustrated them. Maybe I should have modeled the process of making a decision from conflicting judgments on a draft, focusing on the way all the assessment documents create a conversation, a place where people are talking about a writer's draft or him as a writer. Then again, Zach and his colleagues needed to sit with difference and conflict for a time, then figure out how to make decisions as writers. I did not always know how students should negotiate these borderlands. Zach was frustrated because in his eyes in a perfect world, his colleagues' and my assessments would be clear and unambig-



uous about their judgments. They would agree. But in our assessment ecology, these things didn't happen because the people were locally diverse in a number of ways and the processes and parts embraced that diversity.

In our discussions in class after the reflection activity comparing my assessments to their colleagues', I asked students if they felt I was a substantively different reader than their colleagues. They said, yes of course. I was the teacher. I was an expert in composition theory. I had more experience in writing and teaching writing than they did in school.<sup>57</sup> I asked them if they were experts in their own readings of texts—that is, did they feel that what they said in assessment documents was truthful and honest, or was truthful to their experiences of the texts at hand? Of course, they said. So I wondered aloud in front of them if it's possible that all of us could be right about each other's drafts at the same time, and why we as a class generally might want to measure everyone's judgments against mine. In other areas of our lives, did we do this kind of comparing of judgments to validate them, to make sure they were correct? In those other places in our lives, is there always a right or correct answer or response? Is there always a yardstick to measure by?

I didn't ask them these questions directly, since I only wanted them to think about them. I reminded them of our on-going discussions about difference and conflict and about writers making decisions. This didn't solve their problems, but that wasn't my goal. I wanted them to sit with the differences and find a way out as writers in the places of their groups, since we still had more assessments and drafts to engage in. Finally, I reminded them that these were good tensions to have and to try to solve, and fortunately for us, these contradictions of judgment do not affect one important product of our assessment ecology, their course grades. They were free to make decisions without risking a lower course grade. The question was not what decisions do they make, but *how* and *why* do they make them. So in a tacit or covert way, I was asking them to problematize their existential writing assessment situations, which came to a head in the contradictions between my assessments and their colleagues'.

What I didn't connect to this problematizing is the ways that my judgments, and the *habitus* I enacted in my assessments, was deeply informed by a white racial *habitus*. I didn't show them how our stop and write assessment process has roots in a white racial *habitus*, and this is both a good thing and something that could harm us if we used it to grade one another. Thus our assessment ecology, one that didn't grade using a white racial *habitus* to form judgments of writing, was antiracist in this respect, but it didn't use this antiracist method very effectively to help students become critically conscious of such racism in all writing assessment.

The key to understanding and working through the contradictions in judg-

ments is seeing the assessments as a place in the ecology. Their writing groups were also places, ones that resisted norming (to my expectations or those of a white racial *habitus*), even as those places attempted to norm students to a dominant discourse and our local SEAE. This norming and anti-norming could only happen if students exercised enough power in the assessment ecology, which I argue they did, and that the power they exercised allowed for the presence of alternative interpretations of what we expected in writing. So while Zach may have left Project 1 and entered Project 2 confused and frustrated, it did make him more alert, more vigilant, which is a step toward critical consciousness. The assessment of his writing was clearly not going to be about correcting his drafts, but about constructing and negotiating a borderland of diverse judgments.

In his final portfolio's reflection letter, Zach returns to this moment in the course, in part because it was a potent moment for him and because he included both the Project 2 and the above reflection in his portfolio. He reflects:

The last aspect that I truly struggled with project two would be speeding up my conversation. Ever since receiving this feedback [on project 1] from Dr. Asao I have always been left with this final question. "How does one speed up their conversation? And what does this exactly mean?" as for me I do not have the time nor energy to properly attack this allegation but I defiantly feel that it should be a place where I could use some improvement.

As for the journal entry that I provided I would like to briefly say that this is the best example of how emotion will change my tone or attitude within my text. At the time I was very upset with the reply I received from Dr. Asao regarding my project one. I just simply felt as if I let myself down because I truly put so much time and effort into that project just to receive what I took at the time to be negative feedback. Later I realized that he actually was providing me with the best feedback I could possibly have gotten. Lastly I just want this journal to be recognized for the sheer emotion that was represented. Now looking back at it I sometimes wish I could write in such a manor or emulate this in other texts.

Is Zach's reflection proof that our assessment processes led him to all the answers he sought, to a critical consciousness about his own language practices, about the judgment of his writing in the class? I think he is more ambivalent than that, but ambivalence is an important characteristic in good, critical reflection.

It reveals the student's willingness to acknowledge ambiguity and complexity, to resist in some way the powerful pull of the progress narrative that so many portfolio reflection letters tend to engage in since the genre itself leads students toward that disposition, as Tony Scott (2005) shows in his research on the Kentucky portfolio project. While I'm positive Zach got much from our class, this reflection engages in, among other things, two interesting questions that are never given a final answer. Both come from the contradictions he saw between my assessment of his writing and his colleagues in his writing group. And because I was not the bearer of grades, he initially struggled with how to answer these questions.

The first question he raises, "how does one speed up their conversation?" comes from a comment I gave him in which I said that as a reader I was looking for him to stop summarizing so much and move to his argument, his ideas, his questions (this is tied to the way he tended to truncate the rhetorical moves he was mimicking from our assessment processes, mentioned above). As a reader, I expressed a need, one that urged him to move more quickly to his ideas and perhaps wrestle with his sources. In the above reflection, he seems to agree with me but uses some strong language to do so, which could be simply some language miscues, but these decisions lead to a sentence with interesting tension in it. The first half of his conclusion, meant to be an answer to the question, seems on the verge of attacking my assessment: "I do not have the time nor energy to properly attack this allegation." The clause sounds defensive and oppositional. Does Zach see that he's used two phrases that could be read as defensive or even attacking me? He doesn't have time or energy to take my assessment seriously, to "attack" it as an "allegation," suggesting that my assessment is false. What student in a conventional writing assessment ecology, where the teacher holds most of the power, would make such a statement?

This statement shows agency, a willingness to suggest that the teacher's own assessment is wrong, or could reasonably be seen as wrong. I wish he had the time to follow up on my assessment. It would have told us more, and more important, told him more. The second clause begins in the same way, but quickly warms to a kinder, gentler, more humble voice, one I had come to associate closely with Zach: "but I defiantly feel that it should be a place where I could use some improvement." So he "defiantly" (or is it "definitely"?) agrees with my assessment. I like to think that the statement ends on a note of defiance, a defiance that opposes my own judgment of his work, yet he sees my judgment as reasonable, worth some consideration that may lead to "improvement." This is the kind of agency that our ecology attempted to encourage and develop in students. The ability to talk back to the hegemonic. I realize I could be reading too much into this final statement of Zach's, but given the way Lu (1994)

demonstrates that such language miscues could be read as a writer making conscious choices that are counter-hegemonic, not errors or miscues, suggests that this kind of reading is worthwhile. It reveals an exercise of some degree of power, agency, critical consciousness.

The second question that Zach ends this section of his letter on deals with a question of how to infuse more emotion and passion into “other texts,” which I’m assuming are academic texts since he’s referring to his informal reflection as the one filled with emotion. He sees the value in “how emotion will change my tone or attitude within my text,” which is extraordinary in a class based on helping students appropriate academic discourses, ones that typically do not value emotion and passion, at least not in the ways Zach is describing it here. His emotional reflection, however, gives him access to another contradiction that I had hoped students would confront, that time and labor in writing may not always lead to improvement, that learning isn’t a linear process. While he doesn’t explain why my feedback was “the best feedback [he] could possibly have gotten,” this statement is situated between two statements about how useful writing with emotion was for him, how it helped create text that was more powerful. His more emotionally charged reflection (a self-assessment) provided Zach with a way to work through the differences in the assessment borderland that had frustrated him earlier in the semester. Even though he doesn’t explain how things made sense to him, he sees a lesson and less frustration. He sees the usefulness of difference, of conflict, and even of his own earlier frustration. Zach finds answers in emotion and passion, not reason and logic, and he articulates these conclusions in somewhat ambiguous terms by saying, “sometimes wish I could write in such a manor or emulate this in other texts.” In his final self-assessment letter in the course, he shows just how self-aware he is of all these issues, which I’ll discuss in more detail in the next section.

