Chapter 52. Multiracial Rhetorics of Representation: Enduring Ecologies and Destabilizing Ideas of Positionality

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Despite how often they appear in our day-to-day lives, most people never had a parent or guardian sit us down to discuss how to fill out the race and ethnicity question on survey forms. I was no different. Why would they discuss it with us? The answer to such a question seems like something children should just pick up on. Like placing block shapes into the correct hole—we somehow just *know* how to categorize ourselves. No need for detailed instruction. Unless you're me. Then it somehow became a production when I took standardized tests in Mr. Fulton's sixth-grade classroom as not only the only Black person but also as the only Asian person in my all-white elementary school in Tampa Bay, Florida (excluding my younger brother in the grade below). Logically, I knew I wasn't the only person in the world with an Asian mother and a Black father; if I was, I thought the newspapers would've interviewed me by now for my singularly rare status. So, while I knew I wasn't the only kid born to two minority parents, I still felt like the only Chinese Jamaican and Black kid in Florida, if not the entire United States. My parents didn't have the language to describe what being a minority-minority multiracial person was like in the early 2000s, and neither did I at age 10.

Filling out the race and ethnicity question on tests became symbolic for how I would walk through the rest of my life, both personally and academically. As a child, I didn't know if I could fill in multiple boxes or if I had to pick one race or ethnicity as my main identity. This caused child-me deep concern. Would I be indicating a parental preference if I picked one race over another? Would I get into trouble for excluding a portion of my racial identity? Would people even take my identities seriously, or would I always be made to feel less than my monoracial peers? One year I thought I solved my identity dilemma and checked only Pacific Islander to encompass what I thought were all my identities. At that time, I didn't know the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea weren't the same thing; there was no way I was equipped to answer the question of my ethnicity when I could barely comprehend its amalgamation myself. I would sometimes resort to asking Mr. Fulton for help on the race question, and it always derived mild confusion. He told me to fill in whatever I felt was correct, but I wouldn't have asked if I felt that anything was correct. Eventually, I learned to fill out the box with the amorphous term "Other" when it was made available. And at that point, it felt right. I could only describe myself as an Othered entity.

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Nowadays, I can articulate that I am both a Black and Chinese Jamaican Writing Studies scholar with some confidence; at least more than I felt as a child. The simple act of acknowledging the combination of my identities and the perceived rift between myself and the majority monoracial world of academia can, at times, soothe the gnawing sensation of never fitting in when I walk into a room. And as I went through life, it became easier to draw upon my identities, to the point that I found myself advertising my identities to showcase that even if I didn't appear the way I thought I should, my writing and my work would appear on my behalf. This came from countless instances of other scholars and even my own students not taking my identities seriously. In my mind, I didn't look like the mental image one conjures when thinking of an Asian woman, nor did I think I acted in a way that signaled that I was "part of the Culture"—a.k.a, a full-fledged member of the Black community. I came to recognize that my mental images and signaling were merely social constructions and generalizations that had more to do with other people's perceptions of what constitutes being either Asian or Black than my lived reality as a multiracial person and as a scholar. Eventually, I came to see my own academic peacocking as tiresome and entirely unhelpful to the work I was doing. So now I work alongside my feeling of Otherness, not for recognition and acceptance but as a site of inquiry and as a resource to navigate the teaching of writing.

As an instructor one standout moment occurred at the beginning of my teaching career when I was working with my students on what effective peer review would look like in our first-year writing classroom. As a fresh graduate student without a collection of student examples to show current-students, I had the students peer-review my own writing masqueraded as a student example. This admittedly occurred out of necessity, but to my credit the topic I had written about—the linguistic practices of a white pop star who purportedly used African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in their lyrics—would hopefully be engaging to my writing class. What I didn't realize at the time was that I had unwittingly placed my classroom into what Mary Louise Pratt calls the contact-zone. At the time, I was a graduate teaching assistant at a Southern R1 university where most of the student population was white and middle-class. I also had the added benefit of having students who were very enthusiastic about pop culture and deeply enmeshed with popular slang. I simply thought they would read this anonymous and hopefully entertaining "student" paper and we would discuss how to give substantial feedback to one's peers.

