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### **Not Grading Writing as Teaching Writing Now: Considerations of Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in the Writing Classroom**

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#### **TEACHING WRITING NOW: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM**

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

Delivered Thursday, February 4, 2022, from 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm.

Thank you all for coming today. And thank you to my friend, Valerie Balester, for inviting me to give this talk today and the workshop tomorrow. I'm honored and humbled to engage with you all today.

Because I live in Tempe, Arizona, and I work at Arizona State University, it's important that I acknowledge the indigenous peoples who resided on the land that gives me so much, not the least of which is the opportunity to do this work for you today.

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Arizona State University's four campuses are located in the Salt River Valley on ancestral territories of Indigenous peoples, including the Akimel O'odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) Indian Communities, whose care and keeping of these lands allow my colleagues and me to live and work in the area. I am grateful for the Pima and Maricopa. Historically, we, the colonizers of this area, have treated them poorly and are not worthy of their land. This land commitment acts as a mindful way to contemplate future actions my colleagues and I can take. I hope it offers you a way to do similar mindful work and make commitments in your own places.

I want to invite each of you to do some interactive listening during this talk. I'm going to pause a few times in my talk to give you an opportunity to feel, notice, and reflect in writing. So have something handy to write with. I'll do this several times, and I find it an important antiracist practice, even if we do not intend to share our writing. We are always already engaged in either racist or antiracist work, racist or antiracist orientations, racist or antiracist grading in our classrooms. We can notice this, and the emotional, intellectual, and practical challenges the system and our conditions present to us. Antiracist work isn't just intellectual or structural work, it's also emotional and bodily work that we might pay careful attention to in order to do it better and more self-consciously.

To do it better means we must understand our emotions and feelings when they happen as separate but interconnected to our ideas and intellectual responses to language and our conditions. This is being compassionate to ourselves and others. This is how we start to find structural changes that amount to antiracist changes in our places.

Part of my orientation to antiracist work is that we all must consciously cultivate a mindful set of behaviors, ones that get us to pause and notice how we feel, what we think, and where those feelings and thoughts come from. So my first practical bit of advice to you today: Pause often in your work and teaching, pause in your reading of student writing. Ruminates on your *feelings* as much as on your *thoughts*. This pausing can be antiracist work.

In my experience, antiracist teachers and activists are mindful of their feelings and thoughts *as they happen*, not just after the fact or after the damage is done. This helps us intervene or disrupt when we notice ourselves participating in racism or white supremacy, which we will do daily. It also helps us compassionately notice our rocks and hard places. To give you practice, I'll prompt you to pause, feel, notice, and reflect in writing during the rest of this talk. Be ready and be brave.

The rest of this talk will center on this: What does it mean to form an antiracist orientation to teaching and grading writing? Now, please notice that I'm not centering

this talk on HOW to be an antiracist teacher, or even how to grade writing in antiracist ways. As we move on, you'll see why I cannot do this explicitly. What I'll land on is that what antiracist teaching and grading amount to is a particular kind of orientation to the world, your disciplines, your classrooms, your syllabi and assignments, your feedback, your own judgments, and the work you do with students. This orientation will lead to other structural changes in your classrooms and grading practices. It's the only way I know how to offer something about grading now in our white supremacist world. So my second bit of advice: Cultivate an *antiracist orientation* to everything, including your grading practices.

Now, let's get a few things out of the way. An antiracist writing assessment ecology must not only be able to recognize the dominant discourse as racially white but keep it from harming some students and privileging others. To do this, the ecology has to have ways to examine itself or the languaging that makes it up. It must turn judgment itself both away from students, as in not grading or ranking them or their writing against a single standard, and toward them, as in making judgments of language more about their own dispositions to read, value, and write, often in racialized ways. In short, the purposes of assessment change quite dramatically because they are oriented toward antiracist ends. They move away from measuring to ranking or making some decision about a student's abilities to move on, and toward other purposes, ones more mutually defined by both student and teacher, ones that are oriented against racist systems, especially the systems that circulate white standards of languaging in classrooms.

