

CHAPTER 1.

PROBLEMATIZING GRADING AND THE WHITE *HABITUS* OF THE WRITING CLASSROOM

What school amounts to, then, for White and black kids alike, is a 12-year course in how to be slaves. What else could explain what I see in Freshman Class? They've got that slave mentality; obliging and ingratiating on the surface but hostile and resistant underneath. Like black slaves, students vary in their awareness of what's going on. Some recognize their own put-on for what it is and even let their rebellion break through to the surface now and then. Others—including most of the “good students”—have been more deeply brainwashed. They swallow the bullshit with greedy mouths. They honest-to-God believe in grades, in busy work, in general education requirements. They're pathetically eager to be pushed around. They're like those old grey-headed house-niggers you can still find in the South who don't see what all the fuss is about because Mr. Charlie “treats us real good.”

—Farber, “The Student as Nigger,” p. 3

The problem of assessment in writing classrooms isn't simply a pedagogical one, or one about how to calculate grades, get students to learn, write, and revise their drafts, or listen to feedback. It is a personal problem and an institutional one. It is existential and structural. It is a problem about individuals engaging idiosyncratically with structured language systems that confine and pressure us in uneven power relations, relations that are mediated by our varied racialized, gendered, and linguistic embodiments. So over the years, I have found myself asking questions about my own existential writing assessment situation as a writing teacher. What am I really doing when I read students' papers? What am I doing when I place my words of judgment on them? What am I doing when I grade students' writing? What am I doing when I make present grades in my classroom? I open this chapter with Farber's now classic, and perhaps infamous, sentiment because the problem I began with in my own assessment practices that led to labor-based grading contracts is encapsulated in Farber's text. I've always wanted to unlock the chains around my students' hands and feet. Grades based on my own judgments of quality seemed to be the links in those chains. Farber's argument represents an initial way to see the problematic of judgment in writing classrooms, but it is only where I began.

I did not, however, begin my journey toward labor-based grading contracts by problematizing my judging practices. I started by problematizing grades, which led me to problematize my judgment practices, which then led to problematizing the conditions of White supremacy in my classrooms as an on-going antiracist project. But to understand the real power and critical usefulness of labor-based grading contracts, I need to work backwards a bit, starting with the problematizing of White language supremacy through judgment practices.

This chapter is a representation of my own ongoing exploration of the problematic of judgment in my writing classrooms, which is a problematizing of my own assessment practices as a writing teacher. This problematizing led me to labor-based grading contracts, but it is also a good example of the kind of reflections that I now ask students to do, and that I think are more possible and educative in labor-based grading contract ecologies. This chapter, then, is a way to see my ongoing, Freirean, problem-posing practice as a teacher who tries to continually question his own judging and grading practices, and a demonstration of problematizing judgment that I ask of my students. Its discussion dramatizes the way I came to understand the importance of what I do now, but it is not the story of my coming to labor-based grading contracts. That is Chapter 2. This chapter lays the important groundwork for that chapter, illustrating why such a grading practice builds equity and inclusion in diverse writing classrooms, illustrating why problematizing assessment in writing classrooms is always necessary if we (teachers and students) are trying to do critical work, work that leads to socially just outcomes. This means that this chapter represents various thoughts and questions that continually arise in my ongoing problematizing.

How I came to labor-based grading contracts was a journey about who I am becoming, who my students are becoming, how languaging really becomes in the world, and how that becoming implicates all of us when we judge others' languaging. Like all teachers' practices, my classroom assessment practices say a lot about me, a teacher of color, raised in a poor, single-parent home, and says something about my becoming, about my language becoming, about my teaching becoming.

PROBLEM-POSING AS PRACTICING THROUGH

When I say that in the past I problematized my existential writing assessment situation as a teacher, I do not mean to suggest that I engaged in a formal version of Freire's problem-posing approach to education. As discussed in Freire's *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, problem-posing education moves through a process of listening to the community outside the classroom, identifying problems or issues, then dialoguing with students using codes, or what Ira Shor calls "a concrete

physical representation of a particularly critical issue that has come up during the listening phase” (“Monday Morning” 38). These codes typically are cultural artifacts that embody language, such as media, newspapers, articles, TV shows, movies, plays, etc., that represent many sides of the problem or issue, that reveal the problem as paradoxes. From these codes, students again listen carefully to them in order to describe what they see, hear, and feel, offering their own experiences that relate to those codes, questioning the codes, and of course, moving to articulate things to do as a response (Brown 40-41; Shor, “Monday Morning” 39). This means that problem-posing is an ongoing process. We never leave the problems. We simply *practice through* them and from them constantly.

The natures of the problems posed then are paradoxes, which juxtapose personal choice and agency (choosing and acting in agentive and idiosyncratic ways) within larger structures that make up society, or the social that makes up our histories, context, discourses, and the boundaries within which we all act. I often think of the social structural part of problem-posing paradoxes as Marxian determination as Raymond Williams describes it, or as a “setting of limits” and an “exertion of pressures” (*Marxism* 87). Thus posing problems about my own existential writing assessment situation is articulating paradoxes that complicate how I make judgments, how I read and make meaning of the symbols my students give me and that I give back to them. Freire explains that “[i]n problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 83). Thus problem-posing is seeing the paradoxes in the individual’s relation to the social and structural. Villanueva offers another way to understand this:

Freire juxtaposes two philosophical schools, the existentialism of a Jean-Paul Sartre and the structuralism of a Louis Althusser, to arrive at the heady term of problematizing the existential situation. Simply put, existentialism says that the essences of being human is individual freedom. Structuralism says that there are social, political, and economic systems in place that keep us from changing the way things are, systems that keep us from fully exercising our freedom, systems that we see as “natural.” The way out . . . is through the problematic, by questioning the things we don’t normally question, questioning just how natural the “natural” is. (Villanueva 54)

So to see problem-posing paradoxes is to see through the natural, or to see things that are natural as paradoxes, thus not natural at all, but contrived by determined systems and choices.

Over the years, I've taken this Freirian process of problem-posing and used it as a model for reflecting on how I read student writing, how I produce grades, and what I need to do differently the next semester or quarter as a teacher. I look at my comments and other grading artifacts from my class, and I ask, how natural is grading? How natural are my own judgments and ways of reading? How natural are my standards for good writing or compelling prose? How natural are the things that seem present to me in a student essay, to borrow a concept from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca?³ How natural is it for me to be the only legitimate judge of student writing in my classrooms? Where did these natural things come from? How did my history of languaging naturalize them? Problematizing my own existential writing assessment situation also helps me decide what data I continually gather from my own classes to help me understand what is happening and how it is working, or what the ecology is doing and producing. It's evidence-based reflection, which is at the heart of problem-posing.

Again, I don't claim to have engaged in a formal process of problematizing my own judgments of student writing, instead my process was informal and constant, which I believe is in the spirit of problem-posing education. I try continually to practice through the problematics of my own classrooms' assessment ecologies. The problems I posed, then, dealt exclusively with the nature of judgment and assessment more generally in my classrooms, and eventually, I called on my students to do this same problem-posing in their own judgments in my classes.

