

## CHAPTER 12.

# ANTI-COLONIALIST LISTENING AS WRITING PEDAGOGY

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In my current role as a full professor of communications at a liberal arts university in the Midwest, I regularly teach our major's thesis course and various courses with an emphasis on written communication. I also assist graduate students with papers, publications, and final projects. In this sense, teaching and evaluating writing is at the center of my job as a communications faculty member. My journey to becoming successful at teaching writing began over two decades ago with my TAship in rhetoric and composition. I remember the day when I got the call that I got a job at my university's writing center as a tutor. At the time, I had just begun graduate studies in communication and brought in some experience as a TA, but it was still hard for me to believe that I, a native Spanish speaker, would get to tell native speakers how to write in their own tongue. It is worth noting that my first reaction to being hired as a rhetoric and composition TA came from my identity as a colonized subject of the US. Of course, excellent tutoring does not require or encourage that the tutor tell native speakers how to use their tongue, but what I wish to draw attention to is how my initial reaction was unique to my own sense of place and the material, historical realities of that place. As a Puerto Rican, being hired to assist with English-language instruction also produced the kind of quiet vindication members from underrepresented communities in the USA feel when we experience that bit of the rare and elusive ability to be trusted with power.

Don't get me wrong, I did not feel I was being coronated or accepted into white society vis-à-vis the white academy, far from it; I felt I had even more to prove since my duties as a TA required that I interact with clients who would otherwise never look at a tiny brown woman with a pronounced Spanish accent as any kind of authority on the English language (something I also learned is not required to be an effective writing tutor). These were the first identity negotiations I remember making as I began my journey as a rhetoric and composition TA as I attempted to reconcile my dual identity as a colonized subject and a gatekeeper of sorts of the language of the colonizer. I guess one could say that resistance to assimilation is in my DNA. I come from an island whose members are notorious for being most resistant to US assimilation. What place is this? How

did this cultural value impact my identity as a writing TA? What commitments and values had to be negotiated in order for me to succeed as a writing tutor and later as a professor? Did becoming a tutor turn me into a gringo by fiat? In order to answer these questions, I need to tell you a little bit about myself.

I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, the US' (and some say the world's)<sup>1</sup> oldest colony. Our territory was ceded to the US by Spain during the Spanish-American war in 1898 and we have been under U.S.<sup>2</sup> control ever since then. In 1917 all Puerto Ricans were granted US citizenship under the Jones-Shafroth Act. "Why?" one might ask. Why would it be necessary for the USA to import soldiers in order to fight WWI? The literature tells us it was because this happened at a time when the US population was under an ethos of isolationism and non-interventionism; thus, there were too few men enlisting to fight in the first world war. As one team of scholars put it:

The main reason why the US granted citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 was the strategic imperative that the United States was faced with in the coming world war. They hold that U.S. military planners and civilian policymakers sought to secure this Caribbean strategic outpost by granting citizenship to its dissatisfied inhabitants, thus inducing a sense of loyalty among Puerto Ricans that would curtail the independence fervor<sup>3</sup> growing at the time and also ease the conscription of young men into the military<sup>4</sup> forces. (Venator-Santiago and Melendez 31)

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1 One such scholar is former Chief Supreme Court Justice of Puerto Rico, José Trías Monge's 1997 book *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*. Yale UP. EBSCOhost, <https://ezproxy.shsu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000x-na&AN=52950&site=eds-live&scope=site>. Accessed 30 June 2021.

2 A note on the use of the "U.S. or USA as opposed to America. Throughout this essay I deliberately abstain from using the term *America* or *American*. This is done in solidarity with those who feel that the use of such terms erases the existence of three separate continents: North America, Central America, and South America. In Spanish the term *Estadounidense* (roughly translates into *Unitedstatesian*) is used to designate the people of the United States and *Estados Unidos* refers to the country as a whole. For a discussion of the history and politics of using the term see Vero Edilio Rodríguez-Orrero and Jorge Luis Padrón-Acosta, "El Cable Telegráfico Submarino y Sus Nexos Con La Sociedad Regional Cienfueguera (1870-1898); The Submarine Telegraph Cable and Its Links with the Regional Society of Cienfuegos (1870-1898)." *Santiago*, no. 148, Feb. 2019.

3 For a detailed historical tracing of the Puerto Rican struggle for independence see Trías Monge, José, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*, Yale University Press. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat08323a&AN=gvsu.b1299116&site=eds-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat08323a&AN=gvsu.b1299116&site=eds-live&scope=site). Accessed 30 June 2021.

4 For a superb analysis of the historical role Puerto Ricans have played in the US military see: Avilés Santiago, Manuel Gerardo. *Puerto Rican Soldiers and Second-Class Citizenship: Representations in Media*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

In other words, the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the US was not borne out of mutual aid or partnership but by crude conquest. Puerto Ricans did not opt to build a relationship with the USA but instead were captured by a brutal and global empire. Another scholar confirms the lack of enlistment by U.S. residents at the time Puerto Ricans were granted citizenship: “The National Defense Act of 1916 allowed the regular army to expand to 175,000 and asserted the principle of military service for able-bodied males from eighteen to forty-five and empowered the president to draft militia units if sufficient volunteers did not appear” (432). Perri goes on to note how a few months later the drafting of militias became necessary. He says: “A draft of individuals was adopted in May 1917” (Perri 432). Please keep in mind the events described in the previous quotes happened a short eight weeks after the Jones-Shafroth Act was signed into law. Thus, rather than a historical coincidence many scholars are unambiguous in their conclusions:

The purpose here is to advance an understanding of why Congress in 1917 declared Puerto Ricans to be U.S. citizens. We do so by referring to the relevant scholarship on the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act (“Jones Act” hereafter), reviewing official documents, and consulting the personal records of several of the principals. We argue that the dominant reason why the U.S. Congress and the Wilson administration granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in early 1917 was the looming engagement by the United States in the First World War—then the “Great War” or the “World War,” of course—thereby forcing the U.S. government to act. German torpedoes sank the *Lusitania* in May 1915, with the loss of 114 American lives; Congress in June and July 1915 authorized a large expansion of the army, increased the construction of warships, and began to mobilize industry and the American people. (Sparrow and Lamm 285)

In explaining the complicated political and cultural relationship between the US and Puerto Rico, I have been careful to provide as much textual evidence as possible to support the claim that the granting of citizenship to Puerto Ricans was not motivated by charitable or moral reasons. Thus, the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the US started and has evolved based on the oppression and marginalization of the will and autonomy of the Puerto Rican people. Furthermore, Venator-Santiago & Melendez (cited above) reference a certain dissatisfaction felt by Puerto Ricans toward the USA and it behooves this discussion to offer a clearer picture of what is meant by this. Legal scholar

Johnny Smith describes the magnitude and depth of said dissatisfaction when he explains that “By the end of Spanish rule, Puerto Rico was suffering from severe conditions of poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment” (173). In other words, the Wilson administration actively preyed on desperate, economically-deprived people. In sum, the starving Puerto Rican populace was forced to take jobs in the U.S. military in order to survive and feed their families, and not out of a sense of loyalty or identification as the authors of the Jones Act purported at time.

Since then, Puerto Ricans have struggled over the centuries with an ambiguous political and cultural status that most recently exploded back into the mainstream due to the devastation left behind by Hurricane Maria. Faced with a rare barrage of news coverage on Puerto Rico during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, many wondered: “What exactly is the relationship between the US and Puerto Rico? Are they a state? What responsibility, if any, does the American government and public owe these people?”

Few of us think about the historical baggage that non-native English speaking (NNES) tutors and teachers bring and will continue to bring into writing courses, but it is undeniable that the wounds and scars of history will be taking a seat across from tutees along with NNES tutors and TAs in inclusive writing centers and classrooms across the country. Describing his own marginalized upbringing as a Mexican-American along the Texas-Mexico border, writing scholar Romeo Garcia describes how “I was situated within a historical space and connected to historical bodies” (Garcia 30). It is in this respect that global histories of conflict, late-stage capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism are vital, though overlooked, facets of the project of inclusiveness in rhetoric and composition and many other pedagogies. As a Puerto Rican writing TA, I showed up to work every day within a historical space of generational trauma and connected to historical bodies that have endured colonization, as well. The fact that those historical bodies were invisible to others in my tutoring sessions, students, or my supervisors did not mitigate their significance and weight nor limit the barrage of questions around personal and pedagogical identity that reconciling those histories requires.

In my case, the oppression and exploitation to which Puerto Ricans have been subjected since and before the Spanish-American war were a constant presence in my development as an academic, as a writing TA, and now as a professor. The reasons why Puerto Rico has remained a colony of the US are too numerous and nuanced to detail here; however, this issue of citizenship has played a big role in our historical rejection of cultural assimilation. Culturally, Puerto Ricans are very attached to the mainland (meaning Puerto Rico, not the US) and, when this is combined with the ability to travel unimpeded by visa requirements back and forth from the mainland, a recipe for recalcitrance emerges.

Around 5.8 million people living across the country in 2018 identified as Puerto Rican (Cotto and Chen) and, while each individual's experience is unique to their circumstances and not generalizable in scientific terms, I believe there is value in sharing those experiences as they help us get an admittedly limited but useful window into how various minority groups navigate their cultural, and academic identities<sup>5</sup> in our institutions of higher education,<sup>6</sup> In order to further contextualize my experience as a Puerto Rican subject in a rhetoric and composition TAs hip, I will now draw from the current literature on NNES teaching and tutoring, particularly as it relates to the teaching of academic writing, and will apply the anti-colonial framework of Romeo Garcia in order to draw parallels between my individual experience as an NNES writing teacher, a Puerto Rican subject, and a colonized subject more generally.

It bears mentioning that the excellent conceptual and theoretical framework Garcia has created was not designed to account for or respond to the experiences of Puerto Ricans as writing TAs or in the academy in general. On the contrary, Garcia is meticulous in situating his experience in a very particular "traceable history and palimpsest of identity" of "The Mexican" as it has operated in the Lower Rio Grand Valley (LRGV) region of the US. Garcia writes about a unique set of experiences that, by definition, would not apply to the myriad of Latinx identities coexisting in the US and around the world. Thus, I make no claim that Garcia's groundbreaking work describes the experiences of all *Latinidades*. Instead, I believe his non-dualistic, anti-colonialist, listening-centered, mobile-oriented framework "that re-imagines the common local and global distinction as a dialectical relationship" (45) is a useful and actionable anti-colonialist listening practice that can and does serve to empower other Latinx identities and modalities. Notwithstanding, Garcia works meticulously to deconstruct, reconstruct, and respond to the specific needs of border subjects, while simultaneously offering a useful and valuable ethical and pedagogical tool other *Latinidades* can benefit from. Like the work of countless other theorists, Garcia's Mobile-Decolonial framework can be adapted or expanded to explain emerging and existing issues the framework was not initially built to explain.

In sum, while Garcia's work is situated in specific historical contexts and materialities, addresses a specific form of colonization, and highlights a particular

5 For a thorough discussion of Puerto Rican identity as it is shaped by its history see: Soto-Crespo, Ramón E. *Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

6 Perhaps the reader has noticed by now that when I, as the author of this piece, reference the US, I alternate between the use of "our" and "their" pronouns. As an author, I was prepared to make the necessary edits to correct this inconsistency. However, I made a choice to leave them in the final manuscript as they illustrate uncannily, in my opinion, the ambivalence of identity—or Stockholm syndrome, I really don't know—that many Puerto Ricans feel in relation to the colonial power.

history of oppression, I believe many of his insights are well suited to help explain the experiences of other Latinx groups (as writing scholars and teachers), because of its unflinching resistance against coloniality and its “mobile-graphical” dimensions in which colonial subjects are presumed to “continue to make and re-make place and geography” (45).