Now, conventional grading ecologies operate from exclusion and scarcity through the deployment of singular standards. Bell curves illustrate this tendency perfectly. Rounding up, a standard distribution, or bell curve, dictates that about 2% of all rankings or scores will rest in the highest category, or the "A" category in grading curves, which is three standard deviations from the mean, or the perfect middle score. Meanwhile, about 14% of all scores or rankings will rest in the category just below that (the "B" category), or two standard deviations from the mean. So 16% of all scores in a classroom will get all the As, Bs, and high Cs distributed, or about 4-5 students in a class of 25.

The rest will get something lower, with the majority (68% or 17 students) resting within one standard deviation from the mean on either side--these are the categories of grades between 85% and 65% (low Bs, Cs, and high Ds). So as you can see, measuring everyone against a single standard creates conditions in which only a few students are allowed to achieve in the ways demanded or expected in the academy (As and Bs). Who do you think has the best chance to get those highest grades?

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Try this experiment: Ask any group of readers to read a stack of student writings and put them into five piles from best to worst. See what happens. The distributions will tend to be on this curve, no matter what specific criteria or expectations readers have. In fact, don't give them any. Just let them use what they know. Why will this happen? Bell curves are so culturally ingrained in us that most have a hard time reading outside of them. They structure our thinking and judging unconsciously. We tacitly expect them when we are asked to rank.

Thus no one is above the seductive allure of bell curves. It's part of white supremacy culture. It's part of our habits of language and judgment. I don't make this argument against standards and grading in writing assessment ecologies just to call attention to their exclusionary nature. It's also the engine that naturalizes habits of white language in writing classrooms. In classrooms, it seems like we are just talking about good writing, but it's really *white writing*. So work against white language supremacy. Stop grading. Stop using your standards against your students.

And the whole "grades as motivation" argument? It's tired. External motivators, like grades, are no substitution for intrinsic motivation to learn. In fact, many have shown how grades are harmful to all students and their abilities to learn (Kohn, *Punished*; "The Case"; Elbow; Bleich). Getting rid of grades on writing, as many writing teachers know intuitively, allows the ecology to refocus people's purposes for judgments and feedback toward other ends than acquiring grades or following orders, ends that are more critical and antiracist. Gradeless classrooms allow those in them to reorient themselves against the racist structures that make that classroom in the first place.

Most of what informs our classrooms come from white supremacy culture. It is a historical, institutional, and social condition. It is less a value or position one holds. So answering my central question well isn't about changing your heart or mind. White supremacy is not a certain thing that one does or feels. To be an agent of white supremacy, as I am saying we all are because we teach and judge writing today, is not an indictment of us as teachers or people, but an acknowledgement of the racist structures and institutions we are forced at the moment to live in. We can orient ourselves against such systems. More specifically, we might turn to the work of social activists like Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun. Their activist and educational work offer thirteen characteristics common to white supremacy cultures in organizations.

I call your attention to six characteristics that are likely an important part of your teaching and grading in your writing classrooms. They are the ways we've been trained as teachers. They are:

## Not Grading Writing as Teaching Writing

1. **Quantity over Quality** -- that is, a focus on quantifiable, measurable outcomes, like grading rubrics and scoring guides used to judge writing, place students and their writing in categories, rank them, and quantify them.
2. **Worship of the Written Word** -- this characteristic leads to a host of mind bugs in our judging of student writing, such as the WYSIATI (What you see is all there is) and the availability heuristics, which take only what is available to the judge-teacher and assumes that is all that is needed to make a decision, such as “how good is this paper in front of me?”
3. **Paternalism** -- in the writing classroom, this is often voiced as rationales by teachers that say, “I know what is best for them.” It’s a modern-day “white man’s burden” mentality. It’s the argument that all colonizers have made in history.
4. **Fear of Open Conflict** -- this characteristic of a classroom usually measures how well discussions go by the absence of conflict and argument, or by how little our students talk back and resist us. It ignores the fact that conflict and dissonance are good for us. It helps us know our gaps, feel our differences, and understand where we might grow.
5. **Objectivity** -- this characteristic is often a silent contradiction, since most of us would ascribe to the idea that there is no objective view that anyone can hold on to anything. And yet, we act as teachers of writing with our rubrics and red pens as if we hold such a view of our students’ languaging by grading that languaging. This is an orientation to judgments that favor being “calm, cool, and collected,” and discount any emotion-filled responses.
6. **Right to Comfort** -- or rather, this is the authority’s (usually the teacher’s) right to comfort, which ignores the fact that discomfort signals learning and growth, even for a teacher who needs it just as much as their students.

