

Beyond Good Intentions: Learning to See and Address Race and Diversity in the Work We Do

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In their 2017 article “Race, Silence, and WPA,” Genevieve García de Müeller and Iris Ruiz challenged *WPA: Writing Program Administration* to interrogate the “direct relationship between race and writing program administration,” calling such work a “critical” task for the field (“Race,” 19). While de Müeller and Ruiz write with an eye toward future scholarship, this bibliographic essay responds to their call historically, asking how has *WPA: Writing Program Administration* engaged, or not, race and diversity in its intellectual work over the past forty years. Not surprisingly, archival research reveals that the journal’s historical engagements with diversity and race constellate around three areas common to *WPA* research: program design and curriculum, assessment, and professional development, each of which I develop in brief below.¹ First, however, I’d like to reflect on something rather surprising that I found, or, rather, didn’t find in the journal’s archives—a curious oversight in our discussions of policy.

POLICY

The journal’s first twenty years are interesting perhaps more so for what’s absent from its pages—namely, *Student’s Right to Their Own Language* (SRTOL). This bears repeating: not a single *WPA* article between 1978–1999 engages, tacitly or otherwise, with SRTOL. Adopted in 1974 by both NCTE and CCCC, SRTOL—a landmark policy that “affirm[s] the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language”—was, and arguably remains, the field’s most progressive policy in terms of addressing race and diversity in language practice. Given SRTOL’s adoption four years prior to *WPA*’s inaugural issue in 1978, its absence in the journal’s early years is worth noting. Why *WPA* overlooked engagement with SRTOL is an interesting question; archival research suggests one possible explanation is that *WPA* dedicated most of its early intellectual efforts to the twin tasks

of professionalization and labor management. Given these pragmatic concerns, the absence of explicit engagements with race and diversity in the journal's early volumes is disheartening if understandable. Given the journal's explicit and sustained focus on policy,² however, the lack of engagement with SRTOL is surprising. SRTOL might be our greatest oversight as a professional community, particularly with regards to assessment—for which Asao Inoue takes the journal to task two decades later (“Engaging”; “Friday”; “Looking”).

Moving forward, *WPA* might more actively engage the implications of SRTOL with respect to program design and assessment, drawing especially on Inoue's work as well as critical race theory, cultural rhetorics, and code switching/meshing theories, for example, to rethink communally responsible ways to affirm diverse language practices in writing classrooms and in our theorizing and evaluation of student writing.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND CURRICULUM

In the 1990s, rapidly shifting student demographics, a critical turn in humanistic study, and “sweeping” general education reforms “brought radical changes to traditional writing requirements” (Gradin 55). Thus began an extended conversation in *WPA* concerning program design. At the heart of the matter was how theory and content might drive FYW curriculum, and the role of rhetoric and cultural studies therein (Shamoon et al. 7). In their 1995 “New Rhetoric Courses in Writing Programs” Linda Shamoon et al. asked,

Does rhetoric mean an enumerating of the many forms of writing that occur in our culture so that students may imitate these forms? Is it the study of argumentation so that students have sensible responses to socially important topics like abortion or gun control? Is it part of the field of cultural studies, so that students are more tolerant in the expression of their views and more critically aware of various aspects of “culture”? (11)

Sustained conversation about the challenges and opportunities of designing these new rhetoric courses fill the journal's pages thereafter.³ By the turn of the century, the jury was in: cultural analysis and critique became a *sin qua non* of our curricular wheelhouse.⁴

While cultural critique sounds good in theory, hindsight reveals several challenges in our practice. John Trimbur's provocative 1998 article “The Problem with English (Only),” for example, argued that FYW's origins are problematically linked to a “racialized curriculum” (27). Evidence of a racialized curriculum also crops up in our analysis of text books. Nedra

Reynolds' 1995 article "Dusting Off Instructor Manuals" showed how said textbooks "construct student subjects as unified, coherent, rational individuals . . . compos[ing] in isolation, free of conflicts of race, class, gender, or sexuality"—a stance that problematically "flattened" difference and diversity and which Reynolds saw as being incompatible with our field's theoretical and pedagogical practices (9). In 2016, Cedric Burrows named this phenomenon "The Yardstick of Whiteness," or an ideological stance in textbooks that functions "to make the marginalized writer/subject more palatable for white audiences" (42).