Above all, the present analysis benefits most from Garcia’s endorsement of practices of listening to be incorporated into writing pedagogy. Beyond, what Garcia denounces as a black/white paradigm to which many histories and experiences of *Latinidades* simply do not fit, Garcia’s approach presents an alternative, non-dualistic framework that remains mindful of the multiplicity of histories of oppression in contemporary society. Ultimately, Garcia’s approach prescribes “rhetorical listening” (50), “transformational listening” (36), or just “listening” (50) as a vital tool in the struggle against colonialism. Extending Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework then, the present analysis proposes the concept of “anti-colonialist listening” to describe various practices of listening that are liberatory in focus and embracing of pluriversality. Thus, anti-colonialist listening practice includes rhetorical and transformative types of listening but is not limited to them or their specific techniques.

Having offered needed caveats and reasons for selecting Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial to explain my own development and evolving commitment to anti-colonialist listening practice, I’d like to turn my analysis to how the four specific listening behaviors prescribed by Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework have impacted my own pedagogy as an NNES teacher. The four listening behaviors are as follows and will be discussed henceforth in this order: (1) mindfulness of difference; (2) being a decolonial agent; (3) becoming a theorist of race and racism; and (4) reflection and reflexivity.

## **MINDFULNESS OF DIFFERENCE IN GARCIA’S MOBILE-DECOLONIAL FRAMEWORK**

Throughout this discussion I have taken care to elucidate some aspects that are critical to what *Latinidad* Puerto Ricans have experienced historically in relation to the US. When Garcia postulates “mindfulness of difference” as a key dimension of a Mobile-Decolonial interpretative framework and its corresponding listening practice, he is partly addressing the significant cultural and historical differences in place and bodies between and amongst *Latinidades* and other ethnicities globally. In discussing what mindfulness of difference meant to me as a rhetoric and composition TA and how it impacts my writing pedagogy today, I am quick to remember the internal struggle I felt trying to reconcile my culturally-bred anti-assimilationist stance and my role as a writing TA in the US. That

Puerto Ricans have a distinctive and recalcitrant view toward cultural assimilation is something to which many scholars have attested. For instance, one study found that

Upwardly mobile Puerto Ricans do not endeavor to leave their enclave and settle within other non-Hispanic neighborhoods. Rather, a strong ethnic identity creates a powerful affective attachment to the group so that high-status Puerto Ricans choose to remain residentially segregated in their own areas. (Massey and Bitterman 307)

The quote above addresses some of the factors social scientists have discovered motivate the historical spatial segregation of Puerto Ricans in the US, but what of social factors? Luciano and Viera-Haslio found in a 2019 study that there is also a racial component that while not exclusive to Puerto Ricans is of increased significance to Puerto Ricans due to our strong African lineage:

The reason for this refusal to assimilate may be attributed to the fact that the darker complected Puerto Ricans did not feel welcomed and often felt alienated from the white majority culture. (Luciano and Halsio-Viera 28)

Perhaps the most significant factor that has played a role in the refusal of Puerto Ricans to assimilate is, perhaps with some irony, their permanent American citizenship. The reason for this is that U.S. citizenship offers us (Puerto Ricans) the ability to travel back and forth to the island anytime. This means that, on the island, we are free to speak our native tongue, eat our authentic food, celebrate important occasions and holidays, and spend time with relatives and loved ones. This is a luxury that few other, if any, Hispanic U.S. minority groups enjoy in the US and one that has historically caused a great deal of tension between Puerto Ricans and other minority Hispanic groups (Fernandez 2). In sum, for a multiplicity of reasons, these and other studies have shown that assimilation is not a typical concern of the average Puerto Rican.

Understanding the historical places and experiences of the bodies of Puerto Ricans who have suffered under U.S. occupation is an important component of the “mindfulness of difference” that Garcia advocates. For it is morally and factually insufficient to ignore the tremendous differences in histories and cultures of different Latinx cultures living in the US. Thus, to counteract such inaccurate and oppressive discursive practice, Garcia invites the reader to eschew the black-and-white dichotomies of old and instead engage in a listening practice that is interested in acknowledging and celebrating difference, whether this is historical, political, economic, or any other lens.

Working as a writing TA I honed my listening skills to identify differences in values and perspectives. You see, I was so preoccupied with holding on to my own historical identity that it became an extension of my work ethic to resist the easy path of connecting to tutees and tutee writing through perceived similarities and instead choosing to relate to them, paying attention to, highlighting, and celebrating their different styles and views. Today, as a professor, I still engage this type of anti-colonial listening in the way I am vigilant to not indoctrinate or “build” my students but rather I keep myself attentive to perceived differences, acknowledge them outwardly, and demonstrate appreciation for them.

## **NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH TEACHERS AS DECOLONIAL AGENTS**

Perhaps most intuitively, the first issue that might come to mind when discussing Puerto Rican’s vexed relationship with U.S. colonial power is our deep connection not only to the Spanish language but also to the particular dialect spoken inside and outside of the island. This is, of course, true of many different groups, including those in the umbrella designation of Latinx. Frances Aparicio defines this concept as “The plural term ‘Latinidades’ has been preferred by many scholars to refer to the shared experiences of subordination, resistance, and agency of the various national groups of Latin Americans in the United States (Latinidad/es). Aparicio is also sure to note that the term is not a static category but one that continues to evolve and morph as scholars continue to search for helpful and faithful ways to analyze and share our experiences. She says, “The term ‘Latinidades,’ in this regard, has been open to transformations and rewritings. It has been consistently modified by additional labels of identity that anchor it in a particular subgroup within the U.S. Latina/o sector” (or Larinidad/es).