Early on, I figured out one key to problem-posing: *the centrality of articulating and coming to terms with paradox and flux*. This isn't just being comfortable with ambiguity. It is being uncomfortable with equally reasonable ideas and positions that each change over time. It is being restless in one's seat as others sit close and around you, getting up and down, moving from position to position, all the while you too move, sit restlessly, and change seats again. So what follows is one representation of my own problem-posing my own existential writing assessment situation. The codes I used, and continue to use, were my rubrics, writing assignments, grading paraphernalia, syllabi, student writing, and my own comments on students' drafts. I will not offer those codes here because this book is not a direct articulation of that twelve- to fifteen-year process, and I don't have permission to share many of those codes in this book. What I offer

3 Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that orators and writers make present certain data and elements in a text by selecting them out of the universe of other data and elements possible (116). I'm suggesting that not only do writers make present particular data and elements through selection but that readers make more or less relevant the data selected by a writer. A writing teacher's White racial habitus is key to making relevant selected details of texts, and finding others less relevant or compelling.

below is a representation of that problem-posing process that attempts to keep to the spirit of my real-life, on-going process.

PROBLEMATIZING A WHITE RACIAL HABITUS

Let us return to Farber's startling words. Hearing him call students "niggers" and claim that the way we educate is brainwashing, or making our students obedient and subservient, should make us question everything we writing teachers tend to hold sacred: collaboration, feedback, our grades, and even things like the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, developed jointly by NCTE, CWWA, and the NWP. Could focusing on habits of mind like curiosity, openness, and engagement be a writing course's way of making slaves of our students if we grade them by *our standards and measures* of what it means to be curious, open, and engaged? Do these habits of mind draw uncritically on White racial habits, thus potentially perpetuating White language supremacy if used as a kind of standard or set of expectations for students' work in classrooms? And how do we know what those noncognitive dimensions of students' learning look like? Might they look different in different students, different groups of students, different contexts and schools, different activities? If so, what use is it to name them as such?

Making slaves is making people do what you want them to do for your purposes. Habits of mind focus on students doing particular things, but for whose purposes? Furthermore, for Farber to call our students the n-word, he—perhaps unknowingly—calls our attention to the racialized ways language functions and marks all of us, and how a White racial *habitus* functions in our classroom assessment and grading systems as a slave-making mechanism. What he doesn't say clearly is that all the ways we judge language, even by well-intentioned teachers, are almost always racist and slave-making, almost always White supremacist.

Farber was writing in a particular historical moment of civil rights movements and Vietnam war protests, which made this consenting to systemic evil more conspicuous and perhaps exigent, although I see systemic evil no less exigent today. But Farber calls attention to racialized bodies. And while it isn't clear to me that Farber himself could see the paradox in the Black body as a metaphor for all students and their subject positions in schools, his use of it can reveal this to us. It is a rich metaphor for my own problematizing of grading and assessment in my classrooms.

Historically, the slave body is a paradoxical image. The Black slave body has been historically situated as a commodity with monetary value. It was valuable in this way because it was a source of free labor to the White body. However, this ironically meant that the Black slave body lacked value as a free and independent

person, or as a citizen. And yet, the Black slave body is often represented as a valuable source of maternal love and companionship, protection, and friendship toward White slave owners. There is no better account of how such racist ideas worked themselves out in U.S. history than Ibram X. Kendi's, *Stamped from The Beginning*, in particular his sections on Cotton Mather and Thomas Jefferson. In our world, Farber's gesturing toward the Black slave body calls forth White bodies and their value. This is what Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe call "haunting Whiteness" in the discourses and logics used in contemporary popular culture, education, and social media, and it helps form part of the problematic of classroom writing assessment that I always felt uncomfortable with, even as a student myself, even when I didn't have words for this problem, or understood it as a problematic. Using the image of the Black, slave body as the normative student, because it has a haunting Whiteness behind it that reveals it in relief, is a problematic itself because it's paradoxical.

Drawing on Freud's analysis of the ego, Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe explain that Whiteness is an identification that functions "as a ghost, a haunting, that feeds on invisibility, nostalgia, and melancholy" (5). This haunting of Whiteness in discourses, then, is enthymematic, "wherein major or minor premises are omitted so that hearers may supply them" (6). Stuart Hall identified a similar kind of rhetorical dynamic, saying that race was a "floating signifier," meaning that references to race are never static or permanent. They float and can mean different things to different people, but audiences or readers must supply that meaning. In Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe's view, Whiteness is also oxymoronic, meaning it need not be situated in a binary of good and bad, White and Black. Instead, they suggest hearing Whiteness as an "oxymoron, as a rhetorical figure in which two apparently opposing terms or ideas are presented in conjunction with one another in order to generate new meanings," which then "invites us to identify multiple contradictions in discursive uses of Whiteness" (7). Thus the nature of Whiteness is to float. It can mean what people want it to mean. Most important, seeing Whiteness often means seeing paradox.

But Whiteness is not the same as a White racial *habitus* that I've argued constructs racist writing assessments (*Antiracist*). And it may be more accurate to see Farber's use of the Black body and its haunting Whiteness as a Black *habitus* that needs a White *habitus*. For Bourdieu, *habitus* are "systems of durable, transposable, dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, *Logic* 53; San Juan 52). These dispositions are marked on the body as well as in ways of acting and performing. In another place (Inoue, *Antiracist*), I adapt this concept to talk about racial *habitus* more generally in judgment practices, which are structured dispositions associated with local racial formations that, in our society, are placed into hierarchies, like the hierarchy of

the White free body standing above the Black slave body. Racial *habitus* function through and mark three social dimensions that affect and shape communication and thinking: linguistic/discursive, material/bodily, and performative (Inoue, *Antiracist* 42). Yet, no matter who you are or what your standards are, if you've made it to the position of writing teacher today, you have taken on a White racial *habitus*, even if only partially. You use this *habitus* to judge the language performances of students. It is *natural* to use it to grade student writing, but is it fair or educative for all students?

Now, I'm not speaking of White skin privilege when I say all teachers use a White racial *habitus* to judge writing. The racial formation one most identifies with or that others identify someone with is not primarily what I'm meaning here, yet it is also not beside the point. We language through and with our bodies, so our bodies mediate our languaging, and thus our various *habitus*, and mediate how that languaging is read, heard, and judged by others. This is why *habitus* references the linguistic, bodily, and performative, even when we only get text to read. We never just read a student's paper. We read students through their papers.

White racial *habitus*, then, are sets of durable, flexible, and often invisible (or naturalized) dispositions to language that are informed by a haunting Whiteness (Inoue, *Antiracist* 47-51). While realizing that Whiteness is not monolithic, floating, most White racial *habitus* invoke at least six traits that the literature on Whiteness identify in various ways as strong, recurring patterns. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's phenomenological approach to Whiteness and Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, these traits may also be thought of as habits of Whiteness, which are in short:

- an unseen, naturalized, orientation to the world;
- hyperindividualism;
- a stance of neutrality, objectivity, and apoliticality;
- an individualized, rational, controlled self;
- a focus on rule-governed, contractual relationships;
- a focus on clarity, order, and control⁴

In Chapter 7, I offer a fuller discussion of these six habits of Whiteness, which I also call habits of White Discourse. I'll also say more about habits later in this chapter. For judgments or discourse to embody a White racial *habitus*, the

4 The literature on Whiteness that I draw on to assemble these six habits of Whiteness that can be seen and heard in White racial *habitus* is discussed most directly in Myser (6-7), Inoue (*Antiracist* 48-49; "Friday Plenary" 147), and Ahmed (153-54, 156). Other sources on Whiteness that offer insight into Whiteness as *habitus* are Barnett, Fannon, Brookhiser, Ratcliffe, and the introduction to Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe.

expression need not demonstrate all six of the above habits. And seeing Whiteness in your own *habitus* does not necessarily mean that you are deploying that *habitus* toward White supremacist ends, but it likely means that White supremacy is an outcome in the classroom assessment ecology you participate in because of its presence if you don't explicitly do something to counter that hegemonic.

