

Preview Edition:
An Invitation to a Too-Long Postponed: Race and Composition
 by Octavio Pimentel

“We can’t buy into the silencing of what we know is still racism, even if the lynchings are now few, even if we know that Jim Crow is now Manuel Labor, even if we know that the jails represent an exclusionary political economy.”
(Victor Villanueva 18)

Walking into a Starbucks is often a unique experience for me because people often stare at me with one of those smiles that one gets from a clown: it appears to be a smile, but is it really? Through their smiles I can see them saying “He is one of the good ones. He made it like us. He can afford a \$6.00 cup of coffee.” But am I really like them? Probably not! I am a first generation, Spanish-speaking Mexican, who has a PhD. Even perhaps more dramatic is that I speak my native Spanish tongue fluently and tend to practice it as often as I can: especially in public venues.

I realize this perspective/practice is unique and therefore it is sad to me that my beautiful Spanish language is almost non-existent in communal spaces, and even further scarier is that its existence is often ignored. For instance, having lived in Texas since 2005, where many Mexicans live, I rarely see "Spanish" written in a public venue. In fact, I don't think I have ever heard Mexican music playing at a Macy's, Nordstrom's, or any other large department store—the exception being Jose Feliciano's "I Want to Wish You a Merry Christmas". Unfortunately that is the practice of almost all public spaces, which simply follow the White European American (WEA) rhetoric that is produced within the United States of America.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss various ways in which WEA ideologies exist within public spaces like universities and specifically in writing classes, and how professors often unwittingly produce WEA practices within these environments. I end the

essay by providing several ideas that may facilitate writing professors in making their writing classes more culturally friendly.

As discussed above, WEA ideologies ubiquitously appear in public spaces, but are especially prevalent in spaces like universities, where WEA cultural practices have a long history of normalcy. For example, although not often stated, university classes are heavily guided by WEA ideologies. Students who do not neatly fit into these cultural practices often find it difficult to navigate through the university system. A bilingual student, for example, who wants to take language classes, rarely finds classes that address or build upon his/her cultural and linguistic practices. If this student wants to take a class to further develop their “minority language,” his or her only option is to take the class as a foreign language class. The problem with this is that the language is not a foreign language for this student. As such, the curricular and pedagogical approach in a foreign language class would unlikely address the language development needs of a bilingual student. Rather, the curricular and pedagogical approaches are geared toward the WEA student, a student who in most cases is at the beginning stages of learning a foreign language. This WEA approach in the foreign language classroom, unfortunately, “dumbs” down the curriculum for a student who is already fluent in that language. Thus, even in a foreign language class, possibly the only class that will build upon native language development is also WEA centered.

This same student is treated differently, but similarly deficient when he/she takes classes in his/her other language—the English language. In English classes, unlike the foreign language approach, fluency in English is a given. If students lack English fluency skills, speak or write in a hybrid code (also known as code-switching), or speak or write

in a non-standard English dialect, they are often remedialized, graded down, or referred out to receive additional help--often to the university's writing center.

College students are made aware of the university's unspoken WEA ideologies in a variety of ways and often before their first day of class on a college campus. Students who take the SAT or ACT as part of their college entrance requirements, which is inclusive of most college students, get their first glance at what some of the cultural and language expectations are on a college campus. These college entrance exams quantify WEA competencies, which becomes clear in the fact that WEA students perform better on these exams than their culturally and linguistically different peers. Once students are on university campuses, they can take note of how knowledge is divided along WEA and ethnic lines, with WEA knowledge representing the unspoken university norm. If college curricula are considered ethnic in origin, it is often classified as non-traditional and labeled accordingly. These class listings might be labeled in Chicano Studies, African American History, or Multicultural Education. Classes that do not indicate a non-traditional norm, most often work from an unstated WEA norm. This division of curricula is often evident in various departments including Departments of English. For example, literature classes that are ethnic in origin are most often labeled as such (e.g., Chicano, African American, or Indian literature). Courses that do not carry these designations are often, without indication, WEA centered (e.g., early American Literature, Modern Novel).

While there is little argument that ethnic literatures and thus, ethnic writing is produced and published, as evidenced by the ethnic literature courses most Departments of English offer, Departments of English generally do not make any solid attempts to

teach ethnic writing. Thus, while literature courses can be clearly divided along ethnic and WEA lines, writing courses are not divided as such. Rather, writing courses, whether they are technical writing, first year writing, or advanced composition, work from an unstated WEA standard. Within this limited framework, we do not see classes called Chicano, African American, Indian writing, bilingual, or multicultural writing. As a result of this limitation, students who write from a non-WEA framework are often identified as poor writers.