As mentioned earlier, due to our permanent status as residents, Puerto Ricans are particularly attached to their dialect and, in this regard, I am no different. Therefore, part of my initiation as a writing tutor involved negotiating my advocacy and passion for my native dialect versus becoming an arm of the academy which has been complicit in U.S. imperialism all over the world. Would becoming a teacher of English run contrary to my commitment to keeping the patrimony that was given to me as a Puerto Rican? Was I betraying our struggle? Would my Spanish use decrease in my new role as a tutor? Will English, with all of its implicit values and priorities, then spill over into other areas of my life? In becoming a decolonial agent, teachers of writing and especially NNEST must wrestle with their own dispositions and biases as they pertain to their own vernacular and political and economic histories. Rather than a fleeting issue in the pursuit of decolonizing writing pedagogy, this is an issue that is sure to become



ever more prevalent across the board amongst students, TAs, and writing center administrators, as writing centers and classrooms continue to diversify in the US.

The current literature supports the trend that the academy is continuing to diversify on many different fronts including writing instruction. In fact, one team of scholars found that it is an undeniable fact that “the number of non-native English-speaking teachers is steadily increasing all over the world” (Daftari and Tavil 379). And yet: “Although there has been some work focusing on international TAs teaching across the curriculum, research specifically focused on non-native English-speaking instructors of writing, whether part- or full-time instructors or TAs, remains scarce” (Ruecker et al. 613). Puerto Ricans are of course but one small segment of new and future generations of writing TAs who are slowly transforming college writing centers and classrooms across the US. However, Puerto Ricans provide an interesting and multi-layered case study of the complex identity negotiations that move into writing pedagogies as more NNES tutors and teachers become normalized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

Through that first rhetoric and composition TAship I not only struggled to reconcile the colonized places and bodies of Puerto Rican history with my role as a TA but dealt with the range of issues writing scholars have noted as affecting NNSETs most. For example, I struggled with language insecurity as a result of my pronounced Spanish accent and ESL experience. Daftari and Tavil explore the relationship between non-native English-speaking teachers’ linguistic insecurity and their experience of teaching (395). Linguistic insecurity is described as a set of behaviors where “teachers shy away from using language freely and asking questions and resort to rehearsed utterances and simple closed-ended questions, which do not encourage interaction, debates, or student participation” (Drljača and Vodopija-Krstanović 32).

Another scholar highlights the anxiety associated with linguistic insecurity and makes an explicit connection to NNES’s confidence in their ability to instruct : “The anxiety or lack of confidence experienced by speakers and writers, who believe that their use of language does not conform to the principles and practices of standard language, is called linguistic insecurity” (Daftari and Tavil 380).

As a TA, I was paradigmatic of this pedagogical error in my early days of teaching. I remember typing my lectures from start to finish and more or less reading them to the students. I was afraid of being challenged and made to feel illegitimate in my role as a teacher because of my ESL background and identity as a colonized subject. Thankfully, my work as a tutor did not allow long for such rehearsed performances. As an NNES tutor, a one-on-one meeting with a student client takes on a more conversational, spontaneous character which challenges the NNES tutor to be more vulnerable and also much more effective as an instructor. I would also argue that the one-on-one interactions with tutees

lend themselves more to the questioning of stereotypes and biases as these individual interactions allow for more unstructured dialogue that can more easily breakthrough biases and prejudices than the typical classroom environment. In all of the aforementioned ways, my form of writing pedagogy was uniquely informed by the process of overcoming my limited view of myself and confronting my anxieties as a TA head-on. One might say that the listening behaviors I have developed over the years took on their “anti-colonialist” character early on as a result of having to face my own insecurities and prejudices regarding how I viewed myself in relation to others and to the colonizing culture.

Another challenge that NNES teachers and instructors face is that of the Native Speaker (NS) myth. This evaporating myth captured the popular but erroneous impression that NS are naturally better instructors of a language. This myth conveniently overlooks other important factors that influence teaching effectiveness such as training, listening skills, and even relatability. Furthermore, scholars have linked the prejudices of the NS myth to the negotiation of professional identities of NNES tutors and teachers and regret the lack of more research in this area. As one scholar laments: “The process of challenging the NS myth and negotiating a professional identity as a legitimate, qualified, and confident ESL teacher, though complex, is largely understudied” (Reis, “Non-Native English Speakers” 139).

In short, while insights into the challenges faced by NNES teachers and tutors remain scarce, theoretical contributions such as the Native Speaker myth and issues around language insecurity have provided useful insights into the general issues faced by NNES teachers in the context of the contemporary academy. Thus, as universities and other institutions of higher education continue to diversify, more research should be forthcoming regarding the specific issues faced by NSSE writing instructors tutors. As another scholar protests: “While the experiences of NNES teachers has been thoroughly explored in other fields, especially TESOL, we have noticed a dearth of research in writing studies on this population of instructors that continues to grow as the US population and the field of writing studies itself diversifies” (Ruecker et al. 613).