The journal's engagements with English as a Second Language/Multilingual Learners (ESL/MLL) and basic writing curriculum further lay bare writing program administration's historical entanglements with race and diversity. In 1995, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson for example, lamented how basic writers are "squashed" by institutional narratives that tell them "over and over that they have problems with their writing" (71), leading Ira Shor to famously indict the course as "Our Apartheid" in the *Journal of Basic Writing* in 1997. WPA engagements with the course and its students proceed with caution thereafter. In their comprehensive review essays, Scott Stevens (2002) and Kelly Ritter ("Conflicted" 2010) respectively demonstrated how the basic writer is socially constructed with respect to the financial welfare of the university, and Stuart Blythe et al's 2009 article "Exploring Options" empirically demonstrated how required basic writing courses may increase attrition of our most marginalized students. More than twenty years after Shor, Sanchez and Branson (1997) ask us to take a hard look at the disparity between enrollment (increasing) and graduation (decreasing) rates of minority students in order to make better arguments about their educational needs (including mainstreaming) and prevent them from "fall[ing] between the cracks" (48). Given the economic and psychological consequences surrounding basic writing and minority students, scholars begin to argue for mainstreaming as both a "communally responsible" and "practical" act (Marzluf; Ritter, *Before* 140).

Paul Matsuda's tireless contributions to the journal also wake CWPA members up to the communally responsible and practical challenges concerning the "new normal" of working with multilingual students. In a 2011 review essay "Second Language Writers" with Tanita Saenkhum, Matsuda advocated for better understanding of the "growing diversity within the second language writer population in terms of their educational pathways" and needs. Much of Matsuda's and his co-authors' contributions to the journal advocate for expanding space and resources to support linguistic diversity in writing programs and FYW classrooms ("Embracing"; "Let's Face It"; "Letter")—a vision that pushes SRTOL (a policy that supports

students' rights to *dialectal* diversity more so than *language* diversity per se) to its conceivable limits.

This vision brings us back to actionable challenges for the journal, which Trimbur prophesied in 1998: "One of the central challenges facing program design is to imagine writing instruction from an internationalist perspective, in multiple languages" ("The Problem" 28). Emerging MLL programming in many universities across the nation is one such actionable response to Matsuda and Trimbur, and *WPA* would do well to stay intellectually engaged with these efforts and their implications for SRTOL moving forward.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment is a fraught topic, all the more so when centering race and diversity. While we might like to imagine our evaluation of student texts as free of racial conflict and identity,⁵ Jasmine Kar Tang and Noro Andriamanalina's 2016 article "Rhonda Left Early" reminded us that "race and writing are inextricable" (10). Drawing on Behm and Miller, in 2017, Bethany Davila also empirically demonstrated how "colorblindness in talk about student texts" reinforces the "coercive force of whiteness" of standard edited American English (SEAE) (154), confirming Inoue's troubling assertion that our history of assessment and judgments about writing are steeped in "whitely" values that fly in the face of SRTOL and often work against the interests and needs of MLL and POC students ("Engaging"; "Looking"; "Racism").