In most writing classrooms, if students do not speak or write WEA Standard English, they are commonly labeled as "different" and even more commonly as "deficient." This negative labeling of non-standard English speakers is not something new, and it has been going on for decades. For example, in an interview I conducted with Carlota Cardenas Dwyer, she recounted how in the 1970s UT Austin placed many Mexican Americans in "foreign" first year composition classes, which assumed that all Mexican Americans were ESL students. These assumptions alone classify these students as "foreign" and address them as developmental writers. Homer and Trimbur further elaborate on the immigrant stereotypes that are commonly placed on students who are enrolled in basic writing courses. They write, "Basic writers have commonly been described as immigrants and foreigners to the academy, those whose right to be there is suspect and whose presence is often seen as a threat to the culture, economy and physical environment of the academy" (609).

In my attempt to make writing classrooms more inclusive of students of color and/or bilingual students, I believe writing instructors and researchers need to examine how, not if, issues of race and language are being handled in writing classrooms.

Smitherman has written on this as well and claim that "...[it is time] somehow [to] actively engage in the process of language attitude change..." (372).

The idea of making writing classrooms more culturally and linguistically inclusive is not new. Carmen Kynard claims that the field of composition was open to the idea of different dialects and languages even before NCTE's 1974 statement of Student Rights to Their Own Language (SRTOL): "Before SRTOL, the fields of composition-rhetoric and linguistics advocated the legitimacy of all language variation alongside the social inadequacy of non-standardized forms" (361). Geneva Smitherman in "CCCC's Role in the Struggle for Language Rights," adds that "although the field was sensitive to the various language and dialects, the turning point was the 1968 murder of Martin Luther King, which occurred during the CCCC Annual Convention in Minneapolis. This loss of innocence was most dynamically captured by Ernece Kelly's speech, "Murder of the American Dream," (Smitherman 355), which "stands as the central rhetorical and metaphorical connection to critical black students protests" (Kynard 361). Kynard states that this speech marks the beginning of the NCTE Black Caucus, and therefore, the origins of a Black Power sensibility in NCTE. After Kelly's speech, it became apparent that the black students and the professors were engaged in a praxis that was much different than the WEA compositionists felt were most important in the field.

Officially though in 1974 the *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* journal published the resolution on language that was adopted by members of the College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) in April 1974. In March of 1972, a draft of the language resolution statement was presented to the Executive Committee by "a special adhoc committee" that was asked to prepare a statement on students' dialects.

After some revisions and amendments, it was adopted by the Executive Committee at its meeting in 1972. It reads:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. 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. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its culture and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (Special Issue of *CCC*, Fall, 1974, Vol. XXV.)

With this statement, the CCCC executive committee declared their dedication to recognize and legitimize diverse dialects. As stated earlier, this practice was already being used by many compositionists before (especially those of color). However, the fact that a national organization was advocating/supporting this controversial topic made it more official and powerful.

While this statement is encouraging, it is unlikely that this pledge to language preservation and integrity is carried out in the day-to-day practices of writing classrooms. From many different conversations with compositionists, I rarely hear a statement such as, “When I teach composition, I want to make sure the students retain their rights to their own languages.” Rather, most say, the “goal of my composition classroom is to teach my students how to write a clear and effective essay.” What is left unstated in a statement like this is that these clear and effective essays are to be written in orthodox English and follow WEA conventions of writing that are upheld by a university doctrine. With the normalized WEA rhetoric, one must question whether the students' right to their own

language statement is simply another example of “ideology of literacy” that Prendergast so elegantly addresses in *Literacy and Racial Justice*, and perhaps not really meant to be followed?

Picture this: Quetzin, an 18-year old college freshman wants to write about Mexican stereotypes in the media. Having lived in a Mexican household where Spanish was his primary language, his media experiences were not those produced by CBS, ABC, or FOX. His media experiences are located in AZTECA, TELEMUNDO, and UNIVISION. Furthermore, since he grew up in a Spanish dominant household, he feels that some of his ideas/expressions are best explained in Spanish, so he uses Spanish throughout his paper to exemplify his thoughts, which is a clear form of his dialect. For example, Quetzin’s thesis statement might read, “This paper addresses the *Cantiflas* characterization of many *Xicanos* on television. In this example, Quetzin chooses the word *Cantiflas* and not the English equivalent “silly, dumb down character,” because *Cantiflas* takes on another meaning in Spanish, primarily referring to the historical acknowledgment of Mexican cinema history. He also uses the term “Xicano” with an “X” to further show his political awareness and unification with the “Xicano Movement”.