Having identified language insecurity and the NS myth as challenges the literature in writing and composition studies continues to address, it is necessary to further complicate this picture to get at the particular identity negotiations and challenges I faced as a writing tutor in my particular modality of *Latinidad*. Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework is of special relevance and value. Garcia offers a unique and innovative anti-colonial framework that promotes communicative virtues such as listening. Garcia takes the writing center as a site of identity negotiation, solidarity, and social justice. He writes, “Writing centers function within a tapestry of social structures, reproducing and generating systems

of privilege” (Garcia 33). It is with this theoretical foundation that Garcia builds an approach to decolonizing these centers in the service of the sort of mindful practice and politics that engages and promotes pluriversality. He explains

To be mindful of difference is to: call attention to the structural practices which re-create realities of dwelling; engage in social justice goals by retraining the mind that works to understand capaciously how race and power influence all; and participate in a different logic that invests in a pluriversal understanding of differences. (Garcia 48)

In the pursuit of this paradigm, Garcia sees tutors as agents of change. In his view, “tutors need to become decolonial agents. This ‘work’ will look and be different from tutor to tutor” (Garcia 49). He continues: “To be a decolonial agent is to be ethically and socially committed to social justice for all. It is having those critical conversations that question even the well-intended progressive and leftist practices” (Garcia 49).

As a Puerto Rican, a historically colonized people, it was and is important for me to utilize my work and academic success in a way that advances self-determination and dialogic engagement, something my people have not been afforded, least of all from the U.S. colonial power. Engaging in decolonization at the interpersonal and professional level can take on many forms, but Cortez and Garcia summarize it this way:

At the core of the decolonial edifice is an oppositional rhetorical structure that postulates a mixed (mestizo) subject position from which to impurify what scholars have identified as writing studies’ tendency to universalize knowledge in a way that frames the writing traditions of its Others as inconsequential to the constitution of the putative “West.” (568)

My development as a writing TA began with the fear that I, too, had become a tool of hegemonization on behalf of the empire. In those initial days the thought that my contribution to the writing center could be one of solidarity and shared struggle versus one of “switching sides” took time and rumination to achieve. It took excellent mentorship and experience to arrive at a place where I could understand my role as a tutor as a venue for social justice. In the process of arriving at that place where I could understand my role as a decolonizer I had to understand my position as an other who interacted with my tutees in a non-hierarchical, mindful manner. Cortez and Garcia emphasize the possibility of carrying out decolonizing work while occupying any number of positions regardless of location:

Modernity/coloniality justifies itself in a hierarchical relation to its Other through a geopolitically situated field of knowledge that claims itself as its origin. And while there are some important differences obtaining among various decolonial projects, they nonetheless share grounding in a specific postulation regarding the politics of location—specifically, in the “colonial difference” thesis, which is predicated on an ontological conceptualization of the politics of location. (574)

In short, in my trajectory as an NNES writing tutor, I dealt with the myth of the native speaker phenomena as well as with issues of language insecurity. Furthermore, my own cultural resistance to assimilation motivated me to use my own experience as a member of an oppressed group to negotiate ways for me to carry out the work of decolonization and social justice from my location as a writing tutor.

### **NNEST RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION TA'S AS THEORISTS OF RACE AND RACISM**

“The “NNEST lens,” as it has been called, is “a lens of multilingualism, multi-nationalism, and multiculturalism” that “takes diversity as a starting point” (Reis, “I’m Not Alone” 48). When contemplating the Mobile-Decolonial writing pedagogies, it is necessary to envision an anti-colonialist listening ethic and practice that embraces multilingualism as a fact of our contemporary and interconnected society. “In other words, we can value all dialects and languages equally and then trust students to think about their grammar and language rhetorically, as a matter of choice given a particular situation and audience rather than as mere correctness” (Pittcock 93).

This, though only one approach, is in my opinion a useful tool to combat racism and white supremacy as all vernaculars are assumed to be of equal interest and value regardless of the specific style that is being studied in a tutoring session or a classroom. Hence, attending to issues affecting specifically NNES teachers, the field of writing studies has also produced research exploring new pedagogies that can advance the decolonizing imperatives of inclusion and diversity. Writing studies scholar Sarah Pittcock Peterson traces the evolution of this paradigm as it relates to writing center pedagogy specifically:

Writing center pedagogy thus made a number of important conceptual shifts. Writing was no longer a discrete skill but rather a way of knowing and being that requires students to develop a meta-language that helps them think about writing as

something complex and beyond grammar; disciplines were no longer closed, static domains that require privileged knowledge but rather dynamic communities of practice. The space of the writing center itself became dedicated to developing diverse linguistic, racial, cultural, and social competencies. Students in these more progressive models were no longer deficient, dependent, or flawed but rather capable of making choices and partnering in meaning-making. (Pittock Peterson 93-94)

In the language of Garcia, one might also think of these changes as “mobile” or “in flux,” always in the process of becoming phenomenologically speaking and moving tangibly in the direction of decoloniality. This turn also signals a shift in the epistemologies of writing. However, the literature shows that these efforts are most effective when carried out through different venues at the institutional level as opposed to depending on their success or failure only through the decolonizing work undertaken by writing TAs and centers. On the contrary, the literature shows that in order to better advance a politic of multilingualism and diversity it is critical to engage the university as a whole. From curricula built into many different disciplines, to inclusive hiring, to other initiatives, scholars insist that it is crucial for the contemporary university to embed this politic into many different academic homes simultaneously. Speaking to this challenge, one scholar offers this plea, “It is important to collaborate with programs and offices across campus that promote diversity awareness, thinking about possibilities to include a focus on language diversity and English as a global language in student orientation programs and in other curricula across campus” (Ruecker et al. 635).

While much has been written on the topic of race and racism, Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework puts pressure on the academy and the university as a whole to conduct the work of anti-racism. However, while acknowledging the fact that the struggle against racism is not dependent on isolated individuals, it is important to recognize that TAs and professors can and should see themselves as students of the social dimensions of race, including those perversions that can call out institutional and structural racism. In becoming a theorist of race and racism, I’ve drawn from my personal and collective experiences of racism to take an interest, engage, theorize, and practice “anti-racism” in my pedagogy and scholarship.