Finally, it is significant that Zach focuses on emotion and passion, and that he wishes he could “write in such a manor” in other places. I want to read this as Zach tapping into the ontological aspects of writing as labor, as an act of being that Yagelski (2011) discusses. It seems to me that what Zach is finding out in this final reflection letter is that writing can be deeply enjoyable and engaging. It can be emotional and passion-filled. It can be a way of being that is good and helpful and insightful. And in these ways, it poses different problems for Zach to ponder, raises a different kind of critical consciousness for him, one that is connected to the sensual, to the bodily, to the material, to feeling.

Der engaged in different kinds of assessment labor than Zach, but with some similar results. At first glance, Der (a third year, Hmong student, majoring in business) appeared to have more difficulty migrating our assessment processes to her drafting processes, but she too migrates the processes of assessment to her

drafting and texts. For draft 1 of Project 2, Der's group decided to change the ecological part that their stop and write method produced. They decided to offer bulleted lists that addressed the questions in the original stop and write method instructions. Unlike Zach's group's narrative form (paragraphs that talked to the writer) that accompanied annotated texts, Der's group's ecological part, their assessment documents, were only lists, usually asking questions to the writer. Refocusing their assessment labor practices on making fragmentary lists that did not try to explain their statements or reactions (the group felt they could explain in their group discussions) made migrating assessment practices, such as those Zach migrated, more difficult, but not impossible.

While the form of their assessment documents made it difficult to know exactly how useful their assessment processes were to assessors and writers, Der's assessment lists do illustrate what she as a reader cogitatively had to do during her reading and feedback processes. Der's assessment document of Gloria's draft 1 was typical of her labors:

Gloria: Is It a Good Time to Come Out of the Shadows Yet?

- What are the bills / laws that would make one hesitant?
- Who would be against the Dream Act?
  - o What professions? – Why would they be?
- Would you be including people who have done it and what they say about it?
- What would you want us as readers to do? (Rubric)
- What are the opinions of non-immigrants / citizens?
  - o Why would they react the way that would?

Her group members had similar lists, so Der was typical in the scope and depth of her questions. All of her items are questions to Gloria, and they likely are organized by where in the draft Der came up with the questions during her reading. For instance, the first two pages of Gloria's draft discusses the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) federal memorandum, passed in June of 2012, while the rest of the draft draws out a history of laws that affect individuals taking advantage of DACA in California. Der's first two questions seem to belong with those first two pages, while the others relate to items Gloria had put into her draft later. Der's questions are good ones, helpful I think, even if under-explained. She makes reference to our project rubric when she asks Gloria to consider "what would you want us as readers to do?" Der is referring to the rubric dimension, "Use Rhetorical Methods, Purposes, and Strategies." We recorded several features by which one could translate this dimension, two being, "attempt to provoke a purposeful response in readers," and "use and dis-

cuss appropriate examples that help illustrate and/or complicate the ideas of the project.” Der seems to use the idea of provoking a response in a reader to frame her question. In effect, she’s asking Gloria, what is the purpose of this paper?

My own reading produced this same question since this early draft is mostly a list of summaries. Der appears to have figured out as a reader how to consider purpose and the use of various perspectives in order to complicate ideas in an academic discussion, something she’ll attempt in her own drafting. What is less clear from Der’s assessment document is what assessment processes she can migrate to her other writing, and whether a list of questions will provide her the ability to problematize any existential situation (assessment or otherwise), as Zach’s narrative-based assessment documents appeared to offer him and Cristina.

Could Der’s group’s listing process for assessment documents be as successful as Zach’s group’s more elaborate processes? Like most groups, Der’s was very talkative. Recall that Jane, one of Der’s group members, mentioned in her reflections during our contract renegotiations that our writing assessment ecology allowed her to “enjoy” her “group discussion the most,” “always [leaving] class in a great mood,” and found that reading her colleagues’ papers helped her in her own writing. So likely, the question listing method they employed was not meant to stand on its own. It was a method to allow them to have discussions in the ecological place of their group, not in the parts of their assessment documents. It was a method that accentuated their group’s material conditions around feedback.

But did Der’s assessment processes lead to successful drafting processes and textual parts in her projects? And did they lead to a rising critical consciousness? In her final portfolio, Der decided to include just her Project 1, which had gotten the more elaborate and lengthy stop and write method assessments earlier in the semester. It seems significant that after the experiment with the stop and write listing method that Der’s group attempted, Der decided to leave out Project 2 from her final portfolio, a fascinating inquiry into the representations of Asian females in contemporary popular media. Der’s Project 1 was personal, and she seemed more invested in it. Her research question asked: “how has being Hmong influenced my reading and writing?” She uses several kinds of evidence to explore this question, researched studies of Hmong students and their literacy practices, her own personal experiences with her family, and an extended interview with her older sister, who was also a college student, majoring in business accountancy.

Her paper developed in a cumulative way, starting with the literature review, then adding the interview, placing it in the second half of the paper. While Der’s paper offers no rationale for the two-part structure or its order, concludes abruptly with one sentence, and doesn’t quite come back to answering directly her question, she does indirectly explore the question in fascinating ways and could arguably be said to offer a counter-hegemonic discourse to the dominant

one the rubric re-presented. At the paragraph and section levels, Der makes some sophisticated moves, some of the most sophisticated of the class. After opening the paper with her question and a brief overview of who the Hmong people are and where they came from, she discusses research, then implicitly applies those findings to her own life experiences:

In the work of Katherine Fennelly's and Nicole Palasz's, "English Language Proficiency of Immigrants and Refugees in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area," a study was done on how well the understudied Hmong, as well as, Russians, Somalis, and Mexicans were able to pick up the English language. Fennelly is a professor at the University of Minnesota whose expertise is in immigration and public policy; diversity and cross-cultural relations; as well as health and public policy. Palasz is a K – 16 Outreach Coordinator for the Institute of World Affairs in the Center for International Education at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Compared to all of those researched on, Hmong people had the least amount of people over the age of fourteen that knew English well. Only thirty four percent of the sampled Hmong in the research, which was conducted in 2003, had a high school diploma. The conclusion to why this is the reason is because Hmong people lived in a secluded environment from other people prior to their movement to the United States. Even when being compared to just other Asian refugees in the United States, "Hmong are at a significant socio – economic and educational disadvantage." (120).

Growing up within the Hmong community, we were taught to keep to our own kind. We were not supposed to mingle with others, well at least outside of school. When in school, we were to be an ideal student, but as soon as we go home we are supposed to forget all the "American ways" and be the ideal Hmong daughter or son. In my early years of elementary school, my family which included most of my father's extended side all lived in the same apartment complex. During this time it was hard, as well as wrong, to ignore the Hmong heritage in me as well as around me. I believe that I chose not to question the Hmong culture because even before I was aware of how taboo it was that my mother was a single parent, in both the Hmong and the American worlds, I did not want to



let my mother down. She could not stress enough the importance of keeping our culture going. In the Hmong culture, once you are married you are part of the husband's side now. If the husband dies, then the wife is supposed to marry one of his brothers, primarily the youngest one. The reason for this is because without the husband as the connection to the family, the wife as well as the children would be basically disowned from the whole. My mom chose not to marry any one of my uncles. This is because she highly respected my aunts and because of the move to the Americas changed a lot of feelings about disowning family. Another reason could be that the oldest of my siblings is my brother who is almost a decade older than me. With him around my family would be able to say we are of our father's. My father's side also figured it would not be necessary because we all needed to stick together to be able to fend off the American ways. The American impact was of course inevitable. In some ways it hit them right in the face of our parents' generation.