Therefore, White language supremacy is a condition and outcome, not simply a trait, and is structured in assessment ecologies in such a way as to function simultaneously as an ideal and as the norm. Needless to say, White language supremacy is the structural condition that determines the standards by which literacy practices are judged in most if not all writing classrooms. As socially conscious and ethically minded writing teachers, we may care deeply about not perpetuating White supremacy, and about not being racist in our judgments and grading practices, but the paradox in educational systems is that those systems that we have to work in set limits and exert pressure on us to grade, and to grade by quality, quality that is determined by White racial *habitus* that structure our disciplines and social settings, which hold the most economic and cultural power.

As a problematic, Farber's student as Black slave with a haunting White *habitus* becomes a set of contradictions when we apply the metaphor to our classrooms. These contradictions are generated when we remember that the Black slave body is always next to the White free body. To name a Black slave as the normative student is to invoke a haunting free, agentive, White body as the ideal student too. Farber's purpose is to jolt us into change, perhaps revolutionary change, in schools and writing classrooms. But hearing the haunting of a White body, of the ideal, free-thinking, White student who is not a Black slave, who has no agency, is equally troubling. Hearing the problematic of the free White body as the ideal student preserves tension in how we understand the material realities of diverse students and teachers in writing classrooms. We interpellate ourselves in such places and we ask students to interpellate themselves.⁵ These interpellations cause the contradictions. We want our students to be free and agentive, but those concepts are soaked in a White history, and associated with White bodies. No one wants to be a slave. Everyone wants to be free. Does this mean being White is preferable to being Black?

I think the trope of student as Black slave satiates many writing teachers'

5 Louis Althusser defines "interpellation" as a "hail" or a call to the individual that makes the individual a subject. He explains: "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (173). Furthermore, "individuals are always-already subjects" (175-76) since we are born into a world of ideology with rituals before us that constitute the subject as a category of existence, which calls us and we recognize. Interpellation, then, is a way to see habits as always-already a part of the rituals that hail concrete subjects out of discourses and practices—or the process of hailing in assessment ecologies.

psychological attraction to be altruistic and helpful (including my own). To say that we should see our students as slaves in order to free them is to be the liberator, the revolutionary, the savior, the Michelle Pfeiffer who frees her students of color from their educational bondage and into a liberated life. It is to interpellate ourselves as a Christ-figure. And that's pretty White in all kinds of ways. But what are we freeing our students toward? Why must *we* free *them*? What if it is *us* who are in bondage? What if we, educators and teachers, turned around one day, the scales dropping from our eyes, and realized that we were slaves to rubrics and the giving of grades, of the need to rank ourselves and our students, slaves to disciplinary ways of reading and valuing language that kept us from seeing a wider, more colorful, deeper felt world of languages and logics? Is not this shift of paradigms possible? Are we not creative enough, generous enough, compassionate enough to try on such a paradigm? Farber is saying that students, Black, or White, or Latinx, or Asian, or indigenious, identify themselves as Black bodies, as slaves, as "niggers," and should identify themselves differently, thus they should behave and act differently in schools—they should not take on a Black slave *habitus*. They should be free. On the other hand, teachers must stop constructing classrooms that make slaves of students, and on one very real level, Farber is correct. We should stop making students into slaves.

But let's attend more carefully to the problematic, attend to its haunting Whiteness. What is so bad about being a Black body, about being a slave, about the Black slave *habitus* that we have already constructed for it? What is so natural about slaves as bad, as lacking agency and freedom? Why must the Black body be cast in such a negative way? Why can't our logics and metaphors be illogics and anti-metaphors? Why stick to the binary, a binary system that Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe ask us to avoid or put aside when making meaning out of Whiteness as a trope in society? From an historical and ethical point of view, it is the Black body, the slave, who has more ethical and admirable ground to stand on. Black slaves in the US endured the evils and unfairness of slavery, without giving up, and in fact, thrived in subtle and subversive ways. Black bodies, former slaves, accomplished many things despite the yoke of past slavery, Jim and Jane Crow, segregation, police brutality, unjust and unfair legal systems, and more. It was Black bodies that led us toward more equitable civil rights in the 1960s, even if not fully realized and rolled back in the following decades. And paradoxically, these Black agents were reacting to White supremacist systems and White racists, all of which cultivated them, provided the contexts to be agentive and ethical.

If this story of writing teachers as slaveholders and students as slaves were a Hollywood movie, the protagonist would be the Black slave (or should be), not the White teacher. This point is debatable, however, since Hollywood loves to

recenter antiracist narratives and histories onto White bodies, especially White female bodies. Nevertheless, the moral center of this fictitious film would rest within the slave student. I'm not condoning or romanticizing slavery or being a slave, but I'm also not plugging my ears to the softer, haunting sounds that Farber's analogy invokes. It is not a clean binary historically, and his metaphor works from a haunting White *habitus* that also haunts all writing classrooms in our standards, rubrics, reading, and grading practices, which is part of Farber's point.

As productive as it is, I'm also uneasy with Farber's trope because I feel some things in U.S. history are sacred. Slavery and the n-word are two of them. What I mean is that White students don't get to be called slaves just because they are structurally determined in an educational system of grading. There are degrees to privilege and oppression. The real life and death consequences were and still are much worse for Black Americans. And the n-word is a part of those consequences. Invoking the Black slave body, calling all students the n-word, begins to erase the very real historical legacy of actual Black slaves and their descendants, all of whom live with the consequences of that legacy. Using the trope for all students denies this history and its legacy (ironically while calling upon it to make the point) and underplays the physical, economic, and emotional harm done to Black slaves and their descendants that simply cannot be reproduced in White or other populations.

In *PHD to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*, Elaine Richardson offers her response as a student in a class in which Farber's essay was assigned.⁶ She offers a cogent way to understand Farber's use of the n-word as a metaphor for students. After hearing from the class and teacher about Farber's argument, Richardson thinks to herself, "*How in the hell can the author prove that these Whitebread students have been niggered? This is a joke*" (202; emphasis in original). This comes near the end of her book that traces Richardson's own struggles with drugs and prostitution in poor, Black communities that have unique, structural antecedents that exist mainly in Black communities, and that come from White supremacist systems. What she gets at so concisely is that one cannot claim that the relatively privileged, White students at any college or university are "niggered," that the material, bodily, and structural conditions are not remotely the same. Our racial *habitus* matter. The "joke" here is that the analogy is harmful because it erases the very real structural problems of being Black in America.

Part of these problems is the way the writing of Black students like Richardson are judged and graded through their own *habitus*, which she ends this passage on. She gets a "B-" on her paper and an accusation that she plagiarized the paper (203). While she doesn't say it, I see her implying a contrast: "You want

6 I thank Virginia Schwarz for reminding me of this passage in Richardson's excellent book.

to see how a student can be a nigger, she's asking? Look at me (Richardson). Look how I get treated, look how my *habitus* dictates the assessment ecology I must live in. I write a great paper and get accused of a crime. That's being a nigger." So the problematic of classroom writing assessment, centered on the Black slave body that I'm discussing here is not only paradoxical in a number of ways, but dangerous to explore in particular directions, without a conscious acknowledgement of where our metaphors come from, the haunting White *habitus* informing their logics, and the very different consequences they have for different racialized bodies and languages in our classrooms.