In theory, and according to the CCC language statement, composition instructors should advocate for students like Quetzin to build upon his cultural knowledge and language practices, thereby encouraging him to write in his own dialect. In other words, composition instructors should encourage students like Quetzin, to use in his case, Spanish (the student’s second language) or a hybrid code that incorporates both English and the second language as a resource for writing, a resource that can only make his writing stronger and clearer for the ideas he wants to express. Unfortunately, this type of

language and cultural inclusion is rarely encouraged in student writing. In fact, several researchers have argued that compositionists work to the detriment of minority success and identity in writing classrooms. In 1971 Marian Musgrave wrote an article “Failing Minority Students: Class, Caste, and Racial Bias in American Colleges,” which focused on how composition courses often disabled minority students. By acknowledging the racist practices that were commonly produced in composition classrooms, she urged composition instructors to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge in Black English, challenging compositionists to draw on and build upon this resource.

Musgrave’s challenge was perhaps a representation of the time--part of the civil rights and student equity rhetoric. It is unfortunate that thirty-seven years later the composition field has lost this momentum concerning equity in writing classrooms. Currently, very few composition professors write about race. An exception to this rule is Villanueva who argues that “invisible racism” is embedded in our everyday practices that position ethnic students’ cultures as obstacles within the academy. Despite continued research and pleas by compositionists of color like Victor Villanueva, Cristina Kirklighter, Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard (and others) to address issues of race in the composition classroom, most instructors avoid doing so, claiming it is “too sensitive of an issue.”

Issues of SRTOL have been addressed in different forms within the composition field though. Elbow’s 1999 article “Inviting the Mother Tongue” addresses how the relationship between oneself and their language is often strongly united when one of the languages is discredited. He further elaborates on the difficulty that student of color face when they arrive in writing classrooms that do not value their home language, and are

expected to produce the university's expected language. Unfortunately this is common happens and scholars such as Michelle Hall Kells, believes it helps to produce "linguistic insecurity," which contributes to unsuccessful academic experiences (10). Through the works of Elbow and Kells, one can see that the idea of SRTOL in the composition classroom is rather complex and complicated.

Aware of the controversial obscurity many compositionists can face if they choose to participate in SRTOL, most compositionists choose to participate in much "safer" activities within their composition classrooms. Perhaps the most common "safer" activity that many compositionists participate in, is adopting a multicultural reader, thus feeling that by doing so, their classroom becomes culturally inclusive. While it is important that students are exposed to diverse authors (and issues of diversity), which a multicultural reader can do, very little attention is dedicated to the pedagogical changes that are necessary to identify the ways in which students' own cultural knowledge and language practices can be expressed in their writing. Again, when it comes to writing, we (compositionists) seem to be more concerned about whether students' writing meets an unstated WEA standard upheld by the university. Although there are many reasons that can explain these practices, a common explanation is that writing instructors are trying to prepare their students to operate in a WEA dominated society. With this goal in mind, it may not be fair to blame composition instructors for their non-inclusive practices. Rather, we need to look at how the larger society shapes our pedagogical practices.

Unfortunately, whoever is to blame, the bottom line is, WEA approaches to teaching writing negatively affect students of color and/or bilingual students who attend these classes. As I stated previously, these students, whether they be Mexican American,

African American, among other social groups, are commonly depicted as poor writers, according to WEA standards. In many of these cases, students of color do not refuse to use WEA standards of writing, but they cannot accurately and authentically express their ideas within this limited framework. This does not mean, however, that these students are not strong writers. Parallel to Valenzuela's concept of subtractive schooling at the elementary and secondary school levels, most college writing classes also subtract ethnic students' culture/language, whereby they emphasize that there is no value for students' cultural knowledge or language practices in the composition classroom. This message, of course, works in opposition to students' best abilities to express themselves in writing, as well as to the CCC language statement that was established almost 40 years ago. In light of these discrepancies between actual pedagogical practices and CCC's language statement, I believe compositionists must examine their pedagogical practices with the goal of moving toward more inclusive and equitable approaches to teaching writing.

In hopes of helping students to retain their own language and encouraging them to express their ideas in their language, writing instructors need to be privy to different dialects/languages, the politics of language, and recognize that the current definition of harmonized English (WEA) produces inequalities in a society that is multicultural and multilingual. Considering that people of color are quickly becoming the majority in the U.S., the education system should acknowledge that other languages, besides English, are also part of American culture; therefore, the education system must draw upon and build on these incredible resources, instead of rendering them as irrelevant or worse, a handicap to students' academic writing.