Unlike the stereotype of the multilingual writer, Der integrates her sources more conventionally than Zach (a monolingual writer), and in many places above uses our local SEAE more fluently than Zach's draft did, although her language does break down periodically. More interesting, Der's family experiences substantiate and subtly complicate the findings of Fennelly and Palasz. It appears Der, much like Zach, still produced a project draft that was clearly attempting the things we asked of each other in the project rubric. But it could be argued that Der was doing more complex things by including an interview and her own experiences as a way to make sense of the research she draws on, which Zach had been asked by his colleagues to include in his writing but choose not to. While Der's local place in the writing assessment ecology didn't produce as interesting or provocative assessment documents as Zach's place did, Der still ends up producing effective drafts and appears to be equally cognizant of her learning. In fact, Der's draft is a kind of problematizing of her own existential language situation in school.

Der's draft, unlike most others in the class, tacitly complicates her sources and topic question, in large part because she includes the personal in ways that problematize her own existential situation as a multilingual Hmong woman in Fresno. And it is also, I argue, a closer rendition of what I was asking students to do in their assessment processes. I wanted assessors to explain their judgments to writers, to reveal how they came to judgments about drafts, not simply support judgments with textual or other evidence. In her draft, Der doesn't truncate the

three parts of the stop and write method of assessing that Zach does in his drafts, and it ends up making her draft more complex, even more critically conscious of how her own language history and practices are racialized and cultural.

In the above passage, Der explains who Fennelly and Palasz are, providing her reader with their ethos (why we should listen to them), summarizes their study, then quotes them on Hmong's "significant socio-economic and educational disadvantage." Her second paragraph moves to her experience with her family and quickly nuances Fennelly and Palasz (the very move she was urging Gloria to do in her paper on DACA). Der's disadvantage at learning English in school wasn't simply due to socio-economic or educational disadvantages, instead it was a number of things that pulled against each other: Der's complex family demands to do well in school; the demand for her to come home and "forget the 'American ways' and be the ideal Hmong daughter"; her mother's urgings to "keep their culture going"; her mother's complicated and contradictory position as a single Hmong mother in the U.S. who elects not to follow Hmong traditions and not marry one of Der's uncles; her own sense of duty to her mother and not wanting "to let my mother down."

Der sees and attempts to represent in this passage the complex ways that Hmong girls/women must negotiate the demands and expectations of family, siblings, and children. It's not simply about language use in the home being different from the English expected at school. It's not simply about Hmong versus U.S. cultural ways. It is also about Der's specific cultural and material conditions in her family, a family who lacked a father, one whose older male siblings were not around much, one in which Der had to take on the duties of translating public documents for her mother and younger siblings because her mother didn't speak or read English well enough (she mentions this earlier in the draft).

Der also suggests a portrait of her mother as a complex figure who is perhaps more precariously balancing an American and Hmong *habitus*. She doesn't remarry one of her uncles, as is Hmong tradition because she respects her aunts, and her son is there to take over as patriarch. I think it significant that despite the family's acceptance of her mother not remarrying, finding a rationale that fits the Hmong cultural traditions and that serves their needs to safeguard their family from American ways, Der articulates this key moment as her mother's choice: "My mom chose not to marry any one of my uncles." In a culture in which Der describes women as second-class citizens, ones mostly without agency, her mother takes control of her own life, and the implication is that this was a good use of American ways, but that this "American impact was of course inevitable," hitting her parents' generation "right in the face." So while Der's mother wants her to keep Hmong cultural ways, she herself cannot help but be influenced by those same American values, gaining agency in a cultural hybridity filled with

tension that Der seems quite aware of. Her question about her Hmong heritage affecting her reading and writing practices clearly is a complex matter of material circumstances, language use, gendered expectations at school and home, the preserving and loosing of cultural customs and ways of living, family relations, and a respect and honoring of her mother's contradictory wishes.

If we read Der's draft as subtly exploring her research question, "how has being Hmong influenced my reading and writing?" then Der's answer is complex, even counter-hegemonic, working against her sources and beyond the convenient binaries readily available. It is a coming to critical consciousness, a problematizing of her own existential situation as a Hmong-American, multilingual English speaker and writer. For Der, the question about her Hmong heritage's influence on her use of English is not simply a binary choice, like the one that Richard Rodriguez (1982) offers in his famous account of his education: either Der accepts her Hmong heritage or she takes on American ways with language. It is contingency in material action. It is hybridity in practices. This complexity likely could not have occurred so clearly without her practicing the assessing processes of her writing group, and her willingness to let contentious and conflicting ideas sit next to each other in her draft, which springs from her use of the personal to nuance the research she reports on.

In more conventional peer review activities, students are asked to focus their attention only on ecological parts, drafts, rubrics. These parts are decontextualized from student labors and processes that created those parts. This doesn't allow students to consider the material conditions that create such drafts and rubrics. In our ecology, Der's focus was on the processes of reading, making judgments, then understanding those judgments as produced from material processes. This simple rhetorical pattern, seen in Der's draft repeatedly, is the stop and write method. Zach used it to help integrate and explain his sources, while Der used the method to complicate her sources by juxtaposing her family experiences. Process becomes part. Part becomes place. Thus, ecological elements flux into one another easily, and our ecology appears to allow students to take advantage of this and notice it. Noticing, in fact, provides more critical perspective.

It could be argued that Der was less self-aware than I'm giving her credit for, that she did not see such nuances in her discussion of Project 1, or more important, that she did not migrate her assessment processes to her drafting processes. But consider her final self-assessment of the course. In it, Der focuses mainly on the utility of her assessing processes, as well as the ecological place of her group as its context. She explains:

In my past college English courses, I always felt as though I had to make my paper be as good as it can be on my own.

I never really had a professor who showed helpful processes of brainstorming as you did. Some of these things would include the construction of the project rubric, article models, and the annotated bibliographies. For the longest of time, I always hated the thought of having to brainstorm for essays. I always felt the need to start my 'final' draft and just turn it in as such. I do not remember any helpful constructive ways my previous English professors has helped me to develop my portfolio. Even though some professors have done similar things, I never felt like I grasped it until now in this class.

In this final assessment of her learning in the class, she identifies the assessment processes, which she calls, "processes of brainstorming," that is processes of invention, and links them to her drafting of the projects. Der identifies the rubric-creation processes, the reading processes with model articles, an inductive activity that produced ideas for what made for good literature reviews, and the annotated bibliography processes that came just before the exploratory drafts, as important pre-drafting or invention processes. In each case, the processes that Der refers to had the same three components: (1) reading a text or set of texts, (2) marking or annotating those texts, and (3) producing a document that demonstrates the reader's reading process to others (i.e., explaining the reader's assumptions and reasons for making judgments). Der is quite aware of what she's been doing in the class and how that labor is situated within her group's place. Assessment processes, as such, were key to Der's writing practices.

A bit later in her final self-assessment, Der explains the importance of her group in the above processes:

My group members helped me in more ways than I can ever explain. I have never really taken the advice of classmates before, but from this class, I learned to not rely on just the feedback from you as the professor, but from those who are in the same boat as me. The trust of colleagues and their advice / opinions on topics has me feel more secure in the fact that criticism can actually be helpful considering the fact that those opinions would be voiced by others as well. Being within the same group every class session helped me feel a role of consistency in the classroom. Each of group member has shown me new method of thinking for reading and writing.

