

# CONTENTS

Introduction. Laboring Toward Grading Contracts and the Inner Dikes . . . . 3

Chapter 1. Problematizing Grading and the White *Habitus* of the Writing Classroom . . . . . 21

Chapter 2. How I Came to Labor-Based Grading Contracts. . . . . 49

Chapter 3. What is Labor in Labor-Based Grading Contracts? . . . . . 77

Chapter 4. What Labor-Based Grading Contracts Look Like . . . . . 129

Chapter 5. Why I Use a Charter for Compassion with My Contract . . . . . 169

Chapter 6. What Concerns Are There of Labor-Based Grading Contracts?. 191

Chapter 7. How Effective Can Labor-Based Grading Contracts Be? . . . . . 237

Coda. Assessing English So That People Stop Killing Each Other. . . . . 305

Works Cited. . . . . 313

Appendix A. Grading Contract for First Year Writing. . . . . 329

Appendix B. Sample Charter for Compassion . . . . . 337

Appendix C. Sample Labor Log . . . . . 339

**LABOR-BASED GRADING  
CONTRACTS: BUILDING EQUITY  
AND INCLUSION IN THE  
COMPASSIONATE WRITING  
CLASSROOM**

INTRODUCTION.

# LABORING TOWARD GRADING CONTRACTS AND THE INNER DIKES

If you are picking up this book because you're interested in learning about grading contracts for your English or writing classroom, or you have used them and want to think more deeply about them or revise your practice, you got the right book. But this book is also about grading literacy performances more broadly—that is, I think, a teacher can learn something about any grading practice from this book even if they decide not to use labor-based grading contracts. Doing grading well, either at the secondary or postsecondary level, is not simply about finding the best practice, method, or mechanism. It is about understanding the various ways that the nature and function of grades might be constructed in a classroom, and the variety of consequences to learning that are possible. What I'm saying is that designing fair and meaningful grading practices is about cultivating with our students an ecology, a place where every student, no matter where they come from or how they speak or write, can have access to the entire range of final course grades possible.

This book focuses on one kind of grading contract, one that calculates final course grades purely by the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing. While the qualities of student writing is still at the center of the classroom and feedback, it has no bearing on the course grade. Why take our judgments of quality out of the tabulation of course grades and progress in a course? Because all grading and assessment exist within systems that uphold singular, dominant standards that are racist, and White supremacist when used uniformly. This problem is present in any grading system that incorporates a standard, no matter who is judging, no matter the particulars of the standard. Thus, in the chapters that follow, I critique hybrid grading contracts, such as those advocated by Danielewicz and Elbow, and Ira Shor (“Critical Pedagogy” and *Empowering Education*), that use notions of quality in order to determine the higher grades possible. In my experience and research, a grading contract based only on labor is better for all students and undermines the racist and White supremacist grading systems we all live with at all levels of education. But using labor as the only way to grade my students allows my classroom assessment ecologies to engage in larger social justice projects, ones that make up an important agenda of

mine, ones that interrogate and attempt to dismantle White language supremacy in schools and society. This project is one that builds equity and inclusion in writing classrooms while also engaging students with the politics of language. It turns out that engaging with diverse ways of languaging and judging in the right kinds of assessment ecologies offers flexible and critical rhetorical training that can prepare students for a wide variety of communication situations.

When grading is done well, it offers opportunities to address the politics of the judgment of language, which is vital in negotiating any rhetorical situation in and out of school. Some call this critical pedagogy, but I think the minute writing teachers move the discussion to pedagogy, to teaching, to lessons and readings, most teachers ignore or forget about assessment and grading. Or maybe, many of us feel that the grading part of a course can be separated from the learning part, or the critical part. Most of us don't grade first drafts anyway, right? But that isn't enough. It is often believed falsely that grading is just an institutional necessity, something we can ask students to ignore, at least while they are learning. But to attempt to do that is to ignore the way grades work in classrooms, how they shape many aspects of the entire ecology, how they influence students' and teachers' actions. Not thinking of assessment first, or at least simultaneously with pedagogy, is a mistake. And our students who do not already come to us embodying a dominant English will pay for it, even when our intentions are to help those very students.

At its best, the practice of grading writing can be a cyclical, self-conscious, evolving practice informed by reflection on that practice and dialogue. That is, it can be just as much a learning practice for the teacher as it is meant to be for students. It can be an ongoing loop of paying attention to what we are doing when we grade, or when we think we are supposed to be grading, and letting those insights inform how we do assessment together with our students tomorrow. Most of all, it can be about deeply attending to our students, not to correct but to understand and grow ourselves and allow them to understand and grow. The goal of the kind of assessment ecology I'm calling for in this book is one that makes the means of grading also its ends. Why? Well, the book will explain in a number of ways. But in short, because the means, our processes of laboring, are all we have and all our students can have for their learning. I hope that short answer will become richer as you read on.