## **REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY AND NNES TAs**

As a Puerto Rican woman, I came to my work as a writing TA with mixed feelings. On the one hand, a severe language barrier made me a cultural and linguistic outsider. On the other hand, my appointment as a writing TA seemed to

signal some kind of social ascension into institutional whiteness. Furthermore, because of my country of origin's colonized status, I came in with mistrust and an adversarial relationship with U.S. imperialism and, by proxy, the English language as the language of our colonizers. The idea that I was being trusted to safeguard the language of the empire made me feel conflicted, to say the least. Was I now a traitor to my own people? Did I cross that line and join the enemy camp? This kind of reflection then and over the years has proven useful in informing my own anti-colonialist, listening-centered writing pedagogy.

Reflexivity played an important part in my development as a writing teacher as well. Starting with that first writing TAship, I examine and re-examine my own values, those of my people, my worth as a scholar, my identity as a colonized subject, and the list goes on. Having moved to the US as a teenager, I already felt a sense of betrayal against those left on the island, especially family and loved ones. In order to thrive as a writing TA, I had to come up with answers to these questions. As the number of NNES teachers and tutors continues to rise in the academy, scholars have looked into the ways in which complex identity negotiations play out in language instruction in various contexts. Preoccupation with teaching the language of empire, for instance, is reflected in some of the existing literature: "Teaching a colonial language, namely English, carries the traces of colonization no matter what the current status of that language is" (Cakcak 194). It is precisely sentiments like these that most benefited from the reflection and reflexivity I've practiced over the years just as Garcia suggests.

Other scholars have studied the differences in pedagogy and style between NS and NNES teachers pointing to the influence of cultural values (reflexivity) on pedagogy. One 2015 study found the kind of evidence that can easily be used to train and engage both NS and NNES in reflection on their practice: "The findings provide further evidence of the tendency for native English speakers to be more serious in indicating students' errors. Also, based on error corrections and written comments provided by teachers, it was found that NNESTs focused mostly on grammar, whereas NESTs focus both grammaticality and intelligibility in identifying errors" (Bal-Gezegin 768).

Such differences in style can have a lasting impact on the way NS and NNES teachers of languages are perceived by tutees and students of various cultural and academic backgrounds. And yet, "there remains a paucity of research exploring identities and challenges of non-native English-speaking writing center tutors" (Okuda 13). In spite of an acknowledged dearth of scholarship on these specific issues, there are encouraging findings for those invested in the goal of truly inclusive, decolonizing, and multilingual writing instruction. "Research so far suggests that although NNES tutors might be challenged by tutees in terms of their English proficiency in ESL writing centers, tutors might be able to take

on a more instructional role or demonstrate their strengths as bilingual writing tutors in EFL writing centers or in L1-medium tutorials” (Okuda 14).

Put a different way, whatever the residual effect of the Native-Speaker myth, a re-imagined inclusive, anti-colonialist writing pedagogy offers countless ways to practice decolonization, and NNES tutors have valuable and unique contributions to make to abolish coloniality. For example, “in a writing center tutorial with an NNES tutor, the tutor’s linguistic status as a non-native speaker could be one of the factors that impact the learner’s definition of the situation and something that is possibly assessed against their motives for improving writing through writing center tutorials” (Okuda 15). Okuda has observed that “it is necessary to ensure an inclusive environment where NNES tutors can be creative, flexible, and confident in employing a wide range of strategies to help writers with their writing” (22).

In his Mobile-Decolonizing framework, Garcia himself promotes the use of listening portfolios that can help writing instructors and tutors reflect and adjust their pedagogy, especially when it comes to monitoring their anti-colonialist listening practice. Specifically, he suggests the use of “Portfolios as a meditational and reflexive activity of decolonial action” (Garcia 50).

## **ON ANTI-COLONIALIST LISTENING AS WRITING PEDAGOGY**

My work as a rhetoric and composition TA played a big role in the subsequent success I’ve had as a teacher in the academy. Honing my listening skills, learning how to connect one on one with students in a short amount of time, and learning how personal and political writing is for so many have served me consistently in the classroom over the years. I believe that even more than the limited experience I had as a TA prior to working in the writing center, it is my experience tutoring that guided my first confident steps toward a new identity as a writing teacher. It is likely that as a cultural outsider and NNES I also benefited greatly from having to interact with students one on one regularly rather than facing a classroom of 20 or more people who, to my newcomer eyes, it seemed more like a mob than partners in learning.

As an academic and as a teacher, my pedagogical DNA—if you’d like—began to take shape as a writing TA. Furthermore, as I made my way through the academic world first as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student, my own education further confronted me with choices that I felt came pre-loaded with moral commitments. Was I to identify as Hispanic? Latina? Puerto Rican? On that personal front, there was a battle occurring for my essence, and many of those choices felt imposed on me rather than true choices.

For the sake of this discussion, I will confess that both the terms Hispanic and Latina took some time to get used to. Since I was born and raised on the island, I initially identified as Puerto Rican. This was common sense to me. I was raised in Puerto Rico, and thus that is what I was. The term Hispanic was very confusing as it did not point to a country of origin, although I did check with friends and colleagues to figure out where Hispania was located (the Iberian Peninsula during Roman rule, it turns out). Today, having lived in the US for over 30 years, I identify as Latinx. I choose this designation in solidarity with the struggle for freedom from the oppression of all people of Latin-American descent. However, as I hope to have been able to convey, this was a choice that has taken me many years to come to and has been an additional site of identity negotiation in addition to my professional identity.

The negotiation of my professional identity as a writing TA came with its separate but connected set of issues. Take, for example, the designation of NNES that I have used throughout this essay has its critics. One contention charges the use of this designation is “the use of a negative particle to claim an identity, or better a ‘non-identity’” (Moussu and LLurda 337). I agree with this criticism, especially as the literature also shows that “Teachers’ self-perceptions about themselves tend to affect the ways they teach” (Lee 199). Thus, anti-colonialist writing pedagogies must be concerned with the potential exclusionary and colonial implications of designating a group as a “non” group while attempting to empower and amplify their voices.