As a way to form another oxymoronic juxtaposition to Farber, one that brings more nuance to the problematizing of judgment and grading, consider Dead Prez's "They School," a song that is critical of the school to prison pipeline in Black, urban communities, critical of what is taught in schools and how it's taught. The song embodies in African-American English a problematic through the stance and voice of the Black body speaking about Black schools in the US. The song's orientation and political agenda too are a problematic because stick man (Khnum Muata Ibomu) and M-1 (Mutulu Olugbala) embody the voices of liberation through, even because of, oppressive, racist educational systems. The oppressive system helped make them more critical, even while oppressing them. They refuse to let the system create slaves out of them, yet they are a consequence of the system. Their reaction to it is to be revolutionary, to resist. These paradoxes are heard in the song:

School is like a 12 step brainwash camp
They make you think if you drop out you ain't got a chance
To advance in life, they try to make you pull your pants up
Students fight the teachers and get took away in handcuffs
And if that wasn't enough, then they expel y'all
Your peoples understand it but to them, you a failure
Observation and participation, my favorite teachers
When they beat us in the head with them books, it don't
reach us
Whether you break dance or rock suede Adidas
Or be in the bathroom with your clique, smokin reefer
Then you know they math class ain't important 'less you
addin up cash
In multiples, unemployment ain't rewardin
They may as well teach us extortion

You either get paid or locked up, the principal is like a warden
In a four-year sentence, mad niggas never finish
But that doesn't mean I couldn't be a doctor or a dentist

And the song ends with a direct call to its listeners:

Cuz for real, a mind is a terrible thing to waste
And all y'all high class niggas with y'all nose up
Cuz we droppin this shit on this joint, fuck y'all
We gon speak for ourselves
Knowhatimsayin? Cuz see the schools ain't teachin us nothin
They ain't teachin us nothin but how to be slaves and hard
workers
For White people to build up they shit
Make they businesses successful while it's exploitin us
Knowhatimsayin? And they ain't teachin us nothin related to
Solv'n our own problems, knowhatimsayin?
Ain't teachin us how to get crack out the ghetto
They ain't teachin us how to stop the police from murdering
us
And brutalizing us, they ain't teachin us how to get our rent
paid
Knowhatimsayin? They ain't teachin our families how to
interact
Better with each other, knowhatimsayin? They just teachin us
How to build they shit up, knowhatimsayin? That's why my
niggas
Got a problem with this shit, that's why niggas be droppin
out that
Shit cuz it don't relate, you go to school the fuckin police
Searchin you you walkin in your shit like this a military com-
pound
Knowhatimsayin? So school don't even relate to us
Until we have some shit where we control the fuckin school
system
Where we reflect how we gon solve our own problems

Them niggas ain't gon relate to school, shit that just how it is
Knowhatimsayin? And I love education, knowhatimsayin?
But if education ain't elevatin me, then you knowhatimsayin
it ain't
Takin me where I need to go on some bullshit, then fuck
education
Knowhatimsayin? At least they shit, matter of fact my nigga
this whole school system can suck my dick, BEEYOTCH!!

The paradoxes of a Black body in an educational system that doesn't value that body is evident throughout the song, yet Dead Prez construct a compelling value to their own Black bodies despite this system. In the first stanza above, the first line identifies the school system as a "12 step brainwash camp," yet the speakers made it out, brains unwashed. They understand the educational system as "they schools," not "my schools," hence the line in the concluding stanza about controlling their own schools in order to "solve our own problems." By the end of the first stanza, the speaker proclaims the "four-year sentence" of "they schools" that "mad niggas never finish," "[b]ut that doesn't mean I [or mad niggas] couldn't be a doctor or a dentist." A paradox based at its core on the judgment of students: flunked out students who could be doctors or dentists. They may not have finished but they ain't dumb.

And assessment of racialized students is equally present in the song. When the Black male voice says, "Your peoples understand it but to them, you a failure," he invokes a binary: Black students struggling against the brainwashing, White system, struggling against the educational system that means to control them, control how they act and dress—control their *habitus*—but unsuccessfully. It's a system that judges, that interpellates them already as failures that Dead Prez recognize and name. The subject is the Black body embodying agency, making his own decisions despite the consequences and because of the system. Part of their agency comes from resisting the unjust educational system they grew up in. Juxtaposed to being judged as failures is "[o]bservation and participation, my favorite teachers." So despite, and even because of, the oppressive White system that determines failure for the Black body, the Black male voices of stic.man and M-1 declare their own agency and choice to learn against or in spite of it through observing and participating.

What "They School" says about the college writing classroom is directly related to the *habitus* there and not there. Consider the paradoxes of the Black, male subject position and African-American English in any writing course. Who is a "mad nigga" who don't finish in a writing classroom? What he look like? What a

mad nigga sound like in that classroom or in writing? Do a mad nigga's voice get graded favorably? The figure of the mad nigga begs the question: how you gonna liberate someone if you don't let em pose they own problems in they own words?

Many years ago, I realized I didn't actually have any empirical sense of whose writing I was using as examples in my classrooms on a week to week basis, or over the course of a semester. I always kept careful records of whose writing I used, so I did some research and math from my own record-keeping. What I found out was that despite my own good intentions, despite my own subject position as a teacher of color, despite my constant striving to enact antiracist pedagogies, the vast majority of examples I used in writing classrooms came from White female students—almost exclusively. Part of this problem was structurally determined in the schools I taught at, where most of the English majors and students were women. But it ain't like I didn't have students of color in my classrooms, or White men. I was simply choosing examples that best helped me teach the class, that offered the best examples of the kind of writing I wanted to see all my students emulate. What I didn't see clearly was that I was also articulating the learning of the course and the ideal student as White female *habitus*. I was an agent of the White language supremacy I was fighting against. How could my students be liberated if most of them were tacitly being told to take on a different *habitus* just to do the work of the course? How could they pose their own problems if I wasn't allowing them to use their only languages? How could my classroom be anything by “They classroom” to my students of color?

I hear another paradox in Dead Prez's song, one that connects the existential to the structural. At least in a U.S. context, but likely globally, a Black masculinity carries a haunting White subjectivity behind it, the kind that Farber assumes in his account of the preferred classroom student-agent. For Dead Prez, this haunting Whiteness is not in a student but is the educational system. And it ain't haunting at all. They name it and criticize it. Unlike Farber's slave student, these mad niggas see clearly the problem with the system. Dead Prez changes the ideal student to be Black and in the struggle for material, economic, and psychological freedom, a struggle that is the problematic of education for Black students. They reveal the structural determination in schools and how students are judged by so-called merit.

This paradox is then formed by juxtaposing the determination of White standards and systems next to the Black male body as “mad nigga,” performed and referenced in the song. In the second stanza above, which is the closing to the song, it turns away from critique and toward possible systemic solutions, which calls forth the haunting White systems that Black students struggle through. The stanza is spoken like a sermon or monologue, and incorporates cues to a call and response rhetorical strategy (antiphony) that is common in African-American rhetoric (Sale

41; Smitherman, *Talking* 104) through the use of the repeated, “knowhatimsayin,” which begs for an audience response, even if only private. Unlike the slave student in Farber’s code, the mad nigga subjectivity embodied in this code, which is aural and textual, flips the term “nigga,” or signifies on it, changing it to something more positive, another common African-American rhetorical practice (Gates; Smalls; Smitherman, *Black Talk*). Through the defiant “mad nigga” who critiques the White system, acts against it, and proposes alternative goals for schools, ones more socially-oriented and locally beneficial to Black communities, the song conjures a Black subject quite opposed to the Black slave body that Farber uses.