Der finds the ecological place of her group to be most valuable to her learning and to the “consistency” of the course. She defines the importance of this place and the people in it as ones opposed to me, the teacher: “I learned to not rely on just the feedback from you as the professor, but from those who are in the same boat as me.” Even in her metaphor, she visualizes her group as one isolated and different from me, and perhaps others in the same class, and these differences are important for her to see “new method[s] of thinking for reading and writing.” Much like I described Lyna’s group, Der associates her group with a locally diverse place, filled with diverse people who need their differences to help each other for judging processes. And this help concerns not just the pedestrian help with drafts, but help with thinking, with the meta-activities that our assessment processes were designed to encourage.

What I hope is clear is how students migrated assessment processes to their drafting processes, and how that was the typical flow of practices from one location (assessing essays) to another location (drafting essays), from ecological process to part to product, or from process to place to product. In both cases, a different kind of critical consciousness surfaced, each problematizing the student’s existential situation in different ways. For Zach, it was his own white racial *habitus* in the assessment processes of Cristina’s research on the media’s role in racializing criminals and victims. Zach’s assessment processes pushed him to implicate himself in her paper, then upon reflection, our assessment processes of the class helped him also find emotion and passion as critical feelings that aid him as a writer. For Der, it was her process of drafting that she migrated from our stop and write assessment method, a method that allowed her to problematize her own existential language situation through a discussion of studies on Hmong students and an historicizing of her family. Der’s project, not her assessment documents, is the place where she finds critical practices, yet they flow from her assessment processes and group.

The flux of ecological elements shows also how consubstantial they all are. When we talk about the place of a writing group in an assessment ecology as a collection of students, as people, we are simultaneously talking about the way they are also the processes, parts, and products in the ecology. In most cases, students self-consciously used assessment processes in their drafting processes, which became parts and products, and students were able to talk about these elements cogently and in ways that tended to situate them in the specific places that their groups cultivated in the ecology. However seeing assessments and drafts as ecological places tends to be a better way to form critical stances toward language and judgments, ones that have the best opportunity to critique the *habitus* involved in judging writing. Students’ near universal migration of assessment practices to drafting practices was designed into the assessment ecology by making assessment

the central activity and defining it as processes. Assessment was introduced to them in their entrance into the ecology by way of our grading contract negotiation processes; it was reinforced through our rubric-creation processes; it was practiced weekly in their groups; it was reflected upon multiple times; and it was reconsidered one last time in their exit from the assessment ecology.

## EXITING THE ECOLOGY

I wanted my students in some way to be aware of the way they were exiting and taking learning products with them. Instead of asking students to assess their colleagues' portfolios, which would have asked them to look mostly at the past by focusing on ecological parts but not necessarily on themselves as learners, I asked them to assess each other as on-going learners in a final assessment letter addressed to me and their colleagues. Each student had to write a letter that assessed each group member, and one that assessed themselves. All letters were written to the person being assessed and me. In our final conferences during finals week, each student and I read together her colleagues' final assessments of her, her own self-assessment, and mine. Just like all of the other assessment processes in the ecology, these readings constructed a landscape of judgments, a final borderland-place. These letters addressed three evaluative questions, asking for evidence of each: (1) how would you describe your colleague as a learner and writer? (2) What did you learn from your colleague during this semester? (3) What do you think your colleague can still work on, learn, or continue to develop? I asked students to spend at least 30-45 minutes writing each letter, and in their self-assessments, they could write just about items 1 and 3.

The final conference is always my favorite moment in every semester. I get a chance to see my students individually in my office one last time. Sometimes, I admit, I'm a little tearful. I cannot help being attached to my students, their success, and their writing. I've watched them do so much in many cases. At this culminating moment, a moment in which I help them all out of the ecology, I get to tell them in writing and in person the kind of learner they were in my eyes, what I learned from them, and my hopes for them in the future, which is usually a positive and warm conversation, even when some students do not always meet my expectations. Most of all, I get to hear their versions of themselves as learners and their hopes as writers and learners for the future, which often is surprising, humbling, illuminating, and wonderful.

I'm always surprised by a few students, ones I thought didn't buy into the class, or seemed too distant most of the semester, or those whom I thought I'd lost somewhere along the way, or who were enticed by what I consider the wrong product to focus on, a grade. Then final conferences happen, and some-

times, those students surprise me with beautiful articulations of lessons learned and questions lingering. Of course, there are also those students who from the beginning of the course clearly bought into the grading contract, took to every assignment in the spirit that it was asked, and moved through the writing assessment ecology in the ways I'd hoped all students would. Zach was one of those students. His journey wasn't free from danger or problems, but in his attitude and willingness to labor for its own sake, he was ideal.

Zach's end of semester self-assessment letter reveals him to be self-aware of much of the assessment ecology and its intended products. He picks up on all the themes I've discussed in his reflections on the grading contract, the rubric building process, his own drafting processes, his reflections on assessments, and the assessments made on his own writing. Many of the lessons he learns come from his dwelling in the borderland created by his conflicting assessments on his writing, encapsulated in his earlier question, "how I can be so close, but way off at the same time," which I believe amounted to his own coming to critical consciousness about his writing and its judgment as a complex network of people, texts, and *habitus*. Zach opens his final self-assessment document by discussing his initial feelings about the course, and how the contract's focus on labor laid the foundation for his learning:

On that first day as I walked into the class I never felt so uncomfortable and insecure, growing up writing has never been my strongest attribute. By knowing this about myself I would be lying if I couldn't say that I was nervous about what might be expected of me throughout this course. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to achieve the writing level that would be expected and therefore providing me that insecurity. Later as we begin to discuss the contract which stated that I will receive no lower than a B if I provide the labor being asked. This was a very foreign and new idea because like most of us we always just earned our grades through the quality of the work completed. Now by having to not worry as much about writing to please the professor this contract provided me with a whole new outlook on writing. And simply provided me the confidence I have always wanted throughout my educational career. The reason why the contract provided me with the confidence is mostly due to the fact that I can just write and try my best without having to worry about a grade.

In one way, I hear Zach saying he writes with ease by not having to write to please. The contract did that for him. For Zach and most of the other mono-



lingual and multilingual writers in the class, the grading contract opened the writing assessment ecology to them because it changed the way grades operated in the ecology. Even when grades are thought of as a reward, there is still the threat of punishment when one doesn't get the grade. Zach knows this, and it amounts to always "writing to please the professor." For Zach, our contract ecology provided "confidence," a confidence he "always wanted" but could not have because grades were always present in past ecologies, which is significant given the research on self-efficacy and its positive association with students' success in writing courses (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985; Reynolds, 2003; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989). Also interesting because many have discussed the negative association between grades and student performance in writing classes (Bernard-Donals, 1998; Bleich, 1997; Elbow, 1993, 1997). And this final statement of his (the self-assessment letter) occurs after Zach knows what his grade in the course is, so he has nothing to gain by telling me what he thinks I want to hear (he's not trying to please, but he is at ease). In fact, I made a point in class to tell them this, telling them that as long as they showed up for their conference with their assessments written and posted, as usual, it didn't matter what they said. They still met the contract's obligations. I wanted them to be honest and at ease.

When discussing the things he took away from the class, he immediately goes to his assessment practices, which he rearticulates as reading practices:

One major aspect that has helped me grow in my writing is learning how to properly annotate sources. I never did this before and would often find myself rereading sources again and again until I had it almost memorized .... I was able to have a better understanding of the information at hand by using the stop and write method provided by this class. Overall I feel that this aspect alone has helped me in so many ways as a writer, and also has taught me how truly important it is to progress in reading before trying to progress in writing.