Concerns about whitely judgments of writing are also relevant to our understanding of plagiarism, a topic that relates directly to evaluations of writing by "basic writers" and MLL students. In "Responding to Plagiarism" (1992), Susan McLeod reminded us plagiarism "is not only modern, it is also profoundly Western" (12). McLeod taught us an important lesson that multilingual and "international students with different cultural notions about sources do not need admonitions and disciplinary action; they need further help with their learning" (13). This empathic stance is given more substantive treatment in terms of race by Dorothy Wells (1993) in "Cases of Unintentional Plagiarism." Coming from the perspective of teaching writing in an HBI, Wells identified an unintentional "plagiarism of desperation" often committed by students who felt genuinely inadequate and underprepared to write in college (61). Wells uncomfortably queried whether students' unintentional plagiarism might also be the result of a poor pedagogy, and rightly admonishes the "heavy personal toll" such pedagogy takes on students' lives (60).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Wells' fear of poor pedagogy reflects broader communal concerns about professional development in writing instruction. Increasing enrollments of diverse and multilingual student populations coupled with growing emphases in higher education on diversity initiatives underscore the need for responsible professional development in writing instruction (Cogie; Dufflemeyer)—as does SRTOL, which emphasizes that “teachers *must* have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the rights of students to their own language.” And yet, a troubling historical truth of FYW is that its instructors tend to be the least experienced and most contingent members of our field—many, like myself once, are graduate students cutting their teaching teeth for the first time; others still are adjuncts navigating the precarity of contingent work and underfunded positions. How best then to professionally develop these well-intentioned but often under-equipped instructors to teach the kinds of critical pedagogy necessary to respect diversity and race and uphold students' rights to their own language practices?

The Wyoming Resolution (1989), unfortunately, is a dream still deferred; thus, CWPA must begin to imagine communally responsible professional development. One favorable approach has been through storytelling: while Wendy Swyt (1996) rightly cautioned us not to flatten diversity through overdetermined and decontextualized case training, Boardman (1994), Anson et al. (1998), and Rose and Finders (1998) have all explored teacher stories and case study as productive methods for problem solving conflicts around diversity. In 2009, the journal challenged us to once again engage diversity in our intellectual work “visibly and purposefully” (Horning, Dew, and Blalock 163). Jonathan Alexander responded by proposing a focus on discourses of othering as a way to combat “the heart of the problem of bigotry and prejudice” (166) of which the CWPA is not immune.

In the 2016 WPA “Symposium on Challenging Whiteness,” for example, Collin Lamont Craig and Staci Perryman-Clark’s “Troubling the Boundaries Revisited” brought “awareness to inequities and racial microaggressions” that are prevalent in our community and to the harm that they do to POC graduate students and WPAs (20). Sherri Craig’s “Story-less Generation” powerfully argued for better representation and more stories by POC graduate students and WPAs to counterbalance our white narrative history, and Kar Tang and Andriamanalina’s “Rhonda Left Early” urged CWPA to invest in better POC graduate student support. The “Symposium on Challenging Whiteness and/in Writing Program Administration and Writing Program” merits a close read and is crucial to the ongoing

work of unpacking our invisible knapsack and solidifying our communal commitments to antiracist administration (McIntosh). Indeed, communal commitments to the symposium's actionable requests cannot be overemphasized. Although "Racial formation cannot be removed from writing program administration in the US" (Kar Tang and Andriamanalina 10), García de Müeller and Ruiz have empirically demonstrated that when we "put resources and time towards researching and implementing race-based writing program strategies, POC students benefit, POC academics feel supported, and white/Caucasian instructors are more able to address race in articulate and concrete ways" (36–37).

That diversity and race are often treated as a special topic in, rather than integral to, the journal, however, may indicate that we struggle to account for and challenge whiteness in our intellectual work; that, perhaps, we haven't been "paying attention" as much as we'd like to admit over the past forty years (Rhodes 126). The uneasy, if unsurprising, truth is that POC and queer scholars shoulder the burden of consciousness raising and holding the field accountable for doing much of our race and diversity work. And they grow understandably impatient with the field. In 2013, Harry Denny's "A Queer Eye for the WPA" lamented how, "It's pretty typical for white people to overstate or over-represent diversity" (190). And in a move that "ain't terribly white and middle class" (138), Asao Inoue's 2016 CWPA plenary queried, "Is it possible that our programs and the CWPA are run by whitely dispositions" (152)? Changing such dispositions, however uncomfortable, Inoue argued, is the imperative "work of antiracism" (152).