Mad niggas aren’t slaves who don’t see their own bondage, or are subservient. They are defiant Black bodies that critique and speak out against the problems in their schools and classrooms on their own terms and propose alternatives that center schools on Black communities and their needs, yet they do not succeed in the White system or society very easily. Their speech and their bodies do not have enough power to make such changes easily. And they don’t wish to succeed in a White hegemonic state. In fact, it could be argued that the song sows seeds for destroying much of that White hegemonic state.

The second stanza above begins with the individual problem (“Cuz for real, a mind is a terrible thing to waste”). The existential problem is the individual mind that is wasted in a White supremacist educational system that denies the Black body, and thus denies the Black mind. The paradox is that if you succeed, if you allow yourself to be brainwashed, then you become “high class niggas with y’all nose up.” You give up your Black madness for Whiteness, a Whiteness that Dead Prez knows is not fully attainable. It’s more than simply selling out. It’s giving up. Their response is to say, “fuck y’all/ We gon speak for ourselves.” One could read this as writing off those Black students who decide to take on White racial *habitus*, to become educated in the White supremacist system. One might also see this as a juvenile language game: “fuck you, I don’t care about you.” But I think it is more. The “we” who Dead Prez speak for is the Black community at large, a communal we, but the problem begins with the individual mind wasted. The problematic here, as I hear and feel it, is in the way the individual Black mind and body are connected to the larger Black community. These lines acknowledge a contradiction in an individual’s choice to succeed in a White supremacist educational system that tends to destroy Black communities. Succeeding in a White supremacist system becomes a purely individualistic and selfish act. And those who choose to go along ignore the consubstantial nature of their roots to their community. They just looking to get theirs, not uplift the community.⁷

7 This same pattern of individual education equating to uplifting the Black community can be seen in Rhea Estelle Lathan’s account of African-American literacy activism in places like the Sea Islands Citizenship School in the 1950s and ’60s.

Of course, this too is a paradox. In a contemporary classroom, where a standard is dictated out of necessity by a teacher, who statistically speaking is White and embodies a White racial *habitus*, mad niggas don't never succeed. They ain't gonna make no grades, and thus don't usually have the power to uplift their communities. They may not always be shamed for using the kind of African-American English that Dead Prez use, or be punished for using antiphony or signifying practices, but with these habits, with a Black racial *habitus*, comes what Smitherman calls a "Black Cultural Sensibility" ("God" 832). She is drawing on Imamu Amiri Baraka. Baraka explains the idea: "[i]t means a quality of existence, of actual physical disposition perhaps in its manifestation as a tone and rhythm by which people live, most often in response to common modes of thought best enforced by some factor of environmental emotion that is exact and specific" (Baraka 172; qtd. in Smitherman, "God" 833). So "fuck y'all/ We gon speak for ourselves" could be a way to express the communal Black stance of a mad nigga who isn't thinking (just) about himself, who is careless about his own safety, yet more careful about his community's well-being. Then again, mastering the dominant White code could be a way to gain some power in order to make changes in the White hegemonic system. Gotta have power and position in the system to make changes in it. Yet again, once one takes on a White racial *habitus*, it's your *habitus*, and becomes part of your values and dispositions, which makes finding fault in it harder to see and feel. Lots of shit you found fault with earlier becomes natural and good when it's our habits you're looking at. Our *habitus* are paradoxically natural to us. Thus, mad niggas be mad niggas because they were already hailed as "niggers" by White society and its haunting White racial *habitus*, but took agentic, care(ful)less action to become mad niggas.

Initially, fifteen or so years ago, I wanted to "liberate" my students from slavish ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions to language, much like Farber seems to suggest. I wanted them to be free of the narrow, White, middle-class standards that all the writing classrooms they'd experienced before mine held against them, much like those that Dead Prez might critique, but I see now that this urge to liberate my students from their assumptions about language, to liberate their bodies by liberating their languaging, is really a problematic itself, a paradox. It ain't all right, but it ain't all wrong either. It is an uncomfortable network of propositions in which I still dwell out of necessity. White language supremacy is the conditions in which we all live—it is the system of education that interpellates us as writing teachers—no matter our pedagogies. The paradoxes are in the nature and context of my own judgments of my students' writing and what I think those judgments can do for them in antiracist ecologies that work in larger racist ecologies. My judgments too often invoke a haunting White *habitus* when placed on my students' writing. I ain't White, but I embody

White *habitus*. My judgments might be heard as an oxymoronic juxtaposition, as an echo chamber that offers the sounds of the world from a different location on the landscape, a location that many of my students do not share with me because we do not share the same racialized and gendered *habitus*. It ain't bad to give them that perspective, a part brown, part White male interpellated subject position.

But how can I not use the mostly hegemonic *habitus* I embody when I read anything without it turning to White language supremacy, when White supremacy is the condition in which I can even succeed as a teacher or scholar? We all need biases in order to read. We only have our biases to read from, to make meaning from. How can I not use my own racialized *habitus*, that draws on Whiteness itself, in my reading practice of students' writing, in grading? How can I share the good, powerful things that this White racial *habitus* has given me, the insights and access, without reinscribing the supremacy of a White racial *habitus*? I sit, restless, with these questions always, ready to get up and move. I know it's not just about good intentions. I want to be a mad nigga too, but I know that is not fully possible either.

Despite Dead Prez's critique of schooling, to be colonized brings with it some benefits of the colonizer, if you can struggle through the colonizing. And yet, there are losses with those gains: cultural, linguistic, emotional. The educational system has been good to me, which makes me feel at times guilty for any success I might claim. Again, more paradoxes. These same educational conditions provided for me as a teacher of color who grew up in the same kind of Black ghettos (North Las Vegas) that Dead Prez speak of, that Richardson struggled through. This is part of my problematic, contradictions in my own languaging and how it was judged in school that has placed me in the position I'm in today, a colonizing position that tries to decolonize by my own colonizing judgments, which I think is more good than bad, yet still a bit bad. There are no answers to the problematic, just more paradoxes within paradoxes, more restless sitting and moving, more practicing through.

DETERMINED PROBLEMATICS OF DOCILE BODIES

A more equivocal way to hear my problematic developed from Farber and Dead Prez may be heard through Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Let me start with a claim that is similar to Farber's claim and comes out of Foucault's critique of docile bodies: Our classroom assessment ecologies discipline our students in determined ways, ways that are constrained yet still have some degree of choice in them. So to say classroom assessment spaces discipline our students by constraining and pressuring them is to say that our assessment ecologies, which

loosely is everything we do around student writing, is a determined docile-making ecological place.

Foucault describes several aspects of disciplining and punishing that make docile bodies. Allow me to translate Foucault's discussion from prisons, factories, and hospitals to schools, and to the typical college writing classroom's assessment ecology. To create a determined docile-making place, the teacher must employ the "art of distributions," which amounts to constructing enclosures for bodies (141), then partitioning those enclosures so that each student may have their own designated place (143). Desks, individual papers or assignments, rubrics, scoring guides, writing groups, and grades all do this enclosing and partitioning. But these enclosures and partitions also need to be useful, functional (143-44)—that is, there is a larger, organizational reason for having students write individual papers or receive individual grades, or sit in "their own desks," or have a teacher rank their drafts by so-called quality that is further partitioned by points or numbers or letters, each meaning something different. These enclosures, or spaces, are useful to the ecology, teacher, even the students. It could be to get grades for certification, or achieve a high GPA, or graduate, or know how well you are doing, or acquire a degree, or manage a large classroom, or keep track of the progress of many students, or even to learn. These enclosures categorize students and their performances out of constructed necessity, another oxymoron. Educational institutions require such enclosures and partitioning, so it is necessary to some degree for teachers and students, yet that institutional necessity is not natural but constructed, since there are other ways to teach and learn, perhaps without enclosures or partitions. Most important, these enclosures are determined by the educational system and so seem natural.