Without me saying anything, Zach figures it out and explains the benefit of our assessment processes, the stop and write method, which is not simply an assessment method but a method to read and annotated academic texts, a practice he struggled with in the past. Zach sees as he exits our ecology that the stop and write method wasn't just a way to provide feedback to his peers, but was a reading process, which then became a writing process for him, and now it is learning product. During the semester, I didn't talk to Zach about this method or him using it to write his papers. These lessons he came to on his own organically, yet in a determined way (i.e., I limited the options and pressed him toward their use

and repurposing). Like all writing assessment ecologies, the ecological processes and places determines the ecological products, even though students have choices, arguably more in our assessment ecology. I expected some students to migrate their assessment processes to their drafting processes in some fashion, and most did in a variety of ways, as Der also shows in her practices. Finally, Zach also figures out an important academic behavior: read first, find your position on things, then write.

Near the end of his self-assessment letter, Zach closes the narrative loop that he began by discussing his initial reaction to the class and the contract. This time, his reflecting is framed in terms of what he has come to understand about himself as a writer and communicator in other ecologies. His conclusions are personal and nuanced, in some ways learning the lessons his colleagues had asked of him in Project 2 about considering the personal in his writing:

project one was extremely personal to me do to the fact that it made me look at how I became the person and writer I am today. By grasping a better understanding of my family and my upbringing I was able to make some real connections to why and how I have such weak communication skills. As stated in project one I discovered that the lack of communication between my father and grandfather, and then me has truly rendered me with a far weaker ability to argue and write in this manner [academic manner]. As a result I learned that I must be the one to break this bad habit and not allow my future generation to carry this unfortunate family tradition.

How did he come to this very personal statement about his family and his own ways of communicating? Was it his access to the emotional and passionate ontological aspects of writing he found in our course? Was it his assessment processes that led him to problematize his own existential situation in the writing of others in his group? Is this a statement that suggests Zach is coming to critical consciousness about his own *habitus*, one inherited from his father and grandfather? Regardless of the answers to these questions, our writing assessment ecology provided Zach with a way to see his own history of communication, a way to come to personal insights on his own—not be told of them by some authority. He sees that his own language and ways with words are not simply due to his personality or interests, not arbitrary, but also due to long family histories that are gendered and difficult to break, determined. He sees how language is social and how particular groups, discourse communities, form communication practices, even how they embody them—his grandfather, father, and he are their discourses. And he takes a stance against the dominant practices of his family,

a stance of difference, a counterhegemonic one. I'm not sure I could hope for anything more critical from a student than these kinds of learning products.

In his final self-assessment letter, Barry, a third-year African-American student, who was always a cautious but willing participant in the class, offers an unequivocal positive assessment of our grading contract, but discusses it as an ecology that had people involved in flexible decisions:

The idea of flexibility in this class is something I will remember and attempt to adapt to my lifestyle in the near future. To start off the class was a metaphor for change in my estimation. It was completely different from any sort of class I've ever been involved in. First the students got to pick the requirements for the grading of the course. In my opinion this was great. The teacher was not a tyrant and we actually got to participate in the blueprints for the class, this not only made the students engage in the class but it made us want to engage in the class. I find myself loving this idea. By using this idea, we became a lot more creative as a group, everyone's opinions were heard, everyone felt involved and there wasn't a lot of stress on one person. In the future if I'm ever given the responsibility to have some sort of control over people, I hope to use my power as gracefully as our professor did. I hope to be flexible. This means being open to suggestions like our teacher was. Or being willing to forgive or change codes of agreement. When I note forgiveness, I am specifically thinking about the instance where we decided as a class to give those who were late on assignments a few more free late assignments. From this I learned to not be so rigid. At this moment in my life I can't explain why this was good, but it seems as if forgiveness on some occasions may be an asset.

When students take control of the ecology, or at least their place in the ecology, as Barry and his group (Jane, Gloria, Gideon, and Der) did, they often come to their own lessons. They had, as Barry emphasizes above, power and control of things. They negotiated the terms of their work and its assessment, which encouraged them to "want to engage in the class." The lessons Barry learns I could not have anticipated as well as I did Zach's. Barry describes the class as a "metaphor for change," which I find intriguing, even though I'm not sure what he means by it, but I know it means something to him. He says that "everyone's opinions were heard, everyone felt involved and there wasn't a lot of stress on

one person.” Perhaps the change is in the way the ecology felt to him, the way it felt more engaging, or gave him more stake in more of the decisions being made. But his most intriguing lessons for me have to do with non-writing products, about his own burgeoning *habitus*, the lessons I couldn’t have anticipated. They are about the kind of leader he wants to be, one who isn’t a “tyrant,” but one who uses his power “gracefully.” If there is one thing that assessment does in classrooms and other places in schools, it is manage power. Barry has figured this out and articulated it well.

And then, there is his lessons on forgiving. He isn’t, I think, saying that forgiveness is needed when leading others, but “forgiveness on some occasions,” which is more contingent and nuanced—it seems more rhetorical, more Sophisticated. These lessons, unlike Zach’s, are less about Barry’s writing or reading and more about Barry’s stance in the world as a person, his *habitus*, about how power works, and how forgiveness is needed to exercise power ethically. He reminds me that forgiveness is power enacted. Remember, Barry found that our labors around the rubric made “better adults.” I did not, could not, plan for such products to be produced for Barry in our ecology, but they are good ones, needed ones in our world, ones that also could be argued reveal writing assessment as an ontological act of compassion through the “graceful” use of power and forgiveness.

As mentioned earlier, Ashe often was ambivalent about the class and what she could get from it. She was always a respectful and good student, doing the labors asked of her, but in her reflections and self-assessments, she was also honest about what she learned and what she didn’t understand. In her final self-assessment letter, Ashe again provides similar ambiguous conclusions about her learning journey in the class. As many students did, her letter’s opening begins with a discussion of our grading contract:

I remember reading the class contract for the first time and I noticed how different the grading contract was from other courses I have taken. One aspect of the contract that appealed to me was the fact that we were able to negotiate the grading contract with you as a class. Honestly speaking, I’ve seen my shares of professors who run their class as if students don’t have a life to live other than focusing on academics or how they shouldn’t have taken the course if one unexpected issue occurred in their life. Having this aspect in the contract gave me extra stepping stones if I happen to fall short along the way.

One of the class activity that I found interesting was getting

feedbacks from my colleagues. It was an interesting process because of the different ideas and analysis my colleagues made to help me better understand what they didn't understand or what they felt was missing. Getting feedback from our professor was also interesting. This was one of the confusing feedbacks I received this semester. I've come to think that it's really hard to satisfy anyone with my writing, anything really, because of how critical people are with how they want writing to be delivered. In any case, I hope to continue to write and not get too focused on other's expectations, but just write.

Despite her more measured tone, Ashe noticed similar aspects in our grading contract as Barry and others did. Students "were able to negotiate" it, and like Barry's "forgivingness," she sees our assessment ecology as one that offers her "extra stepping stones" on the terrain, just in case she "[e]ll short along the way." But the lessons she learns from our assessment processes are more ambiguous than most of her peers. This ambiguity stems from the "confusing feedbacks" that she received from me, which I'm assuming was because my assessments seemed so different from her colleagues (they had the binary judgments on them). What she learns, however, is that "it's really hard to satisfy anyone with my writing, anything really, because of how critical people are with how they want writing to be delivered." Yes, a good lesson about audiences and writing, I think. Likely, in her mind, I am the most critical person in the ecology. She seems to be talking directly to me in a gentle and respectful way, perhaps asking me, "why must you be so critical?" She ends on hope, a hope to keep writing, not to "get too focused on other's expectations, but just write." I'd like to read this as a counter-hegemonic hope to disregard future readers like me in her efforts to "just write." But I'd also like to think that Ashe's concerns, similar to Zach's question about his conflicting assessments, his borderland, is Ashe's first steps toward a critical consciousness through a similar struggle in a borderland of assessments on her writing.