Now, Jones and Okun describe the *culture* of white supremacy, but what about white language supremacy?

“White language supremacy” is the *condition* in classrooms, schools, and society where rewards are given *in determined ways* to people who can most easily reach them, because those people have more access to the preferred and *embodied white language*

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*practices*. Part of that access is a *structural assumption* that what is reachable at a given moment for the normative, white, monolingual English user is reachable for all.

Here's a broader version of the same definition: White language supremacy is the condition in schools and classrooms where the products or effects of the classroom's systems and structures (which include our cultural and disciplinary language practices that teachers inherit) -- i.e. the course's standard operating procedures (SOPs) -- produce political, cultural, linguistic, and economic dominance for white students, faculty, and staff, despite anyone's intentions.

So white language supremacy is a set of conditions that are set up by structures that we have inherited and take for granted, and that are too often considered normal and neutral because they come from the white people and cultures that assume them and their own authority in places like university classrooms.

I realize that for some of you, what I'm saying may sound crazy. White language? It's just English, just language? There's no such thing as race. Language and good, clear communication have no race, so how can we have white language supremacy? It really ain't that hard to understand how the standards and outcomes in colleges and universities, in disciplines and English classrooms, amount to white language supremacy. Who made those standards? Where did those people come from? What places and groups of people have been in charge of such language standards? Who has historically been kept from making such standards, and who benefits most today from them?

Of course, the answer is white, middle- to upper-class, monolingual groups of people. Look at who writes the most popular English language grammar books and style guides. They all are white, mostly male, and often from the East coast. And each book offers the same habits of white language.

The top three style guides sold on Amazon are written by white men from the East coast. But really, there's no competition. Strunk and White's classic style guide has been and still is the most used. It's been around since 1959, but really William Strunk first published versions of it in 1918 and 1920. *The Elements of Style* has more reviews than any other grammar or style guide on Goodreads.com that I can find, way more. As of this last week, it has been reviewed or rated 77,714 times, with an average rating of 4.16 (out of 5). It receives on average an additional hundred ratings each month. Nearly half of all the ratings (46%) give it 5 stars. As a way to compare those ratings, the next closest style guide of English in terms of numbers of ratings is Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. Pinker's book has an average rating of 4.06 by 6,953 readers.

By these measures, Strunk and White's guide is by far the most influential English style guide in the last 100 years. But Pinker, a white, middle-class academic is not that dissimilar to Strunk or White. Pinker is a Harvard cognitive psychologist and linguist, who was born in Montreal, Canada, and received his PhD at Harvard. His father was a lawyer, and his mother was a vice-principal of a high school, while his grandparents owned a small, Montreal necktie factory. These are similar conditions and credentials that Strunk and White have. William Strunk was born in Cincinnati. His father was a teacher and lawyer. Strunk got his Ph.D. at Cornell, then taught there for 46 years, where E. B. White met him as his student. E. B. White was born in Mount Vernon, New York, to upper-class parents. His father was the president of a piano firm, and his mother was the daughter of the famous American painter, William Hart.

The point is, white men like these have created our language habits and standards from their places, the people around them, and the schools they attended. And because, as teachers and educators, we've ignored how these places, people, and their languaging are racialized, we have a difficult time talking about standards of English as white language supremacy.

Today, most racist outcomes in schools are accomplished without reference to race. Our ostensibly neutral language standards tacitly uphold racial inequality by being used as a universal yardstick by which all students are measured. This means that when we say that some instance of language is clear or effective, that we are not thinking or judging in racial terms, that clear and effective language, "good grammar" and expression, are neutral and raceless expectations, what we really mean is that those standards and expectations for language *should not* be racial. We confuse what *is* with what *should be*. It's a wish, not a historical fact. You cannot undo language history with a wish, but we don't have to repeat that history. We can change language structures and how we judge with them by changing our orientations toward them, or rather against them.