Years ago, it was critical for me to ask of my own assessment ecologies: What enclosures do I make? What enclosures does my institution make for me to use? What purposes does my school have for these enclosures? What are their purposes in my classroom's assessment ecology? How do they actually function (a much harder question to answer)? What are their effects on my students and their learning? What are their effects on me as a teacher or reader? How might my classroom do without some or all of them and still achieve our goals?

Consider grades, since that is what this book is about. Grades are a kind of enclosure. They create partitions around groups of students. A-students, B-students, C-students, etc., or types of performances, A-papers, B-papers. These grades are hierarchical in nature, and create hierarchical partitions. Because we have to grade things, because at least part of our purposes for reading student writing is to put grades on that writing or give the student a final course grade at some point, grades orient us toward students and the products of their work, papers, assignments, etc. It even orients us toward their labor, what it takes to

produce that paper, even though we usually do not see or have access to much of that labor. We think in terms of grades. This is a high B-paper. That is an average C-paper. But these grades are based on judgments that we make from our own determined and naturalized *habitus*. These grade-enclosures interpellate students and teachers in subtle ways, over time, as a student acquires more and more of them on their writing. How productive is this orientation and interpellating? What other, perhaps more productive, orientations might there be for us or our students?

This enclosing and the creation of hierarchies that hurt students, particularly students of color and multilingual students, was the first thing I felt, saw, and heard in my own schooling, then in my teaching. Making and working in hierarchical partitions is what we do in writing classrooms mostly. It's all Aristotle did, partition rhetoric. At every turn, we academics and teachers are confronted with a world of partitions. It seems so natural, and the necessity of this partitioning seems reasonable. Shouldn't each student know how well they are doing, where they land in the hierarchy? Shouldn't students know what kind of writer they are, how close or far away from the passing grade they may be? I don't think these are easy questions to answer, but they are reasonable. They may only seem easy to answer because we all grew up in graded classrooms. It's all most of us know—it seems so natural to think in hierarchical terms. It comes natural to us. I'm reminded of my years practicing Kung Fu (Gung Fu) in Las Vegas as a teenager, and then later in college. There were no grades, just practicing. The evaluations that my sensei or sifu⁸ gave were verbal and kinesthetic. "Watch me. Do it this way." He would demonstrate, then, "you try now." As I would try a new movement or form, my sifu would literally place his hand on my arm, waist, or leg, move it where it should go, turning my body in the proper directions. "Feel that? That is how it should feel. Try again." When I was ready to move on, there were no grades or exams, sifu simply said, "okay, you are ready. Time to move on to a new form." There were no grade-partitions, yet the system has worked for centuries to teach and learn. Half the dojos I was a part of didn't even have belt systems, a set of hierarchical enclosures that discipline students.

I'm sure it is not surprising to anyone what I am saying, that conventional classroom assessment systems are hierarchical and categorical, that students move around in the provided spaces to some degree, and each space or enclosure means something in the system, and they interpellate those who move or circulate in the system. We know this is at least unnecessary, perhaps even harmful to many students, as others before me have highlighted, particularly around grades

8 Sensei is the Japanese honorific word for teacher, and is the typical way to address one's teacher in Karate and other Japanese forms of martial arts. Sifu is the Cantonese version of the word used in Chinese forms of Kung Fu, and means master.

(Bleich; Elbow “Grading,” “Ranking,” “Taking,” Kohn). So why do we keep doing this? We must see some benefit in this kind of ecology. In some ways, I want to believe that many of us who see this problem but do nothing about it, do so much the way Dead Prez speak of mad niggas. We are careless, or is it careful? Perhaps we feel enclosures are still more necessary than detrimental. Perhaps we think our students need them more than those enclosures hurt them. But why? What evidence do we actually have for such acquiescence in our own schools?

Foucault would say that students “may traverse [these intervals or spaces] one after the other” (145-46). He called this mobility of bodies, this disciplining through interchangeable spaces, as “an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (146). It is a reward system that creates individuals to be rewarded through their ability to move around in the system from one partition to the next, one enclosure to the next. It encourages consent on an individual basis in the system by holding out some carrot or reward down the road, which is actualized and reinforced by mobility in the system, the moving from space to space by individuals. Moving up or around in the educational system of the classroom means you are getting somewhere, so you consent as long as you keep getting somewhere. The most used carrot is a grade. The important thing is that the big carrot is down the road. The ultimate reward is never quite now. That’s what keeps folks in their place, consenting and docile. That’s what allows students of color to be internally colonized. *They* may have all failed but *I* will be the exception!

This may be what fools many writing teachers into thinking it’s okay to grade in their classrooms, that grading is still helping *their* students even if grading otherwise is bad. Grading is bad, but it ain’t bad when I do it. My students are moving in the system, getting better, achieving higher grades, grades we invented, grades I determined. In a U.S. context, this art of rank feeds on the myth of meritocracy, the bootstraps myth. As long as we are moving from space to space in the ecology, there is a feeling of upward mobility, a feeling that we are making it on our own, a feeling of development and growth, by our own merits and talent. But of course, a student does not get a grade by themselves. It requires a grader to give them a grade, no matter how that grade is determined. Let us not fool ourselves. A grade is equal parts student *habitus*, written artifact, and grader *habitus* translated into judgment practices.

Through the use of enclosures and rewards, our classroom assessment ecologies alienate students from each other and potentially larger, more rewarding purposes for their mutual labors in schools. Partitioning turns education into a purely private enterprise, a selfish act of grade accumulation. Ain’t no room

for mad niggas with larger, socially conscious and communal purposes. The contradictions between the individual and the communal, between educating the individual and educating for the community, is no better seen than in the contradictions between Farber's vision and Dead Prez's, the difference between slaves as paradox and mad niggas as paradox.

But there is more to this disciplining, more to the making of a determined, docile-making assessment ecology. Foucault says that often part of disciplining is controlling bodily activities by establishing, imposing, and regulating cycles, rhythms, and processes that bodies or students do (149). This includes imposing particular gestures and bodily movements, and imposing "the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body" (152). The gestures that we impose on students often are linguistic, but really we are talking about movements of bodies more than we're talking about static drafts, despite the fact that it is the drafts that get graded. This is why I tend to use the noun, "language," as a verb. *Languaging* is gesturing which comes from dispositions to do particular actions, all of which are a part of our *habitus*. Our languaging is a product of our racial *habitus*, among other social dimensions. And dialectically, the racial *habitus* we share influence us.

This aspect of Foucauldian disciplining of bodies is what makes judging the Black *habitus* so fraught with problems in conventional writing assessment ecologies and classrooms. Our bodies are already integrated into larger social systems that are racialized and hierarchized. The languaging that these bodies do gets associated with those bodies. Patterns emerge. Language becomes racialized. Language becomes—is always becoming—*habitus*. And so our languaging is, of course, discursive, material or bodily, and performative in nature, and these dimensions of it are the places we draw on to judge and measure language performances in classrooms. Others have already discussed the ways language is racialized and are judged tacitly in racial terms (Greenfield; Inoue, "Friday Plenary," *Antiracist*; Lippi-Green; Villanueva, "Blind"), so I'll leave this connection between our socially constructed and historically evolving notions of race and racial formations to language at this, but emphasize the centrality of a White racial *habitus* in judgment in all writing classrooms through its use as both the norm and the ideal. Anything else begins to be mad, abnormal, less than ideal.