Later in her letter, she comes back to her confusion and on-going concerns about her learning in the class:

This journey that we took together was quite a ride; the confusion and frustration that we shared, the exchange of ideas that we commuted, the time we spent listening to each other's advice, and the time and efforts that we dedicated to read each other's work was time consuming, but it has brought us all to understand each other more than an average classmate would. All in all, my colleagues were the first individuals I am

able to see around campus and beckon a hello to, especially as a first time student at Fresno State.

I still think that I don't really understand rhetoric. I understand what it is, but not to the point where I know where to apply it. Sometimes I think that some professors are so critical with how they grade my papers that they ignore the reasoning and purpose that I may have intentionally made that sentence that way or why I put that comma there even if they don't think it is necessary.... I don't know whether my writing is meaningful to others, but it is meaningful to me, that's why I am writing. ...writing down what I feel or think at that moment and those who read this will do whatever they please with it.. take whatever it is that you think is meaningful to you ....you may find something meaningful to you along the way of thinking it as unimportant.

It seems significant to me that Ashe, a shy, introverted, multilingual (Hmong), "first time student at Fresno State," would find through the "time consuming" labors and "confusion and frustration" of the ecology friends she could talk to outside of class. It seems significant for Ashe that she could say, "my colleagues were the first individuals I am able to see around campus and beckon a hello to," and that she would say this in a letter of self-assessment, describing herself as a learner. These, to me, are important products of our writing assessment ecology, and not ones that everyone could or should get when they leave it. They certainly are not part of the formal learning outcomes of the course, but definitely make for warm, inviting, and educative environments.

Equally significant is her return to the frustration of "professors" who are "so critical," which could be another reference to me, but maybe not since she links these readers of her writing to graders. I was clearly not a grader. Ashe's focus on her closing paragraph above is on these readers' lack of empathy for her intentions when she writes: "I may have intentionally made that sentence that way or why I put that comma there even if they don't think it is necessary." This is such a good lesson for any teacher to remember about his students, especially his multilingual students, a lesson that reminds me of Min-Zhan Lu's (Horner & Lu, 1999, pp. 175-177) wonderful example and pedagogy that asked her students to map the contact zones in student writing that initially looked like error, but quickly revealed in deeper discussions possible writer intentions. Perhaps, I did not do this enough in this class when responding to Ashe's writing, a lesson I need to heed more often.

Yet Ashe isn't finished. She shows herself as a stronger woman than her shy,

introverted persona suggests. She concludes strongly about herself as a writer in an elegant and bold fashion, reminiscent of Hellenic Sophistic rhetorical thought: "I don't know whether my writing is meaningful to others, but it is meaningful to me, that's why I am writing....writing down what I feel or think at that moment and those who read this will do whatever they please with it." This isn't despair, at least not as I read it. It seems to come from a sense that writing is an ontological act, an act of being in the world. I see Ashe in this final, passionate passage finding her own way as a writer, determined to keep writing, no matter what others think. The ellipses are hers, and they appear to be places she pauses for emphasis, or asks her reader to pause and think. Despite her own sense that she doesn't understand how to apply rhetoric, I also hear a nascent Sophistic rhetorical philosophy of language in her final words, one akin to Protagoras' human-measure fragment. This is significant since Protagoras' fragment is one about judgment (Inoue, 2007, pp. 45-46). How her writing is assessed by readers, how it is read, is intimately connected to her sense of herself as a writer. I believe our ecology revealed this to her and could be one way to see her problematizing of her existential writing assessment situation. Despite the stumbles and falls in the ecology, Ashe had some stones to step on, ones she knew would be there, and they may have saved her in order that she might keep on writing.

Susan, on the other hand, was less enthusiastic about the writing assessment ecology in her final self-assessment letter, preferring one that offers "structure," and "the ability to write a comprehensible sentence," so that "even a brilliant idea is [not] lost." Susan, I should mention, was a consummate student. She was white, older than most, and had a full-time job and a daughter in college as well. Susan did her work thoroughly, and was always present for her group members. Her assessments were detailed and helpful. Her drafts were clear and exhibited the markers of our local SEAE. Despite her semester-long concern about the way our class was structured, she accepted my invitation to have some faith in our processes, to do the labors asked of her in the spirit asked. I think her willingness to have some faith in our contract and processes helped her see the good products she took from our environment. Susan explains near the end of her letter:

Being older than most of my classmates, I think I unconsciously assume that I have nothing to learn from them and am frequently pleasantly surprised to learn how wrong I am. The feedback I received from my group members was helpful in keeping me on track and motivated. I struggled a lot this semester with motivation and this class, although the source of MUCH stress helped me get back on track. It is refreshing



to spend time with young minds that have goals and opinions and purpose. It gives me hope for the future and keeps me grounded. Thank you for the opportunity to learn something new. Although not a 100% fan of the structure of this class, I can see the benefit of the approach. Personally, it made this particular journey more difficult but it also gave me the opportunity to push myself and learn something about myself in the process.

Susan wasn't converted "100%" by the end of the semester, but because she labored so diligently, cultivated a place with her group members, she still found products worth taking with her as she left the ecology. She learned to listen to her younger student-peers, and through that listening she gained some "hope for the future." Additionally while her journey through our ecology was "more difficult" for her than perhaps a more conventional assessment ecology would have been, ours still offered her "the opportunity to push myself and learn something about myself in the process." While I wanted so much more for Susan—I wanted fireworks and dancing elves, spectacular insights about writing and assessment at her exit—because she gave her colleagues so much, it is not always clear at the end of a semester to anyone what products a student may eventually gain from any writing assessment ecology. Perhaps, Susan (or I) will find in years to come other products from her journey in the course. For now, I must be satisfied that Susan accepted her agency in our ecology, acted upon it, and while more difficult than it could have been for her, she pushed herself and learn something about her herself that she wouldn't have otherwise. And these products were revealed most noticeably for her in the ecological place of her writing group.

In contrast, Gideon comes to very specific insights about the products of the ecology, some expected, others unexpected. When discussing the writing and assessing processes in the class, he makes a distinction between different kinds of discourse in his life now:

I learned the value of looking at the related work by academics whose work normally is scrutinized enough to be mostly objective valuable analysis.

This was not natural for me and it was something of a milestone to find that there isn't as much bias and spin in academic writing as I previously thought. I found that the same holds true with academic papers as is true with news reporting. The stuff that is easiest to get to is usually the worst, but with diligence you find great information. What good academic re-

sources have that good news reporting doesn't have is a more clear explanation of the questions that lead to certain information being presented which then leads to more questions. This sticks with me because until about half way through the semester I watched a lot of network news. My research of the healthcare legislation got me to see popular media for what it is. By and large they are selling conflict, not information. I haven't watched network news since.

In his usual fashion, Gideon coins a nice phrase, "selling conflict," which is a conclusion that comes from another product about rhetoric that he takes from our ecology. He explains that the information which is "easiest to get to is usually the worst," like all the network news he has watched. Additionally, these insights come to him by his seeing how laborious good academic work is, and how that hard labor corresponds to better writing of his own. It is through "diligence" that one finds "great information." Gideon shows a coming to critical consciousness about language in his world, how it is used around him and on him, and how he has understood it next to how he understands it now. And this product for him is another version of assessing, assessing news or the rhetoric in the world around him.

I have to believe that it wasn't just his research and thinking on his project that led him to this stance, but also his assessment labors in the course. All of those labors were ones focused on this kind of discrimination, on asking questions, on seeing questions in texts as important to academic inquiry and important to understanding things in our world. Gideon sees the importance of questions, saying that academic discourse offers "more clear explanation of the questions that lead to certain information being presented which then leads to more questions." For Gideon, good writing practices appear to be hard labor that focuses on asking good questions that lead to more questions. Questions were at the heart of our assessment practices, so in this very practical way, again, the ecology set up writing assessment labors so that they flowed into other elements in the ecology, which ultimately manifested as ecological products.