Let's PAUSE and WRITE: What are you feeling right now in your body? And what idea or question is most on your mind? Take 30 seconds and write.

White language supremacy does not reference opinions or beliefs about a superior race or skin color, but as I said already, a condition set up historically that reproduces unfair and unequal racial hierarchies through its outcomes. This is why we can have racism without racists, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's important sociological studies show us. We can have good intentions, be good people, demand "clear and logical" writing from students. Yet through our language standards and judgments, we

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end up promoting white language supremacy because those standards and expectations come historically from a white racial formation in the Western world. And when such standards are used to decide grades and opportunities for everyone, they become white language supremacy.

You want to stop white language supremacy in your literacy classrooms? You probably have to stop grading. Stop using your standard as the standard for all to mimic. There's my next bit of advice, but you likely know that already if you know me. So I won't dwell on it today.

Many have talked about the white supremacy condition in society as hegemony. As many of you probably know, the concept is Marxian, and it explains why we all can come to accept white supremacist educational systems without realizing that we've been enlisted in a language race war fought in such places as our classrooms.

The Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci says that dominant groups gain consent through hegemony or through the ongoing process of cultural and rhetorical conflict in society at all levels and places, like schools and popular culture, like language and standards, like AP tests and SATs, writing classrooms and GPAs, or the WPA Outcomes and departmental standards for writing. The result of this struggle is that the oppressed end up consenting to the ideas that make their oppression possible because their conditions demand it. It's the draw of our racist rationales that we tell ourselves and others, like if I don't grade by a standard in my classroom my students won't succeed; I'll be setting them up for failure tomorrow. It's also the attraction of the bootstrap myth, of the anyone-can-do-anything myth that the U.S. is built on. It's everyone's need to survive and maybe thrive.

We tell ourselves that it's just how you succeed today because it's how others succeeded yesterday. This is a white supremacist orientation. It accepts the racist status quo, and when we use it to justify demanding a white standardized English in our classrooms, it's white language supremacy. And this logic links our notions of language and judgment all the way back to our colonial beginnings. We think we're talking about helping students succeed, think critically, but we mean succeed and think like white people, the white people yesterday who succeeded, who were the only ones allowed to succeed.

White language supremacy is the hegemony in society and the academy. It's historical and everywhere. We all participate all the time. It's the standard operating procedure for becoming and acting as an academic and teacher. What else are writing classes but places of institutional colonization?

Another way to hear the hegemony in white language supremacy is in a poem written by me. Listen for the antiracist orientation the poem offers.



## Hegemony

is a house built on personal contradictions.  
It means that the critically conscious  
are critically guilty,  
    and seemingly hypocritical.  
It means limits and boundaries  
that feel like freewill,  
but are really  
predetermined preferences  
that feel like ourselves  
and feel good in our bones.  
It all works better  
when the system doesn't have to point a gun  
or order people to do or think things.  
It lets people  
point guns at themselves,  
do and think things  
it wants them to do and think.  
Hegemony convinces people  
that their oppression isn't oppression at all.  
It's Sunday afternoon football games,  
and going out to eat after church,  
or watching the latest action film,  
or playing an innocent video game  
made of killing and collecting  
electronic representations  
of real-life people and things  
that aren't real, but feel like it.  
It's conspicuously choosing  
the choices given to you.

Hegemony is a system  
that makes you feel bad  
and inadequate for what it doesn't provide.

It's like blaming the tennis player for where the baseline is located,

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or that you only get two chances at serving for each point.  
Only the hegemonic sets up its rules  
in order to benefit those who make rules.  
In such places,  
a few make rules and systems  
to perpetuate the things, conditions, and world they want  
to keep and pass on to their kids.  
This is all called fairness:  
merit,  
hard work,  
and always-receding delayed gratification,  
or should we say, deleted gratification,  
gratification never meant to be realized,  
only dangled in front of so many,  
a rhetorical ponzi scheme,  
played by those who only give  
the oppressed words,  
and try to convince them  
that they are not oppressed  
but free, free to be poor,  
free to do whatever they want.  
There is much oppression in the freedom  
that only words make.  
These are our values  
that devalue.