Key to an effective response to this imperative is making use of what Garcia calls “transformational listening” (36) or “mindfulness of difference” (Garcia 33). Listening is at the heart of Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonialist framework. In many ways, Garcia postulates listening as the foundational, enabling, decolonizing virtue. He promotes the communicative skill of “listening—as a form of actional and decolonial work” (Garcia 33).

Moreover, Garcia situates the possibility of the embodiment of this communicative excellence in writing instruction. He says, “listening is functional and operational towards actional and decolonial work that can expand the role and work of writing centers” (Garcia 33).

Other scholars have suggested specific techniques that complement the Mobile-Decolonialist framework. Take this finding from a 2011 study: “it is critical for teacher educators to create mediational spaces that allow NNESTs to collaboratively challenge disempowering discourses and conceive of legitimizing professional identities, create a sense of individual and group agency, and support NNESTs as they commit to changes in both discourse and action” (Reis, “I’m Not Alone” 48).

Ultimately, writing pedagogy can de-gringo itself, in Garcia’s language, by acknowledging that “For NNESTs, to say that identities are negotiated within



power relations means that NNESTs' professional legitimacy is eroded to the extent that disempowering discourses remain unchallenged" (Reis, "'Non-Native English'" 155). This requires the kind of mindfulness at the administrative level that Garcia foments with his Mobile-Decolonizing framework. In promoting an ethic of de-gringoing writing instruction, he is invoking the term "gringo" as a way to deploy a number of colonialist tropes that span Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinx communities in the US.

"The term 'gringo' has different meanings in different parts of Latin America; however, it is commonly used to refer to North Americans" (Hayes 947). Furthermore, while this term can be understood differently according to context, scholars explain that "Gringo, lightly pejorative, is seen to have had its greatest currency in the Mexican-American borderlands, although usage extends to English speakers from other countries as well" (Sayers 324). In terms of the role this term plays in invoking a de-gringoed writing pedagogy, Garcia is alluding to an open, pluriversal, and mindful organization that is inclusive and adaptable. By way of contrast then, for a writing center to be "gringo" means that it is a closed, hegemonic, and uncritical space where social justice and inclusion take a backseat to other concerns.

A new paradigm of listening-centered anti-colonialist writing pedagogy, then, is tasked with implementing and sustaining a culture where: "In particular, NNESTs can benefit from social mediation and collaboration in conceiving of and internalizing identity options that lead to more professional agency and empowerment" (Reis, "'Non-Native English'" 142-143). As we have seen the identity negotiations and reflections, I as a novice writing TA and now as a professor, are many and quite complex. Evidently, some progress has been achieved as the NS speaker myth has lost much its potency, but more work remains to be done. As we continue to reflect and revise our pedagogies to meet the challenge of rejecting global imperialism and colonialism, we must ensure that multilingualism is welcome and celebrated and that the misconceptions propagated by the NS myth must become a thing of the past as just one aspect of a new writing pedagogical paradigm that can effectively struggle against coloniality. As one scholar points out, the need to attend to long-standing disparities between NS and NNESTs must be addressed: "The NS myth has serious implications for NNESTs' employment prospects and instructional practices. However, while identities are often imposed, they can also be disputed, negotiated, and asserted" (Non-native Speakers 156).

Learning the value of an NNEST teacher and tutor has been an ongoing project. Appreciating the anti-colonialist potential of my position as a writing teacher and tutor has taken lots of reflection, education, and questioning. In many ways, when it comes to our professional identities, we are at the mercy

of our colleagues and clients. One thing is to have a healthy self-image and yet another is to gain the respect and appreciation of our peers. As scholars have noted, “in many contexts, even qualified NNESTs are positioned as less able professionals than native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) by the public discourse, the institutions where they work, their colleagues, their students, and even their social acquaintances” (Reis, “Non-Native English” 143). If that wasn’t enough: “NNESTs frequently question their own value as language teaching professionals, which throws them into a vulnerable psychological condition” (Cakcak 195).

The problem is, of course, exacerbated when there is an absence of supporting networks not just for NNES teachers and tutors but for other identities that converge in inclusive writing classrooms: “a large majority of NNESTs internalize the so-called ‘internal superiority’ of the native-speaker teacher and engage in self depreciation” (Cakcak 195). In this context to de-gringo writing pedagogy is to help tutors and teachers “realize their own strengths and to find their own voices as proficient language teachers” across the board (Cakcak 195). Here, the literature once again offers concrete suggestions for promoting the level of inclusion within the de-gringoed writing classroom: “In the spirit of true praxis, teacher candidates should first engage in reflection about the causes of their oppression via the use of generative themes, and then they should take action by preparing consciousness-raising tasks for English language learners, writing papers, and organizing seminars” (Cakcak 195).

## **ANTI-COLONIALIST LISTENING AND WCA**

Thus far, I have extended Romeo Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework to analyze my experience as a NNES writing TA and instructor in the academy. Garcia himself seems optimistic about the possibility of bringing about the de-gringoed writing center: His work “calls attention to the opportunity for a community of scholars to make and re-make writing centers in productive and meaningful ways” (Garcia 32). One vital factor in the realization of an inclusive writing center is its administration. Garcia says of their role in his framework, “I see the directors playing a critical role in this type of transformative learning and praxis. The director should be the one to initiate these conversations on race and power, holding professional development sessions and monthly meetings dedicated to such topics” (50).