Arte-Vega, Doud, and Torres shed light to this subject by adding that when they were collecting data for their article “Más Allá del Ingles: A Bilingual Approach to College Composition,” they learned that the academic scholar named Juan Guerra (along with his colleague Ellias Argott) taught a bilingual composition classroom in 1975. Within their own classroom, the students were expected to produce text in English but were allowed to participate in class discussions in either Spanish or English by Guerra and Argott. Arte-Vega, Doud, and Torres end by writing that “Despite impressive results that corroborate our current efforts—the university refused to institutionalize the course” (105).

The second suggestion I have is to look at the pedagogical styles used in the writing classroom. For example, most professors expect their students to be active learners (guided by Freire’s concept of “critical pedagogy”) in the classroom, which in many cases demands students to play assertive roles in the classroom. The more aggressive students (most often WEA students) have the confidence to meet this classroom expectation because their concerns/issues/perspectives most often align with classroom practices and context. Unfortunately, most students of color do not have this same level of confidence in the classroom because their issues/concerns have rarely been addressed in classes, thus giving them the impression that they are “classroom guests” and not necessarily “central members of the classroom”. Instead of having this dichotomy between students, which plainly gives WEA students an advantage, composition professors should develop more culturally inclusive composition classes. For example, instructors should never force students of color to participate in classroom activities, because this often puts them in vulnerable positions by forcing them to express their

opinions in a context in which their cultural perspectives have rarely been acknowledged. Instead, instructors should include culturally relevant material and address issues of power and equalities in the larger society, which would provide some opportunities for students color to participate. Simply put, I am asking writing instructors to implement culturally inclusive pedagogies in their writing classrooms. Although this is something new to the composition field, this is something that has been happening in education for some time. Scholars like González, Moll, and Amanti have written about the need to build upon students' cultural practices in the classroom instead of trying to "subtract them."

Although their work primarily deals with elementary education, it is an excellent pedagogy, and thus compositionists would be wise to consult this research. Scholars like Pimentel and Pimentel, and Ramirez-Doore and Jones have addressed the use of alternative pedagogies in their writing classrooms, demonstrating how students of color can become empowered, which often leads students of color to produce much more critical and powerful pieces of writing.

The third suggestion I have is that compositionists should produce more research on race and racism. I challenge them to write about race/racism in the context of their composition classrooms. Although people in the English as a Second Language field (like Matsuda et al.) are doing this, they are few in number. The composition field (as a whole) must make this a mainstream issue instead of an exotic one that only a few compositionists of color take up, namely Victor Villanueva, Cristina Kirklighter, Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, and a few others. Although I have no doubt that these elite scholars of color will continue to provide us with a wealth of knowledge in their research,

other scholars need to address these issues as well. As Canagarajah contends, it is not until scholars publish in mainstream publishing venues that true changes can be made. Canagarajah writes, “The mainstream publishing wield a real power in terms of reach, significance, and status that cannot be ignored if changes are to be wrought in the global knowledge-production industry” (29).

It would be specifically helpful for some instructors to utilize bilingual texts, which is an increasing practice. Artze-Vega, Doud, and Torres write: “The increasing renown of Latino/a literature and criticism in the past few decades lends itself to our bilingual composition efforts, since many texts experiment with varying degrees of English/Spanish bilingualism and speak to the social, cultural, and political situations of Latinos/as in the United States” (106). By using material such as this, the teacher will have the opportunity to have his/her students better connect with the class material as well as provide models of a strong bilingual and multilingual writing.

A final, and conceivably the most significant suggestion, is that writing instructors must recognize that racism exists in our society, including the spaces within our composition classrooms. Although it is fair to assume that most individuals are not purposely racist, we must admit that we are all embedded in a racist society that informs all our knowledge construction and decision-making. It is imperative that all writing instructors (including instructors of color) are attentive to the ways in which race informs their practices. It is preposterous for a teacher of color to believe that since he or she is of color, racism will not exist in his/her classroom. As a Mexican male, who is extremely proud of his culture, I fight on a daily basis to confront the racist discourses being (re)produced in my writing classes, knowing well that I cannot completely eliminate it.

When we can begin to identify the ways in which our own writing classroom produces racist ideologies, we can begin to deconstruct and produce alternative practices. This point relates back to my previous suggestions about publishing on racism. We need to publish our own racial analyses of our classrooms, so that other scholars can learn from and build upon these analyses. I end this article by urging other writing instructors to join in on this discussion. Students of color and linguistic minorities stand to benefit from our own critical discussions on race, but also society in general will benefit from these discussions.

As a friend, colleague, and scholar, I invite you to respond to the manuscript. It is only through these tough, but informative conversations that we can improve the educational experiences of all students, especially students of color who are most often marginalized.

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