Our class discussion derailed from what I thought should be the focused and generic feedback students wrote down into a discussion on race, popular media influences, and the ownership of language. Then students began to make presumptions about the author of the paper: most students guessed female or at least assigned female at birth but couldn't discern the race of the author and how that would've influenced their overall argument. One student pointed out that they felt they could give more specific feedback if they knew the author was someone who was an avid AAVE user and more of an authority on the topic as it

related to grammar structures. Another added that the paper spent so much time giving examples of AAVE usage, that when the conclusion wasn't to charge the pop star with using a "blaccent", they were somewhat let down as a reader. They said it felt like the author didn't feel comfortable sticking with their argument. Another rightfully asked that the paper should have given more information on language appropriation, since the author assumed the readers would possess the same information and understanding on the intersections of language and race. These comments alone were a lot to take in as a newly appointed graduate teaching assistant; I just wanted to give them an entertaining student example! At that time, I was unable to consider that despite removing my name from the "student example", I was still very much embedded within my writing as the author—the writing didn't become neutral once I deleted my name from the page.

But my students did what I had asked them to do even if I didn't realize it at the time; they gave specific and focused feedback to the writer. I hadn't even planned to tell my students it was my own paper after they completed the activity, but something became obvious to me after numerous students engaged in asking meaningful questions as readers. The conversion couldn't *just* be about giving feedback. We were talking about peer review. I recognized then that it was an embodied process that couldn't be free of subjectivity. My students taught me that engaging with the writer and their identities would bring more context to readers and increase the clarity of one's arguments. They also taught me that our academic and personal habitus influences the types of arguments we may make, something even I'm not excluded from.

In current iterations of this activity, I've accompanied modeling peer review to my students with a conversation on positionality because they're not separate entities. Of course, I continue to keep the paper anonymous for the first half of the activity because I enjoy seeing their shocked faces when I tell them the paper is mine. After the initial shock is over, I enjoy having a conversation on how who we are as people influences who we are as writers. We talk about giving helpful feedback without being overly critical or tearing someone down. We talk about considering identities other than our own when reading others' writing: especially so for people with varying cultural-racial-sociolinguistic identities. I ask all students to include positionality statements on their in-progress and final drafts, so that their peers and I have context to their own personal and academic habitus. I try to teach that writing on a page may sometimes seem homogenous when its writers are anything but.

As a scholar a standout moment occurred while co-writing a paper with four other graduate students in my department. We wanted to examine the intersections of the normalization of Standard Academic English (SAE) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practices in writing programs. While the experience wasn't frustrating, it became apparent early on that we each came to the project with different ideas based on our research interests. One group member wanted to focus on how linguistic justice is discussed in the broader field of Composition

and Rhetoric, while another wanted to interrogate the history behind standard language ideology in American education. Another co-author wanted to explore how the international/immigrant body navigates being institutionalized in higher education via language assimilation. Meanwhile, I wanted to discuss the importance of cultivating critical language awareness as a writing program administrator for multilingual and multidialectal students. Whenever we discussed organizing the paper, it felt like we all agreed on what scholarship to cite and agreed on the overall sentiment of the paper, but our lines of approaching the topic felt disjointed and misaligned. I wanted to take charge and alleviate our organizational malaise.

What I really wanted was for everyone to agree on my sub-topic, and I was prepared to argue my line of thinking into becoming everyone's shared thinking. It didn't occur to me that I wanted to engage in the same behavior that frustrated me for some long in academia. I was used to engaging with learning and cooperation through a monoracial lens—the lens that surmised everyone had the same background and commonplaces, without any of the contradictions or complexities I typically experienced. The same lens that assumed I would see things from a singular point of view and adhere to a generalized epistemology. My individual work actively sought to dismantle that notion, and there I was ready to ignore it for the sake of my version of cohesion. I was prepared to exclude other epistemologies and subsume my co-authors under my version of reality when I should've taken a note from my own experiences as a minority-minority mixed race person to approach topics from a site of inquiry. So instead of pushing my sub-topic, I did the opposite and suggested writing positionality statements to not only clarify ourselves to one another but also to our future readers as well. Sitting down and discussing why we cared helped me look deeper into my peers' experiences, since I could only vaguely guess as to why each person wanted to approach the topic from their own standpoints. The ensuing revelations were enlightening.