Putting aside  
the abstraction of “the middle class,”  
what I think is left in the world,  
the real, material world,  
is our languages,  
our stories,  
and the common senses  
we tell ourselves.  
But be careful.  
Everything is paradoxical  
when you drill down.

A word is hegemony made personal.  
And our stories help us  
consent to an unfair and racist world  
by offering us,  
teachers and intellectuals,  
a slice of really nice pie.

Sure, the pie can do things,  
and it's awfully -- terribly -- beautiful,  
but language is paradoxical.  
How is access to the middle class,  
whether abstract or real,  
not also becoming an agent of  
white supremacy,  
becoming the beautiful agent of racist systems  
made syrupy sweet?  
Are we not merely offering future opportunities and success  
in inopportune and anti-successful systems  
in our classrooms?

Hegemony  
is a house built on personal contradictions.  
It's the sweet taste of almost there.

Once we've bitten into  
the delicious and comforting pie,  
we can't help but eat it all,  
gobbling it down,  
and asking for more from the system  
and those who made it.  
But how exactly are the systems made  
that make our hunger for more pieces of pie?

And in our classrooms, we try to help our students,  
especially those coming from places  
and groups who have not  
had a taste of the pie yet,

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get their tastes.  
But it's all just the same old pie.  
And the result?  
Rotten teeth and diabetes.  
And it's all our fault,  
and their fault,  
and the system's fault.  
And it's all we can do,  
even as we resist.  
You gotta live, right?  
You gotta pay the bills  
and be happy, right?

Hegemony  
is a story built on personal contradictions.  
It's metonymy and synecdoche.  
It's white supremacy made in us all.

Let's PAUSE and WRITE: What are you feeling right now in your body? And what idea or question is most on your mind? Take 30 seconds and write.

As you may have guessed, antiracist orientations to grading and our pedagogies do not equate neatly to a particular pedagogy or practice. We might identify a pedagogy or practice as antiracist in a classroom, but because racism and white supremacy are so much a part of everything -- they are structural -- it's easy for a pedagogy or practice to be co-opted by the hegemonic structures around us. As Grascmi explains, this is how hegemony works. It constantly changes, adapts, and co-opts the forces and agents that work against it. Why fight your enemy head on when you can incorporate them into your army and make them fight for you?

For instance, we want our students of color to be as successful as our white students already are, but we want that success to look the same, sound the same. In fact, the system defines success in that way, or rather in one way. In fact, we only recognize success in one, white way. We want everyone to meet the same white standards of English language, read and appreciate the same white authors and texts, just with a sprinkle of Brown and Black in the curricular dishes -- you know, for flava and spice, for garnish. But not many expect the Black and Brown parts of our courses and curricula to sustain us, feed us, make us stronger. Ain't that a shame. What a loss.

And this is often because our practices get inserted back into the hegemonic white supremacist system without us understanding the meaning of them in our places with those around us, and so the same outcomes circulate. We get a version of the same white supremacy we've always had.

So if we cannot have an inherently antiracist pedagogy or practice, then what can I offer you? I can offer an *antiracist orientation* to your work, language, and the larger schools and societal structures around and in us. We must be *antiracist toward systems*, not so much people. This is why my central question is, "What does it mean to form an antiracist orientation to teaching and grading writing?" It's not "*how* to form one," it's "what does it mean." What it means is that you see, feel, and experience the conditions and systems around you differently, as oppression and liberation, as limits and boundaries and other things.

The how is really up to you. Your how is your laboring in the conditions you find yourselves in, among the people near you. I cannot do this laboring for you, nor can I know the important details of the how in your place with your students. You must inquire and respond to these things constantly. It's hard work because once you figure out something, inevitably things change, and you've got to do something else. And of course, likely, for many, there is a lot of learning about race and racism and whiteness to do.

Orientations are flexible, though, adapting to context, people, and places. They can be crafty and sneaky, trickster-like. An antiracist orientation can adapt to the hegemonic racism built into our schools, curricula, and even our own training and habits of language and judgment. Sometimes, we gotta do brave work to undo ourselves and our training.