## **UNDERMINING WHITE LANGUAGE SUPREMACY**

One main goal I have for this book about labor-based grading contracts for secondary and postsecondary writing classrooms is simple. I wish to change the rules of the grading game in writing classrooms. I know that most writing teach-

ers hate grading, and know intuitively how bad it is for their students' learning. It is a distraction that pulls students away from the real dialogues and discussions about their writing that we want to have. It isn't formative in nature. A grade on a paper is a red herring to most students. But there is a more sinister problem with grading, one that may make some teachers very uncomfortable, because it is going to sound like a personal attack, or a reason to be permissive and lax about standards. It may even sound like a way not to prepare our students for future success with language. I want to assure you that this is far from what I mean and far from what I've seen in my own classrooms.

What is this more sinister problem with grading? Grading, because it requires a single, dominant standard, is a racist and White supremacist practice. There is no way around it. Let me back up and come at this claim from some known premises. Grading is almost always employed in order to control students (and sometimes their teachers), force students to be accountable (and sometimes their teachers), and measure or rank students (and sometimes their teachers), either against each other or against a single standard. Each of these purposes for grading in writing classrooms is detrimental to learning generally, and more harmful to many students of color and raciolinguistically diverse students. This is because "diverse students" means "not White students," or students who use varieties of English that are not the standardized version used in the schools.<sup>1</sup> Raciolinguistically diverse students come to our classrooms with *habitus* (or linguistic, bodily, and performative dispositions) that do not match the White racial *habitus* embodied in the standard of the classroom. In short, the traditional purposes and methods used for grading writing turn out to be *de facto* racist and White supremacist. Grading by a standard, thus, is how White language supremacy is perpetuated in schools.

Let me pause for a moment and explain why I will be using the terms, "White supremacy" and "White language supremacy," since I know they can be triggers for many, especially White people. I use these terms compassionately as a way to help teachers of all political stripes confront their Whiteness and stay in the discomfort that the term generates when associated with our own grading practices, with our own values and habits, with our bodies. When we associate the things we hold dear with something like White supremacy, it can sound like an attack on your person. It can be uncomfortable. Yes, I want you to feel uncomfortable because it can help you *feel the problem*, not intellectualize it, or see it, or hear it. You need to feel it if you want to change systems.

In fact, this tactic itself is one way I resist the rhetorical pull to produce a

---

1 I realize that race does not equal language practice. All White students do not use the dominant standardized version of English expected in their classrooms, but that is the dominant pattern in the US. Black, Latinx, Asian, and indigenous students may also use the dominant English, but that is not the pattern in the US.

text that both assumes a cool, calm, and rational tone and expects its readers to have the same disposition as they read. This disposition to be calm and rational is a part of the academic dispositions that Thaiss and Zawacki contend, in their interdisciplinary study of writers, may be universal in all academic writing (5-6). This disposition also is deeply rooted in a White racial *habitus*.<sup>2</sup> It's part of the dominant "standard" for good writing. So, I'm compassionately asking you, my reader, to feel something as you read, even if that feeling is anger, defensiveness, or guilt. I ask this of you because I believe we all can come to great insights and knowledge about ourselves and others through this kind of discomfort, if we sit long enough in it, and interrogate why we feel the way we do about terms like, "White supremacy."

But I have another reason for using these trigger words. It is compassionate to suffer with others, like the suffering that so many of our students feel when a standard that is not of their own is used against them. Staying a while in your discomfort that my use throughout this book of the terms "White language supremacy" and "White supremacy" bring is an important part of a critical, Freirean, problematizing practice that I'll discuss in Chapter 1. The terms are a constant reminder of pain, our own and our students'. Sometimes our work as teachers and scholars cannot be cool, objective, unemotional, and purely reasoned. Sometimes it must hurt, cause us some discomfort, so that we really change. If it helps, remember this when you feel misrepresented or blamed by my use of the terms: You think you're misunderstood? You think you are unfairly judged because you are an ally in the struggle for racial equality? What do you think your students of color feel? Suffer with us.