Late founding editor Kenneth Bruffee once praised *WPA* for its "ability to hear valid criticism. Not just listen to it. Hear it, and turn it to good use" (10). Designing and administering accessible, antiracist writing programs is undoubtedly critical and often daunting work that requires ongoing communal commitment. Archival records reveal an earnest if uneven history of communal efforts to reimagine writing program administration as a site of allyship and antiracism. As a small step in this direction, this bibliographic essay has attempted to recount how the journal and its contributors have tackled race and diversity over the past forty years in order to better account for the "yardstick of whiteness" that inflects our intellectual work. There is much work yet to do and much to write about. We must, and we will, do this important work for the good of our students and our colleagues who deserve better.

NOTES

1. See the appendix for empirical results.

2. Watershed policies like *Portland* (Hult et al. 1992), *Wyoming* (CCCC Committee on Professional Standards for Quality Education), and *Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration* (1998) occupy much of the journal's intellectual attention in the first twenty years.

3. See, for example, Butler; Gradin; Bamberg; Farris; Himley; and Kramer.

4. These new political classes did not go without caution, perhaps most forthrightly in Maxine Hairston's famous 1992 *CCC* article "Diversity, Ideology, and Composition," the sentiments of which were echoed a year later by James Seitz in his *WPA* article "Eluding Righteous Discourse."

5. I'm thinking here of Ed White's and my failure to adequately account for race and diversity in assessment practices in *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating* (5th ed), for example.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Frequency results of pre-set codes as appearing in WPA article titles by decade. Corpus analysis reveals that less than 2% of sum total WPA journal articles use the words, "race," "whiteness," or "diversity," or their root form, in their titles.

Pre-set codes	Search term	1978– 1988	1989– 1999	2000– 2009	2010– 2018	Total	% of total entries
Race	"rac"	0	0	0	5	5	0.7%
White/ness	"white"	0	0	2	2	4	0.3%
Diversity	"divers"	0	0	4	4	8	1.1%

Table 2

Frequency results of open-code themes and terms as appearing in individual article titles by decade. Corpus analysis reveals that approximately 13% of WPA articles have engaged race and diversity by the open-coded terms used herein. The majority of this engagement has appeared in the last twenty years (2000–18) and centered mostly around discussions of basic writing and MLL writers as well as discussions around labor.

Pre-set codes	Search term	1978– 1988	1989– 1999	2000– 2009	2010– 2018	Total	% of total entries
Diversity	“div”	0	0	4	4	8	1.1%
Color (blind)	“color”	0	0	0	4	4	0.5%
Race/ism	“rac”	0	0	0	5	5	0.7%
White/ness	“white”	0	0	0	2	2	0.3%
Low-income	“low”	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Social Class	“class”	0	0	0	1	1	0.1%
Gender	“gender” and “woman”	0	1	0	2	3	0.4%
Labor/Work	“labor” and “work”	0	6	9	10	25	3.3%
MLL	“multil”	0	0	1	2	3	0.4%
ESL	“ESL”	1	2	3	3	9	1.2%
L2/Second	“l2” and “second”	0	0	7	4	11	1.4%
Basic Writer	“basic”	2	2	3	3	10	1.3%
At risk	“at risk”	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Latinx	“latin”	0	0	1	0	1	0.1%
Urban/Black	“urban” and “black”	0	0	0	1	1	0.1%
Rural	“rural”	0	0	1	0	1	0.1%
Social Justice	“just”	0	0	0	1	1	0.1%
Citizen/ship	“citizen”	0	0	1	2	3	0.4%
Activism	“activ”	0	0	2	3	5	0.7%
Advocacy	“advoc”	0	0	2	0	2	0.3%
Bias	“bias”	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Queer	“queer”	0	0	0	4	4	0.5%
Total		3	11	34	51	99	12.9%