Again, let's PAUSE and WRITE: What are you feeling right now in your body? And what idea or question is most on your mind? Take 30 seconds and write.

I suppose you could say that the teacherly orientation I'm calling for is not just an antiracist one but an explicitly racialized and political one, one that is conscious of the importance of the politics of race in the teaching and judging we do. So it's also a racialized and political orientation. It's about politics, power. But be careful. The problem with identifying just politics, avoiding the racial, is that it too easily can appear as if we don't have racist problems in our systems and schools, in our classrooms and assessment practices, in the very disciplines that make us as teachers and educators. It's like we ain't teaching already in fucked up systems with fucked rules. But we do. And so, our orientations should be against those things. This means

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we must embrace conflict and not understand it as merely “against” something else. That logic is limiting and, quite frankly, whitely and a characteristic of white supremacy culture.<sup>1</sup> Conflict, not comfort, is how we’ll dismantle white supremacy. Most of us need more conflict in our classrooms and grading practice, not more white comfort. Comfort is how we got here. Antiracist orientations embrace conflict because it's the way toward change, growth.

Using more facially positive terms, or ones that seem to provoke less ire by others, can also lead us to talk past each other. That is, people who seem to be discussing the same topic, even agreeing generally about their purposes and goals, but really, they ain’t. They are talking about different things, and it always leads to reinforcing white supremacy. That’s the game, especially in schools and universities. One teacher is talking about breaking racist systems by *NOT talking about race or racism*, or maybe talking about a lot of other salient oppressions all together, so instead, they talk about inclusion and valuing other ways with language more generally. They talk about “closing achievement gaps.” They talk about helping “underprepared” students or “disadvantaged” ones, making special classes -- all code words for students of color and deficit.

This kind of language participates in the old Southern strategy of racist discourse.<sup>2</sup> Talk about race by not talking about it. From this orientation, it would appear the system is okay. It just needs to add some inclusion, a text from a Latin or Black author, a helpful course or tutor. “How would you say that at home with ya momma?” “Now, let’s translate for school.” “Take this course, it will help you succeed and achieve.” “Go to the writing center.” But it’s all just assimilationist discourse that punishes people for being where they are from.

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<sup>1</sup> For the term “whitely” and “whiteness,” I draw on Marilyn Frye’s, “White Woman Feminist,” in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism* (The Crossing Press, 1992), accessed at <https://feminist-reprise.org/library/race-and-class/white-woman-feminist/>. Frye draws on several scholars of color to understand the term and set of behaviors: Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing By Radical Women of Color*, (Brooklyn, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1985); John Langston Gewaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (NY: Random House, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Lee Atwater perfected the “Southern strategy” for political rhetoric. Its goals were to maintain white supremacy by not explicitly talking about race in political discourse. Atwater was the political strategist for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. See Rick Perlstein, “Exclusive: Lee Atwater’s Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy,” *The Nation* (13 Nov 2012), accessed at <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/>.

Meanwhile an antiracist teacher is talking about dismantling curricula because it promotes only a white European set of languages and values and makes it harder for most of the students of color and poor students in their classroom to achieve success. Success is defined, they say, in elite white racial terms, languages, and habits of learning. They push against the grading of their students. They openly criticize department standards for writing. They want to decolonize the reading lists. This teacher tells their students: “The system playin’ ya.” “Ya gettin’ gamed.” “It’s makin’ ya think you ain’t good enough or too stupid to achieve,” while it hides its white, middle-class standards behind the smoke of raceless, universalizing language that just ain’t true.

The first teacher is ignoring the racism in the system by not acknowledging the fundamental white supremacy of it, not calling it out, while the second teacher is addressing it as already politically raced and pushing to dismantle it. They are not talking about the same kinds of goals. They do not have the same orientation. The first orientation is to fix a fundamentally good system, the second is to replace a fundamentally corrupt one. Fixing and replacing ain’t the same orientation.