In this regard, I find perhaps the biggest analog of my experience with the existing literature on decolonizing writing pedagogy. My success as a writing TA would have been nearly impossible without the mentorship of a director that fits the description offered by Garcia nearly perfectly. One of his most impactful and

valuable decisions was to have me work with every type of client that came into the lab, NNES or not. His wisdom is backed by the literature:

NNES faculty and TAs should not be relegated to only teaching ESL sections or only teaching “mainstream” sections. Instructors who teach a range of related courses become better informed of the writing needs of students in all sectors of their institution and are able to apply those lessons back to their first-year writing classes; similarly, instructors who know multilingual students’ needs are better equipped to teach beyond just ESL or first-year composition, as the numbers of multilingual students have risen at US universities in general. (Ruecker et al. 633)

It is precisely because of the challenge, support, and exposure I received through my mentor and director that my experience as I reflect back on it was, on the whole, not only positive but also affirming and edifying. Ultimately, effective mentoring played a principal role in my success as a tutor. Specifically, I feel that: (1) working as a writing tutor had a significant and positive impact on my subsequent role as a university professor; (2) it also empowered me as a speaker of “world Englishes” and, by extension, my tutees by exposing them to speakers of English with different accents and backgrounds; and (3) there are numerous anti-colonialist benefits to both NNES tutors and the academy at large in hiring and nurturing those NNES tutoring “newcomers” as the academy abandons the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century view of education as a vehicle of assimilation and instead a new paradigm of anti-colonialism arises.

## LOOKING AHEAD BY LOOKING BACK

Throughout this discussion I have connected my personal experience as a particular modality of Latinx, NNES TA to Romeo Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework and selected existing literature regarding NNES teachers and tutors. As I look back on my growth as a teacher, the impact of my TAship experience is undeniable. Beyond my own experience, scholars offer reasons for optimism in decolonizing or de-gringoing writing pedagogy: “recent voices have advocated the idea that nativeness is not always a synonym or guarantee of successful language teaching because language competence is essential, but that is not all” (Martinez Agudo 1). Furthermore, recent studies are revealing useful and encouraging aspects of NNES teachers’ experience that have not been studied before. For instance, Daftari and Talvin have found that “The most impressive factor, according to the findings of this study, is experience. Experienced NNESTs

feel less linguistic insecurity than novice ones. But in some cases, other factors had bigger impact than experience” (396).

Further research is shining a light on the changing perceptions of NNES teachers and how a new generation of students seems to have had a shift in perception: “Data showed that students prefer native speaking English teachers when learning speaking and listening techniques (NESTs = 94.2%; NNESTs = 5.8%). However, students preferred non-native speaking teachers when learning reading and writing techniques” (Echong 35). These findings are particularly encouraging when thinking about the inclusive writing center paradigm and suggest that there are heretofore unexplored strengths and opportunities for furthering the goal of valuing and engaging varying backgrounds, identities, and experiences in the service of amplifying those voices and reconning with those experiences, which at times will include historical forms of oppression and exploitation.

The de-gringoing of writing pedagogy will thus have to be mindful of recent trends and conduct its anti-colonial work by either promoting or challenging shifting perceptions of the many forms of otherness that converge in the writing classroom. Carrying out an anti-colonial politic means challenging these unquestioned assumptions and presuppositions while providing a space where growth and mindfulness of difference, in the language of Garcia, can flourish. “Therefore, it behooves a writing program that employs NNES instructors to play to their relative strength of knowledge of the metalanguage and learning strategies that are beneficial to learning writing in another language” (Ruecker 634). In short, “writing programs can and should play a role in broadening students’ understandings of and attitudes toward language diversity.” (Ruecker et al. 635) as part of its decolonizing efforts.

## CONCLUSION

Anti-colonialist writing pedagogy has much to gain from promoting Garcia’s Mobile-Decolonial framework as its paradigm. This means that in putting its decolonizing role into focus, inclusive writing pedagogy welcomes and acknowledges the complex identities of everyone involved with the organization from administrators to staff to clients. True inclusion means that the US’s long-standing foreign policy of aggression and its exploitative economic practices will also show up in the inclusive writing classroom as part of the identity negotiations that will go on for everyone involved in writing instruction and learning.

NNESTs have a valuable role to play in this new paradigm and accompanying practice of anti-colonialist listening. One scholar suggests that “professional development opportunities for NNESTs must create learning conditions in

which NNESTs are encouraged to become aware of how they are positioned by others and how they attempt to position themselves in terms of their professional legitimacy in local and broader contexts” (Reis, “I’m Not Alone” 46). Furthermore, a de-gringoed writing pedagogy must be committed to supporting the development of NNESTs’ professional identities by “promoting their awareness of how they position themselves professionally and are positioned by others (e.g., students, institutions, the public discourse) in regards to their legitimacy and in relation to the contexts where they work and live” (Reis, “Non-Native English” 144).

Additionally, the literature on NNEST points to a cultural change in values that has shifted the perception of NNESTs as ineffective or deficient:

The positive experiences reported by our participants demonstrate that NNEST writing instructors can be confident teachers and valuable contributors to writing curriculum development, adding their often-unique perspectives and serving as role models for their students. However, without sufficient teaching experience or without programs’ support in terms of emphasizing linguistic diversity in pedagogy courses and understanding that NNEST instructors might have different needs or challenges compared to their NES [Native English Speaker] colleagues, NNESTs might not be able to build the confidence necessary to realize their potential as writing instructors. To that end, we conclude by bringing together suggestions from our participants and our own work in the NNEST movement. (Ruecker et al. 632)

I believe a Mobile-Anti-Colonialist writing pedagogy promotes the idea “diversity can exist within unity” (Hayati 86). And it must be a place where teachers, “tutors and administrators become important partners in the quest for more inclusive, socially just university cultures. One-way assimilation is an ideal of the past, transformation of all the ideal of the present” (Pittock 94).

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