Gideon continues his reflection by turning to non-writing or indirect writing products, but quickly returns to the theme of questions:

This was one of those courses where it was impossible to blame the instructor for anything. That includes not having a substantial background in the subject at hand. This isn't always the case. When this isn't the case there is almost a built in excuse, or motivation, to put in a certain amount of effort. In either case what you get out is more closely tied to

what you put in. I think I ought to have made more the good fortune of your presence. I also learned to fight becoming jaded in my education experience through the grading rubric discussions and through being asked questions you and my peers more often than I was told to accept answers.

I learned that the rhetoric in messages can hold more information than what's being communicated. While the value of considering rhetoric isn't limited to this the messenger's rhetoric can hint at what values or questions drive them or what they are assuming about you and how to get a message to stick in your head or heart. What answers you think you may have found in that will lead to a wonderful endless stream of questions about the messenger and the message.

Most importantly I learned questions are more important than answers. A good question is hard to answer and what I learned from sharpening a good question to using better sources to attempt to explore my questions rather than find a finish line will serve me well in life.

He learned to “fight becoming jaded” about education “through the grading rubric discussions and through being asked questions.” This sounds like something that may have been a fortunate by-product of the engagement and stake in the assessment ecology that Barry mentioned, who was one of Gideon's group members. And recall, it was Gideon and Der's group that attempted the question-listing method for assessing. Questions perhaps mostly obviously embodied assessment for Gideon's group. But as I argued already, these kinds of products, ones about building student agency and engaging students with questions about grading and judging, which for Gideon were questions that led him away from being jaded by his educational experiences in the past, were determined by how I designed the ecological elements of our writing assessment ecology. Gideon, through his focus on questions as his most enduring product, demonstrates the effectiveness of that design. If there is another way to describe our rubric processes, the rubric itself, and our assessment processes, it is that they all at their core are methods for posing questions, problematizing. To me, this simple but powerful stance is Gideon's coming to a critical consciousness about language and his own stance as a citizen, his own problematizing.

What I have attempted to reveal in Zach's, Barry's, Ashe's, Susan's, and Gideon's exits from our classroom writing assessment ecology is the variety of ecolog-

ical products possible in an assessment ecology that focuses mostly on assessing but uses no grades during the semester as products. Some products are determined, like student agency and the lessons learned from that agency and the deeper engagement in the ecology. Zach and Barry are good examples of such products that students recognized upon their exits. Some products are unexpected, such as Ashe's finding friends to talk to on campus or Susan's seeing value in younger voices. And some products are not so clearly positive, such as Susan's less than "100%" approval of the course, or Ashe's uncertainty about meeting audience's expectations in her writing.

Most students' final self-assessment letters were positive in nature, similar to Zach's and Gideon's. In this closing section, I tried to use final self-assessment letters that were the most representative of the class, while also attempting to close the stories of some of the students I had opened earlier in the chapter. Perhaps the only truly atypical self-assessment letter was Susan's, since it was not fully supportive of our assessment ecology, but this is not a requirement of the course, or these final self-assessments, or even of exiting the ecology with worthwhile products in hand. I am arguing that most students left with a fledgling critical consciousness, a problematizing attitude that came from the central labor of assessing. All the insights, all the ecological products each student discusses, come from our labors as assessors, aided by constant reflections on assessment, the rubrics, and our labors themselves. For my students, the ecology was visible, and this made a difference.

To close, I turn to Jessica's self-assessment letter. Jessica, a monolingual, Latina, who was a third year psychology major and budding musician, was perhaps the most complete in her appreciation of the grading contract, group work, and the writing assessment ecology as a whole. She was a very good student, always seated near the front, always ready for discussions, always prepared. In many ways, I didn't worry much about Jessica during the semester. In part, because she was extraverted enough to ask questions when she had them in class, or after class. She also produced a lot of writing, much like Der, Zach, Jane, and Susan. She had, like most in the class, some difficulties with the dominant academic discourse promoted in the course, but through revision she always improved her drafts. Jessica seemed always to be doing fine. However, I end with Jessica because in some ways, like Zach, she represented the sweet-spot of the class and their exit from the ecology. Jessica's comments represent what most said about themselves as learners and about the products they took away from our ecology, only Jessica's letter personalizes the lessons at every turn, which to me highlights the local diversity of our classroom and shows how any writing assessment ecology always produces locally diverse products from locally diverse people in them that we cannot anticipate.

In Jessica's final self-assessment letter, she begins in typical fashion, discussing

the contract. Her first paragraph, however, moves quickly from the abstraction of grades to herself and her relations in the ecology:

First and foremost I would like to thank you for incorporating this new grading method in my writing, it was something very new to me and I will admit at first I was a bit hesitant but I think it definitely grew on me. I don't know if you remember but the first day that we went around and discussed what we were hoping to take from this class and the grade we wanted etc., I said all I cared about was getting an A, after that you went on to discuss how that was not important and I thought "psh an A not important, right!" but now I see it the way you do. I mean do not get me wrong, I love getting A's and if it is possible I will get it, but I do not look at it the way I did at the beginning of this semester. I think your method gave me a lot more freedom to write, which is something that I want and need when I write. It made me feel secure that my writing was not going to simply be given a letter grade after it was read only once, I had the chance to work on it until I made it into something better than the last, and I got feedback, and I felt very secure. I think it is because I did not have to stress about making it so amazing the first time so that I could get a decent grade, I was comfortable and I knew I was going to get another chance to work on it again. I do not know how to explain it, but to make this short I definitely see what you meant that first day now.

The sense of writing with ease, freedom, and comfort—feeling secure. These were common sentiments in most self-assessment letters. I hear her saying a version of Zach's sentiment: I wrote with ease, not to please. These sentiments embrace writing and assessing as ontological acts, as ways we are in classrooms. Most, like Jessica, link these sentiments to the contract and the larger classroom writing assessment ecology that gave them power. I do not take lightly sentiments like, "it made me feel secure," which Jessica makes twice, as well as saying, "I was comfortable." Feeling secure, while not my number one priority in class, surely for students is vital and necessary for writing. Security came from a lack of grades on drafts—or rather, not punishing drafts. Not only does Jessica figure out why grades are so harmful, why they are an ineffective product in a writing assessment ecology, she also explains the value of our assessment ecology in terms of a "method," a process, which led her to have "more freedom to write," a common comment on the grading contract at Fresno State in first-year writing courses, only it

typically occurs in Hmong student formations (Inoue, 2012a, p. 89).

What I find encouraging about this self-assessment is Jessica's focus on her and her group members' labors of writing, reading, and assessing. It is these labors, not the approvals or positive comments from a teacher, not a grade or even a positive validation from me, that matters most to her. This is more powerful, and I think more productive, than any set of teacher comments on her writing or grades could have been. What matters most is her labor that is focused in a direction that she determines and controls, which in some ways is very similar to Ashe's determined hope to keep writing. In a different way not so like Ashe's, Jessica writes because of the ecology, because of the feedback she got, not in spite of it.

Jessica continues with method and process by describing the way the ecology, through our processes, changed her own processes and relations with others:

This class as a whole changed not only my mindset but also the way I write, and the way I work with others. I hated group work before this class, I felt it was a waste of my time and I dreaded being stuck with people who were irresponsible and did not get the job done in time, and then I'd have to deal with lecturing them and then they end up hating me because I do not know how to keep my mouth shut. But in this class I was able to work great with my group, we got the job done all the time, and sometimes we even talked about stuff that had nothing to do with the class (pretty bad, I know) but I think because we got to know each other that way as well, it helped our understanding of each other, the way we approach things, what is important to us, we learned to respect each other because of that. I cannot say I will enjoy working in a group as I did in this class in another class, but this changed the way I look at group work at least for now. I believe that is the biggest milestone that I was able to accomplish, along with as I stated before in my letter of reflection, the whole idea of me actually taking the time to read someone else's work and give helpful feedback.