My use of these terms also draws on my interpretation of methodologies from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which discuss counter storytelling as important to disrupting White supremacist and racist narratives that become naturalized in institutions and society as normative, often non-racial, and neutral (Solórzano and Yosso "Critical Race and LatCrit"; "Critical Race Methodology"; "Critical Race Counterstory"). I wish by repetition to create a kind of counter languaging, or counter rhetoric, that calls our standards for writing and their grading practices what they really are, which are the ways teachers, courses, programs, departments, schools, disciplines, and society perpetuate White language supremacy. By using these terms I look to produce in readers a bodily response that I hope will urge you to pause, notice, and reflect. And so, I must name the thing we are really talking about and not shy away from it by using neutered euphemisms in order that my audience might skip the very problematizing of their own subject positions and *habitus* that are assumed in their standards, ways

2 To see how the literature on Whiteness has identified the disposition of reason and neutrality, see Brookhiser, Myser, Frye, and McGill and Pearce.

of judging language, and grading practices. It is not my job to make you comfortable. In fact, I believe it is quite the opposite.

But my use of these terms in this book is also meant to be a compassionate invitation to all readers to sit in discomfort with your complicity to unfair systems, to urge you to feel seriously about changing those systems. And I say that this is a compassionate invitation because I firmly believe that compassion is suffering with others and helping them grow in areas in which they want to grow. If you've picked up this book, then you have already expressed that desire to grow. As Chapter 6 will discuss, compassion is an important part to my labor-based grading contracts because it is an important way that my students and I set ground rules for the difficult conversations about language, race, racism, Whiteness, and White language supremacy we have.

What do I mean by "White supremacy"? I'm most taken by Derald Wing Sue's definition of the term. He links it closely to White privilege, and through his discussion, also to institutional racism. Drawing on Peggy McIntosh and others, Sue explains that White privilege is a set of "unearned advantages and benefits that accrue to White folks by virtue of a system normed on the experiences, values, and perceptions of their group"; furthermore, these invisible privileges are "premised on the mistaken notion of individual meritocracy and deservingness (hard work, family values, etc.) rather than favoritism . . . [and are] deeply embedded in the structural, systemic, and cultural workings of U.S. society" (*Overcoming* 137). These advantages and benefits are automatically conferred, such as using a standard for writing in a course in which some students have considerably more contact with it outside of the course (or school) than others. These students' good grades seem to be due simply to hard work and merit, but this is only so because their White racial *habitus* and the *habitus* that informs the standard for good writing agree with one another.

Sue explains that White privilege needs White supremacy as a system to exist at all. There's no way around it. Larger structures are the only things that can create privileges for a group of people so consistently, not individual racist acts or people, not anomalies in the system. Thus

White supremacy is a doctrine of racial superiority that justifies discrimination, segregation, and domination of persons of color based on an ideology and belief system that considers all other non-White groups inferior (J. M. Jones, 1997) . . . it resides in the very institutional and cultural foundations of our society . . . To maintain conformance and silence of persons of color, White supremacy as a doctrine and belief is instilled through education and enforced by biased institutional poli-

cies or practices that punish those who dare raise their voices in objection to their second-class status. (*Race Talk* 155)

White supremacy, then, is institutional racism. It's structural, seems natural, thus is normalized such that many of us cannot see it as such in our classrooms, in our disciplines, in our ways of reading and valuing student texts. We cannot see, for instance, how holding one standard in our grading practices reinforces White supremacy since all such standards have historically come from one racial formation on the globe. We cannot see clearly how our own grading practices are linked to historically White supremacist ideology and practices, laws and customs, all of which have been maintained and policed primarily by White racial formations and those who embody a White racial *habitus* in our society, schools, and disciplines of study.

Sue quotes James M. Jones' important work on the subject, his 1997 edition of *Prejudice and Racism*. In defining institutional racism, which I'm offering as one way to define White supremacy, Sue quotes Jones, saying that institutional racism—and so White supremacy—are “those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequalities in American society,” and these customs, laws, and practices are what Sue identifies as our “standard operating procedures” or SOPs (Sue, *Race Talk* 90). For instance, the privileges that a White racial *habitus* confer in classrooms where language is graded by a single standard gives some unearned privileges, yet those standards are a part of our SOPs in school. How are we to determine a student's progress? How else are students going to be motivated to do work? Isn't it only fair to have one standard and apply it to all students equally? Jones continues: “If racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racist intentions” (Jones 438; qtd. in Sue, *Race Talk* 90). So if our SOPs and the standards for language use within them privilege a White racial *habitus*, then no matter who controls that system, it still produces unfair results, i.e., White supremacist results. The system and its standards are White supremacist by design and results.

So how would I define White supremacy in one sentence? White Supremacy is a product or effect of systems and structures, our SOPs (standard operating procedures), despite anyone's intentions, that produce political, cultural, linguistic, and economic dominance for White people. This means that White language supremacy can be defined as a product or effect of assessment systems and structures, our SOPs in classrooms and other places where language is judged, despite anyone's intentions, that produce political, cultural, linguistic, and economic dominance for White people. The use of labor-based grading contracts, I



believe, changes the rules of the grading game in such a way that White language supremacy can not only be seen for what it is, but effectively countered. This makes for a fairer, more equitable, and inclusive language classroom.