When we place both teachers into that same system, say a classroom or a faculty meeting, the first seems more positive, more palatable, more agreeable, more helpful, because they are doing diversity and inclusion work as the system has prescribed it. They maintain white language supremacy, not disrupt it. They make white comfort, not conflict with white supremacist systems. They seem to be “preparing” students for a white Supremacist tomorrow. The second teacher just seems like a troublemaker.

But in the end, when history rolls on, the first teacher simply makes more white supremacy, while the second, the antiracist troublemaker-teacher, will be the one who makes things more equitable for all. If the system is racist, you gotta make trouble for it. You make trouble by reorienting yourself against it. You embrace conflict.

This talking past each other is also a white supremacist strategy that avoids the actual conflict, as if conflict is abnormal or bad. Conflict, tension, difference, disagreement are typical and normal in human societies. Conflict and the confronting of difference is how people and systems change, how we all learn new things and grow. You want to be antiracist, but you don’t know how? The systems haven’t seemed difficult or unfair to you? It’s hard to understand all the ways you are privileged? Then you need to change your orientation, to be different, be uncomfortable, so that you can see, feel, and understand things differently. That’s inner conflict, and it can make you better. So why demonize conflict? Why be afraid to disagree? Why be afraid to be a troublemaker in a racist system?

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Avoiding antiracist orientations to our disciplines, research, and teaching, or even just avoiding the terms of race and racism in our standards and grading, participates in another problem: *Trying to celebrate or value diversity and inclusion without orienting yourself against the systems that make those very acts necessary today.* It's an avoidance strategy. It's another way to avoid race and racism by focusing on other more palatable and acceptable things.

In his classic book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, the late sociologist Philip Slater calls this logic the "Toilet Assumption," which he explains is "the notion that unwanted matter, unwanted difficulties, unwanted complexities and obstacles will disappear if they are removed from our immediate field of vision." He's talking about common sense practices in the U.S., and he goes on: "Our approach to social problems is to decrease their visibility: out of sight, out of mind. This is the real foundation of racial segregation, especially in its most extreme case, the Indian 'reservation.'" And to his list, we should probably add the redlining practices of banks, Japanese "internment," and so-called "remedial" English courses for students.

What this removal of problems does, according to Slater, is "decrease, in the mass of the population, the knowledge, skill, resources, and motivation necessary to deal with them."<sup>3</sup> And so, to ignore race and racism in our schools and teaching, in the way we define our teacherly orientations, really amounts to eroding our abilities and desire as a community to dismantle white supremacy and racist systems.

Many of you may be thinking that this is all well and good, but you need something practical. Again, let me warn you about that impulse. It participates in white habits of language that often turn into white language supremacy in schools and other places. The impulse for the practical often comes out of a sense of urgency. It's the need for high impact practices now that can be demonstrable in outcomes. It rushes past what those practices mean to those in that place, and the future lessons that that understanding may offer you. It also tends to sacrifice inclusive processes for quicker results.

The impulse for the immediately practical also can work in faulty either-or thinking. It is often placed against the reflective, theoretical, and philosophical. The "how to" of antiracist teaching is artificially placed in opposition to the why's, where's, and who's of antiracist orientations. Cultivating antiracist orientations allows you to

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pg. 15.



attend to the meaning of any practice, sometimes changing it, sometimes scrapping it altogether, but it is always flexible.

Antiracism isn't an Easter egg hunt, where you collect as many pretty, shiny pedagogical eggs as you can. It's about seeing and feeling the egg hunt for what it is, a deception, something to keep your eyes, mind, and feelings off of the system, off of the racist game of Easter egg hunting.

But this impulse also infantilizes you as a teacher. Don't settle for other people's answers. Settle for your own but learn about why and how others do what they do in their places. Anything practical or "how to" that I might offer you today should be heard with a grain of salt. Like everyone else's practices, mine come out of me and my conditions (or lack thereof).

*And so, what it means to be an antiracist teacher is to have an antiracist orientation to your work, your planning, your expectations of students, your grading, and your own body in the classroom.*

Let's PAUSE and WRITE: What are you feeling right now in your body? And what idea or question is most on your mind? Take 30 seconds and write.