The place cultivated by the locally diverse members of her group was important to the success of the assessment processes in the class. And perhaps most interesting, Jessica makes a good argument for the importance of the personal in academe, at least for students writing and reading each other's work: "because we got to know each other that way as well, it helped our understanding of each other, the way we approach things, what is important to us, we learned to respect each other because of that." Respect through the personal, through getting to know the locally diverse

people around you, knowing their *habitus*, this seems an important learning product to take away, one only determined by the processes of assessing in the course. But of course, Jessica doesn't connect our group work with all group work. Like Barry's lesson about forgivingness, Jessica's lessons about group work are contingent and qualified. It may not work out so well in the next class.

Finally, Jessica's following paragraph moves to her dispositions as a writer. I don't think it is typical of most in the class, but my hope is that there is a degree of her enthusiasm for writing before and after the class that could be a product of our writing assessment ecology for more students. That is, I hope that through focusing on the labors of writing, reading, and judging, students not like Jessica, or not like Ashe, who are both determined to keep writing, but students more like Zach or Der who could produce text but may not call themselves writers at heart, or like Dwight, Gloria, and Kyler, who had various struggles with writing, could find a space in which they liked to write, could problematize the judgment of their writing. If writers like them could feel more like Jessica, they may experience writing and reading as ontological acts of judgment that can and should be problematized for their own good. I'm not sure how I could encourage this ecological product, but it seems important to strive for, and it's surely connected to antiracist writing assessment ecologies that feel safe and secure. Jessica reflects:

As a learner I came in to this class thinking I knew what it was going to be about. I thought it would be all about just writing papers, reading stuff and writing a paper on that, grammar, essay structure, boring stuff like that, but it was not like that at all, and I really loved that! I feel that I grew as a learner as well. As where before I hated writing such long papers for a class, this class was different, I was able to choose my own topics, approach it in the way that I wanted to approach it and everything just made me feel so comfortable. I love writing, but I only love writing outside of school, I like to go in depth with things and discuss what is important to me, show empathy, create different scenarios, take the time to let my mind let everything out onto a piece of paper, everything important to me that is, I like to speak to the paper as if it were an actual person listening to me, and in this class I was able to do that. I cannot say I did it in my first project but I definitely did it in my second project. I was able to talk about something that is important to me, which is music. I listen to it, I sing it, I write it, I read it, I breathe it, it has been a part of my life for so long. There are musicians in my family as well, so it is kind



of easier to see that writing about music was important to me and it was easier. I was able to take country music and turn it into something not so personal, which I had no idea I would be able to do, and I still do not think I did such a great job in that area, but definitely better than I thought.

What a profound statement to make: “I love writing, but I only love writing outside of school.” I’ve heard versions of this sentiment from many students in the past. And it’s frustrating, not the student’s statement, but the conditions I know that create such a response by a student, conditions I’m sure are similar if not the same as those that created Gideon’s frustration and jadedness, or Ashe’s ambiguity, or Der’s and Zach’s insecurities. These conditions are created by writing assessment ecologies that are not comfortable or secure, even harmful, and likely racist, despite their intended purposes. They don’t let writing be an act of ease because they are too focused on it being an act to please.

One of the most memorable examples of this sentiment was from an African-American female student, a fifth year student graduating that semester (at a different university), who told me in her reflections how she’d loved keeping a journal, writing poetry and stories in high school, then took a timed writing exam for placement in college, and “failed it,” placing her in study skills courses and not the first year writing course. This experience, as I imagine so many other similar writing assessment ecologies do, quickly and efficiently killed her love for writing—that is what she told. It killed it, clipped it from the vine while it was still blooming. She stop writing immediately, didn’t begin again until five years later in my class. It’s heartbreaking at times to know that this fundamental aspect of the college experience, writing assessment, fucks up so many young students who stop using writing for their own ontological purposes because the assessment ecologies they enter are unfriendly, caustic, uncomfortable, and unsafe. In my past student’s case, it was because that placement ecology was racist. I know this because the first-year writing exemption exam at the same university, one based on the placement exam, never exempted an African-American student writer in its entire time of use.

But for Jessica, what she means by writing is something quite cerebral, creative, organic, and explorative. Writing for Jessica, as I would hope it could be for more of my students, is a labor that allows her to “take the time to let my mind let everything out onto a piece of paper, everything important to me that is, I like to speak to the paper as if it were an actual person listening to me,” which our ecology allowed her to do and rewarded her for it. But she also demonstrates why writing assessment ecologies kill students’ organic love for or enjoyment of the act of writing. As she puts it, “I listen to it, I sing it, I write it, I read it, I

breathe it, it has been a part of my life for so long.” This is a similar description of how my past student who was so destroyed by her placement exam described herself as a writer, a writer who wrote daily in a diary, wrote poems and stories, then took an exam and stopped writing completely. If writing and its assessment are ontological acts, then the words they produce, the labor they expend, and the products they create are *of them*, which means that the writing assessment ecologies that simply rank, rate, grade, or push students around, that give them very little power or agency, that do not allow them to cultivate their own ecological purposes, that do not acknowledge students’ labors as valuable—central even to the ecology—will destroy students’ interest, engagement, and love of writing. This is the real academic tragedy of most writing assessment ecologies. They kill most students’ love of writing and willingness to have others read and discuss it.

There is much to like and say about Jessica’s letter. For this discussion, I’ll conclude by saying that it is a good demonstration of the way locally diverse writing assessment ecologies always transform the intended products of our pedagogies and learning outcomes. Zach, Susan, Ashe, Barry, Gideon, and Jessica demonstrate the ways locally diverse students transform broader determined consequences, and do so because the ecology is visible to them. Locally diverse ecological products are a result of the contingent nature of what and how we teach writing, as much as they are of the locally diverse students and teachers who inhabit and construct the assessment ecology. Chris Gallagher (2012), in fact, argues a very similar point when arguing for writing programs to focus on assessing for “consequences” or “aims,” not for outcomes (p. 47), because “consequences direct our attention to singularity and potentiality” (p. 48). This, I believe, is one of the strengths of using an ecological theory of writing assessment. It assumes the inherent diverse nature of students, their languages, their evolving purposes, their reading and writing processes, their parts or artifacts, the degrees and kind of power exercised (or not), the places on the landscape they construct in order to survive, and the products with which they leave our classes. It also makes visible and dramatizes the interconnected nature of all these elements.

Finally, what I hope I’ve shown through my discussion of my classroom as a writing assessment ecology is, among other things, the ways that every writing classroom is first and foremost a writing assessment ecology that is either racist or antiracist. To be antiracist, it first must be visible to everyone as an ecology. I believe that making more obvious to ourselves and students our own classroom writing assessment ecology as such, even when a teacher has not taken advantage of key opportunities, can still provide ways to offer students the seeds of critical consciousness, ways to problematize their own existential writing assessment situations, ways to become antiracist in their languaging. And as teachers and WPAs, we should be inquiring about these elements when we design, revise,

and assess our pedagogies, and especially when we assess our assessment ecologies (when we validate them). If we do not, it may appear that our students are not learning, or not learning enough, when likely, they are learning what they want to learn, or can learn, or what's important to them, or some hybrid, code-meshed, translingual version of products we (teachers and writing administrators) think our students need or want. In other ways, they may be learning things we, their teachers, cannot possibly learn. Ultimately though, to understand any of the learning in our writing classrooms, and how to assess such learning, we must understand our writing assessment ecologies as borderland-places where local diversities, dominant discourses, and hegemonic structures of norming and racing clash and shock/*choque* one another, flux and move, creating expected and unexpected ecological places, people, and products.