The discipline of Rhetoric and Composition actually already works from the assumption that writing classrooms discipline bodies, making them into our own images, our own White *habitus*. The terms now in fashion actually make this bodily assumption much more present and come from the same Old French and Latin roots that *habitus* does. Our major organizations and conferences have turned to thinking about "habits of mind," which are more flexible and transferable for unknown, future contexts of languaging. Habits of mind share more

with noncognitive domains than the cognitive ones we've come to measure in writing assessments of all types, which tend to be thought of as "direct evidence" of learning in writing classrooms, but are really only the products of that learning (I'll say more about noncognitive dimensions and assessing effectiveness of labor-based grading systems in Chapter 7). Learning is the activity, the doing, a verb. Essays and portfolios are the products of that learning, a noun.⁹ We never have full access to students' learning, only to the products of that learning. This is another reason we should be skeptical of grades that purport to say something about students' learning. They aren't the learning, and they only can be an indirect measure of the products of the practices of learning, not that actual learning, which is bodily and experiential.

There is more to consider in habits of mind in writing classrooms though. All the early English references to "habit" given in the OED, which begins as early as the thirteenth century, show the word to mean clothing, apparel, and monastic attire, and the original Latin and Old French origins of the word tend to mean: to have or hold oneself, as in an outward demeanor or appearance to others ("habit"). Habits are material, marking our bodies for others to read. In its original usage, habits, imply a reader of those habits, or one who beholds those habits. Thus any description of those habits, like our evaluations of student writing, likely says more about the beholder than what is being beheld or read. Even if we think of habits as unconscious, repetitive practices, habits are still embodied. People do habits. Texts do not. And yet, people also embody their habits. Habits, like Bourdieu's *habitus*, are marked on the body, and mark the body, and they are durable, transposable dispositions, meaning they resist erasure and change or evolve with the changing ecologies in which that body circulates. Like ourselves and language itself, our *habitus* is always becoming. The paradox here is that if all languaging is becoming, then it is both evolving and beautiful.

This is not simply a play on words. I mean it in the way V. N. Volosinov describes the historical nature of language systems and utterances. He's responding to Saussure's ideas about *langue* and *parole*, that there's a distinction between a language system and various concrete, idiosyncratic utterances that deviate from that system. And this debate about whether there can be a language system that is outside of individual utterances, an ideal or even a norm, is exactly at the center of grading practices and the role of judgment in writing classrooms. Volosinov describes language as "a ceaseless flow of becoming," arguing that there is no *langue*, only *parole*, only the historically idiosyncratic that continually evolves (66). *Habitus* also are historically situated and evolve over time and in contexts.

9 It may also be useful to note that the word "essay" comes from the French word (essayer), "to try," which Michel de Montaigne helped coin.

There is no static or universal—no *langue*—no single White racial *habitus*, only historically situated, idiosyncratic instantiations. *Habitus*, including White racial *habitus*, is plural and continually evolving.

Second, I mean that *habitus* are becoming in the sense that the word also means being comely, or “fair, beautiful, nice.” Becoming and comely have the same roots in the Old English *cýme* / *cýmlic* (come), and in Middle High German, *komlich* / *komenlich*, as well as early modern Dutch *komlick* / *komelick* (“comely”) (*OED Online*). The point is, to be comely, or to become, invokes a way to appreciate all *habitus* in material ways on their own terms. Comely originally referred mostly to physical beauty or delicateness. Our writing classrooms might see and strive to understand the ways that, for instance, Dead Prez’ African-American English does what it does so compactly and elegantly, on its own terms. As an historically situated, idiosyncratic Black *habitus*, mad niggas be becoming. If all *habitus* are becoming, then it is difficult to justify a preferred *habitus* in writing classrooms for any other reason than the one given in the CCCC’s Statement on Students’ Right to Their Own Language, which refers to a CCCC’s Executive Committee resolution passed in 1972:

Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. (Committee on CCCC Language Statement 2-3)

What I am suggesting here is not just that all *habitus* are becoming, but that writing teachers’ and programs’ inability to value all *habitus*—and it is an *inability* to do so—because of the way their assessment ecologies are structured, amount to one social group exerting its dominance over others. It is, as the resolution states, immoral. It is racist. It is White supremacist. It is how writing teachers perpetuate White language supremacy. To put this another way, because we live in a White-dominant society, and our dominant Englishes have historical White racial roots in White racial formations in the US, coming from White racial *habitus*, not to value all *habitus*, or to punish students for not demonstrating a dominant one, is to enact racist writing assessments, White supremacist ones. Our ways of valuing and assessing must reflect how all languaging from all *habitus* are always already becoming. They are historically evolving and discursively, bodily, and performatively comely. And yet, this need to assess diverse student writing in equitable ways, socially just ways, is a paradox itself, a problematic. Shall we all go back to some past “babel” time where we speak differently, unable to communicate fully with

each other? Are there no linguistic dispositions that we can agree upon to use for particular academic or professional reasons?

For good reasons, the field generally has dispensed with thinking that the products of writing processes are the most important things to focus on in writing classrooms and perhaps even in our feedback or evaluation practices; however, I'd argue we haven't addressed how to do that second part yet. The rest of this book attempts one way to do it. Nevertheless, we now focus on habits of mind, dispositions to language in particular ways that are marked on the body, in how we perform language, and in texts. But just because our field has reoriented itself to habits of mind, and perhaps our pedagogies too, it doesn't mean we've reoriented our assessment ecologies. This requires a continual problematizing of them. Our disciplinary values appear to be concerned with students' bodies, their movements, their performing, their languaging, their *habitus*. We are in the business of making *habitus*, and all *habitus* are racialized, gendered, sexed, classed, among other socially constructed dimensions, but many of us don't want to talk about these things with how we judge words.

And so, disciplining students in writing classrooms means not only that we create enclosures, allow movement between those enclosures, but by focusing on habits of mind (and body), focusing on the *habitus* of our students, we also define the best movements or articulations of the body in motion, how to write, how to read, how to engage in polite and respectful conversation in class, how to revise a draft, how to say things, even how to pronounce words. This means we assess languaging, all of it, mind, body, emotions, performance. But do we all have ways to make visible and judge fairly the movement of bodies in the practices of learning to write? Our work as writing teachers ain't never been just about words.

This leads us to Foucault's final element in the creation of docile bodies, the principle of "exhaustive use," or "non-idleness." Foucault describes it this way: "Discipline . . . arranges a positive economy; it poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces" (154). This is the maximizing of bodily labor and movements, of being efficient and productive, of learning all you can, that is, learning as much as you can, getting the most of the class. Can you hear the metaphors of quantity and efficiency? We might see this disciplining through the ways teachers expect particular purposes from revisions and other labors in and outside of class, or what we expect as products of such labors, or how much change in a draft we expect from revisions because, well, we talked about that in our feedback.

Often we expect students to “use their time wisely,” and “productively,” which Richard Brookhiser identifies as traits of WASPness that are inherited from Benjamin Franklin.¹⁰ Brookhiser calls them “industry” (17) and “usefulness” (19). Surely, these assumptions that build the discourses of judgment in our assessment ecologies, that can easily be heard in the habits of mind articulated in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, are not all bad, but are they all good when used to grade students? Should they be used to rank students, create partitions and enclosures, to interpellate? How natural should they be in our classrooms’ assessment ecologies? Should we not problematize them with students?