In my own and other literacy teachers' antiracist orientations, I have found at least twelve common elements, some are impulses and urges, some are goals and purposes, while still others are flexible practices or behaviors that may look different in different places. All are important, so I find it difficult to cherry-pick from them, then call myself an antiracist teacher. I've grouped them into four overarching categories for convenience's sake. These categories may help you think about the areas of your teaching life that can be reoriented. Your practices will flow from that new orientation.

I offer them as a way to end my talk and encourage you to engage with me about them and ask questions. I won't describe them all but focus our attention on just four of them.

1. The teacher explicitly **pays attention to the intersectional subjectivities** in the classroom, and the way those subject positions, and people, affect learning and processes of learning, which always starts with the teacher's own identity. This includes embodying a deep interest in students reflecting upon their own intersectional subject positions as political ones that are implicated in literacies, habits of language, ways of learning, and the classroom space. It's calling attention to the structural or social in the individual without forgetting the individual situated in the structural. This orientation urges the teacher to make

explicit the politics of languaging and its judgment, showing students how language and people are valued or devalued in conventional racist systems, such as the school itself. Key questions are: How am I made by the structures, policies, practices, languages, literatures, behaviors, training, people -- the racist discourse -- around me? How do I already situate myself in the racist discourse around me?

2. The teacher **calls attention to the racial politics of language and its judgment**, which includes the politics (or power relations) that regulate or mediate the teacher's own assessments and evaluations of students' languaging. Lessons and activities are historically and politically framed, highlighting the difference in power, authority, and value among different racialized language groups and language habits. In their own assessments and evaluations, the teacher also calls attention to the teacher's own position of power and authority, highlighting where the teacher's language habits and expectations come from, who they have tended to benefit and why. Key questions are: How are my own language and ways of judging language racialized in my history, education, and experience? What do those politics mean for my students who do not share the same racialized habits of language and judgment? How can I call attention to these racial politics of my language and judgments in my classroom and on my students' literacy performances?
3. The teacher **crafts antiracist purposes and goals** for what they do, what students do, and how teaching and learning are accomplished in the classroom. While activities and assignments may have purposes that ask students to engage with dominant, White English language practices, standards, and literature, the goals are never to simply mimic those standards or appreciate the literature as universally good or preferred. The goals are to understand such practices, standards, and literatures as historically and politically created by particular groups of (usually white) people, and to draw out who those practices, standards, and literatures have tended to benefit when circulated or promoted in schools and society. This orientation focuses on goals that center the politics of language and its judgment in ways that talk back to, or counter, the status quo and the systems in place. Key questions are: What antiracist purposes and goals can I create for all my students' work? How can I help students come to flexible practices that offer them knowledge about dominant habits of white language and a critical orientation to those habits? How can I

help them see the ways racist discourse may produce false ideas about themselves and their world or a sense of alienation that may be difficult to realize?

4. The teacher **resists hierarchical logics** as a way to organize the classroom, materials, ideas, assessments, students, and their language performances, while also calling attention to the ways schooling and learning have used such hierarchies to determine value and worth in languages and people. This means the teacher addresses the ways their assessments and grading practices participate in racist and white supremacist hierarchical logics. These logics unfairly categorize language performances and students, usually along tacit racialized lines. The teacher shows and analyzes with students how the world and our ways of explaining things are already made and arranged hierarchically by people. Through these discussions, teacher and students resist such hierarchical making of things, ideas, people, and languages because the practice unnecessarily and unfairly creates racial privilege and oppression. Key questions: How exactly have I organized my classroom, lessons, assignments, readings, and grading in ways that may assume hierarchical logics? How might I call attention to these logics with students and find alternative ways of organizing the class and its materials? How do I grade in ways that use hierarchical logics and systems, and what alternatives can I employ (e.g., ungrading, labor-based grading contracts, etc.)?

These four categories seem a good place to start for those wanting to. In total, these twelve elements of an antiracist orientation to teaching literacy make the most sense to me, and I hope, offer flexible ways to make antiracist classrooms with your students. I know, each one requires more reading, more thinking, more research on your part, and that is where we are at. We must always work at our orientations. That is what people with an antiracist orientation do. They work and work and work because our white supremacist system continues to work around us and in us. Thank you.

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