The first co-author described herself as a white, English-speaking American scholar who noticed the disparate treatment between herself and her peers as she moved through higher education. She recognized how she was never asked to prove her language ability on applications or in classes because of her nationality, and that her partner and the international students she worked with didn't receive the same benefit. Her goal was to use her privilege to critique racist and xenophobic language requirements in higher education. The second co-author identified himself as a Chinese-Chamorro multiracial scholar who observed the assimilatory language practices placed upon his own parents, and saw the same practices being replicated in the Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) he taught at. His aim was to intervene in these assimilatory practices to reclaim linguistic identity. The third author identified himself as an international graduate teaching assistant who felt his learning of English was an act of colonization over his identity and wanted to engage in reclaiming linguistic justice for himself and other IGTAs. And the final author was a Hmong-American scholar whose

work involved preserving Hmong cultural practices and stood firmly opposed to assimilatory language practices in the writing classroom. While I knew some of my group member's identities and interests, I wasn't aware of all of them. If we hadn't shared our positionalities and how it brought us to care about the varying intersections of linguistic justice and DEI work, I would have bulldozed my co-authors into my singular vision. Instead, after sharing our statements, we agreed to keep our sections focused on our individual sub-topics but worked on our introduction and conclusion to draw parallels between our shared concerns about SAE and language assimilation practices in higher education. We even included an author's note on intentionally not making the paper's tone cohesive in the effort to not flatten our individual voices. In the end, I think the paper turned out all the better for it.

Nowadays I hold many identities—both the ones I've been wrestling with since childhood and new ones—mainly being the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Assistant director at a different R1 university. The position fulfills my other academic passion after researching racial literacy practices and teaching writing. As a WAC practitioner, I love working with faculty across different departments on how writing assignments can help their students learn and communicate disciplinarily. Throughout my time in this position, I always saw racial literacy and WAC as two separate entities. Yes, they could intersect, but I didn't feel like everyone was ready to have that conversation—in my mind there were more important things to push for, mainly encouraging a culture of writing without the confusing politics of race and linguistic justice. As a scholar, I was making myself fill out the race and ethnicity survey question again on a larger scale. I was trying to make myself pick one race—or in this case, pick one scholarly interest, when I could and should have always embraced both. Furthermore, I care about WAC and racial literacy for similar reasons—I think there is much to learn through difference, whether that's how our racial-ethnic identities were formed or how we write in different disciplines.

Currently, my advisor and my boss, the WAC Director, are both encouraging me to not treat WAC outreach and racial literacy as two separate entities. They can be enmeshed, and they can both coexist in a research question without being seen as fraught or unsightly. The same way it's not weird that the Chinese came to Jamaica and contributed to the island's rich culture that we all know and admire. It might not be talked about often, but it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. My academic pursuits and collaborations do not need to be subject to binary ways of thinking—they're not checkboxes on a survey. There is the option of the Other, and that is okay.

When it comes to acknowledging my positionality as a scholar, it's still a fraught process. There are many contradictions and discoveries I'm making about myself, my place in the field, and how it impacts my interactions with peers and students. It's not something I have entirely figured out, but I'm willing to learn and have others hold a mirror to myself to help me see beyond my nose.

Even if it's confusing, enlightening, and sometimes painful, I will continue to do this reflexive work because it's necessary that I contextualize myself as a teacher, administrator, and a scholar.

All of the work that we do—teaching, mentoring, research, and writing—does not occur in a single, sterile bubble. And despite the historically homogeneity of academia and the field as a whole, the field continues to demonstrate that it's a living organism that continues to adapt and grow to include us in all our multitudes. We just have to be willing to consider our whole selves and continuously, authentically bring that to the table.