But how do we create the right conditions to examine the very *habitus* and languages we use to communicate in ecologies that will produce grades and potentially use the very habits we want to investigate as expectations for quality in the class? How do we evaluate students’ critiques on the very dimensions of literacy we hold them to? Do we force our movements on students and attempt to extract the most from their time and labors? Is this unfair to some students? Does it privilege others? And how do we, then, promote all students’ rights to their own languages in our assessment ecologies when one standard is often demanded of our classrooms, or when others outside our classrooms do not understand the racism in such a single standard? How can a writing assessment ecology not have a standard by which we judge student writing? Does it mean that we have no standards—is this “mad nigga” thinking? Does it mean that we must return to the fall of Babel, to a world filled only with uneasy and contentious cacophonies, and not soothing, euphonious harmonies? Or is that a lie, a myth we have told ourselves too, made natural so that we can move on, do our jobs, feel good about them, and sleep at night.

STILL PRACTICING THROUGH

The trouble in much problematizing of writing assessment and judgment is that we can fool ourselves into thinking that we are so damned altruistic. That it is just about being fair. We certainly do not teach writing for the money, and we don’t want to be unfair—but *being fair* and *not being unfair* ain’t the same thing. In writing assessment ecologies, these two positions work from different

10 The term “WASP” has come to mean “White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant” by the middle of the twentieth century. When describing the group of people who have controlled the political, economic, and cultural centers of the US, the political scientist Andrew Hacker defined WASP this way in 1952: “they are white, they are Anglo-Saxon in origin, and they are Protestant (and disproportionately Episcopalian). To their Waspishness should be added the tendency to be located on the Eastern seaboard or around San Francisco, to be prep school and Ivy League educated, and to be possessed of inherited wealth” (1011).

assumptions about the default settings of the institution, discipline, language values, and society. If a writing teacher designs their assessment ecologies by trying to be fair to all their students, they likely will assume that treating everyone the same, judging them by the same standard, is fair. Fairness means everyone has access to the system in the same way, but everyone does not have access to the system in the same way. Everyone is not located in the system in the same place.

So the position that I find preferable is to design assessment ecologies by *trying not to be unfair*, which works from a different assumption: that the systems we circulate in, like our classrooms, departments, schools, disciplines, and society are not inherently fair to everyone. They are structured in such a way as to provide more access and opportunities to some students—in my assessment work, I focus on racialized intersectional patterns of unfairness—mostly determined by luck of birth. This is what grading schemes do that use judgments of quality, quality that is determined by a racialized group in power, a White, middle-class group, a group who often says they are establishing rules, guidelines, and standards for the good of everyone, altruistically, but turns out, those rules and standards benefit mostly people like them. Our society and schools may be pluralistic and diverse, but the systems and structures that organize them do not account well for a plurality of languages or a diversity of embodied students.

As the creators of determined docile-making assessment ecologies, we teachers can feel okay about any student who can't seem to make it, who never seems to produce drafts that meet our standards, even after our kind and generous feedback, even after multiple drafts. We constrain the ecology by creating enclosures and partitions, expecting and pressuring students to respond and revise, to move through and up categories, grades, spaces—to move their bodies in particular ways, the enticements of future carrots. So many hoops to jump through for the purposes of jumping through more hoops. We tell them they have “earned” their grades. We did not simply “give” them those grades. And yet, we hold critiques of the myth of meritocracy, a myth that supports our uses of the art of rank, movement in systems that is perhaps more circular than upward. Furthermore, we buy into theories of rhetoric and discourse that say language and meaning-making are social, while paradoxically (or is it contradictorily) tell our students, you earned that grade. You had all the means available. But the judging wasn't just about available means but about pressures and limits, about *habitus* and social formations we do not fully control, or choose, about White racial hegemony and White supremacist systems of education, which even good intentioned writing teachers are beholden to.

And even if we are not using grades on drafts most or all of the time, if we use judgments of quality at all to determine success, then there is a standard,

and that standard will be used to determine students' final course grades, so the spaces and enclosures created are ones based on a haunting White *habitus*. We *de facto* stop giving students their rights to their own languages. No matter how delayed our grades are, the ghosts of White racial *habitus* are still present and felt by everyone in the ecology. We expect students to improve, to move through the system of enclosures, to be upwardly mobile. We expect their bodies to be moving outside of our classrooms for our purposes, to go to the library, to sit and read or write, maybe even in very particular ways—and these movements of the body, we know, can be good for our students. And so we punish with grades, or tacitly threaten students with them, all the while rationalizing to ourselves and them that it is all on them. It is all for their own good. They choose to do particular things in drafts and between classes. The choice to work long, or longer, or even longer, is theirs—and in one sense, it *is* theirs. It is their habits, not ours, we want them to mind, but really the ideal habits are not theirs but our habits we mind. And yet, the problematic here is that our students are in our classes to learn new things, new languaging. How else will they learn but to take on different habits, to become new *habitus*? This is the nature of becoming! Isn't being held to foreign standards how any *habitus* becomes something else? And isn't that why our students come to us?

Our students have to take responsibility, don't they? It's not our fault students fail, even though the way the ecology is set up is our fault. The system of enclosures is our fault. The disciplining and punishing is our fault. The determining of students' choice to be docile in particular ways is our fault. The way we treat mad niggas is our fault. Meanwhile, we writing teachers, can feel self-righteous about how well we treat and think of our students. And some, mostly White students, or those who have taken on a White racial *habitus* in their minds-bodies, will even say, "I don't know what all the fuss is about. Teacher treats me real good." And it may be true. And there's the paradox, the problem posed about determined, docile-making writing assessment ecologies. We aren't bad people. Our work is not evil work. We want our students to do good work. We do have some agency in the determined school systems that place limits and pressures on all of us. I sure feel like I have.

I could not write this book without some internal colonization. Then again, I ain't totally colonized. The paradox is also in the slave/docile mentality. Students don't judge for themselves or by their own measures, but depend on teachers to do so. We do know some things about language and rhetoric, and more than our students. That's why we are teaching, and why they are learning. We are in the best position to grade writing, right? Yet that seems like a natural position we should question. What is so natural about teachers grading students' writing? Why can't they do that too? Wouldn't they learn more through that process of

judging, partitioning, and exercising the art of rank? But then, are we not simply shovelling the burden of the art of rank onto our students? Are they prepared to do that work ethically? Then again, are we formally prepared to do it?

We should not conflate the art of rank or our own creations of hierarchical enclosures and partitions in assessment ecologies with the methods for learning or learning itself. For many multilingual students and students of color, docile-making assessment ecologies lead to determined failure and feeling bad about oneself and one's writing, even when in a few instances, it may lead to so-called success in postsecondary writing. Enclosures create such feelings and psychologies that are wholly unnecessary for learning. The carrot of success, which is a euphemism for taking on a White racial *habitus*, keeps us from realizing just how internally colonized by grades and the hegemonic White racial *habitus* we all are. Drawing on Burke, Villanueva puts this dynamic rightly when explaining the new racism, the racism without explicitly mentioning race: "synecdoche is representation . . . synecdoche carries it all. No more talk of races; no more talk of religions, or nationalities, or languages, while talking about all of them, mixing them up in the most unsettling ways" (9). While Villanueva is speaking about writing center work, seeing the judgment of student writing in classrooms as a racialized practice that depends on White racial *habitus*, which function through the trope of synecdoche, is instructive and paradoxical. Our students are in our classrooms to learn rhetorical practices that will help them as citizens who must language in the world. They need us for this work. It is also a critical learning of a White racial *habitus*, or maybe a learning of ways to be mad against it and the institutional systems that reproduce White language privilege.