## EDUCATION AS INNER DIKES

So in our current society and educational systems, regardless of who you are, where you came from, or what your intentions or motives are as a teacher, if you use a single standard to grade students' language performances, you are directly contributing to the racist status quo in schools and society. Language only moves in groups of people and people are racialized in a variety of ways in society and history. This is how language exists and how race is a part of our politics of language. Language exists because racialized people communicate among each other, and their languages are always in historical processes that associate those languages with particular social and racial formations in society. While linguists and other scholars agree that there is no single way to communicate effectively, judgments of effectiveness and correctness of language are contingent and contextual. What this really says in a U.S. educational context is that effectiveness and correctness of language is racialized. It has come from White racialized groups in our histories (Ignatiev; Jacobson; Roediger). White people and Whiteness as a set of raciolinguistic dispositions and habits, or White *habitus*, are the context and contingency for effectiveness, or "goodness," or appropriateness, or excellence.

This means all standards for good writing are deeply informed by a White racial *habitus*, which makes grading by such standards White supremacist. I am not saying that you (the teacher) are a bad person, but grading by a standard does make your grading methods and your grading ecology in your classroom racist, and White supremacist. I've argued elsewhere how this is the case (Inoue, *Antiracist*), so I won't repeat those arguments here. Instead, I point to the legal literature on the history of Whiteness as property in the US to further argue the point that grading by a single standard is White supremacist.

Cheryl L. Harris' comprehensive legal account of the ways that laws and the courts in the US defined and maintained Whiteness as property extends to education and literacy, particularly as seen in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions (1954 and 1955), which were an extension of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1896) (Harris 1746-57). These judicial decisions hinge on questions of Whiteness as property. Harris explains in her conclusion about the *Brown* decisions:

Whiteness as property continues to perpetuate racial subordination through the courts' definitions of group identity

and through the courts' discourse and doctrine on affirmative action. The exclusion of subordinated "others" was and remains a central part of the property interest in Whiteness and, indeed, is part of the protection that the court extends to Whites' settled expectations of continued privilege. (1758)

What Harris shows in her discussion over and over in various legal ways and through court decisions in various realms of U.S. society is the way Whiteness has functioned and been used as property for the benefit of those deemed to be racially White. Whiteness is the property that even a poor, uneducated, or jobless White man can have that has value. Furthermore, Harris argues that "Whiteness and property share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of a right to exclude" (1704). Whiteness as property is, therefore, about exclusion. This point is critical in educational settings because most of us proclaim or promote inclusion. Our schools, programs, and even pedagogies proclaim to include raciolinguistically diverse students, but our grading practices, standards, and assumptions function to exclude. And the direction this exclusion takes is a racialized one.

In *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning After Brown v. Board of Education*, Catherine Prendergast argues convincingly that historically in the US the courts have worked from a fundamental premise that "literacy is first and foremost White property," and the logic goes "that no attempt should therefore be made to redistribute the best goods" (167). She looks closely at the logics and consequences of *Brown v. Board*, *Washington v. Davis* (1976), and *The Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), all of which demonstrate what Prendergast calls "the economy of literacy as a White property," or a dynamic rooted in figurative or literal "White flight" in places where people of color begin to accumulate. She explains the dynamic: "literacy standards are perceived to be falling or in peril of falling" when too many people of color, often African-American, are included or presence in the place in question, be it a school, police department, community, etc. (41). Where do we find the most calls around "literacy crises"? Schools and communities that are made up of increasing numbers of people of color. What do schools and classrooms have at their disposal to remedy such perceptions of falling literacy standards among their students? Grading mechanisms and standards. Remember the primary goals of grading by a standard are control, enforced accountability, and measurement. Thus, grading is a great way to protect the White property of literacy in schools, while never mentioning race. It's a great way to maintain the White supremacist status quo without ever being White supremacist, yet such standards are White language supremacy.

So if literacy has been, and continues to be, a White property in the US, and if the nature of White property is the right to exclude, and if grading by a standard is always about control, accountability, and measurement, then grading by a single standard is how most, if not all, schools and writing classrooms exercise the historical right to exclude in order to protect literacy as White property, all the while exclaiming and even believing that they are helping their students of color. And how well has that helping really worked out?

Put more directly, in all schools, grades are the means of discrimination, the methods of exclusion, not inclusion, no matter what else we may think they do for our students. Therefore, this book argues to change the rules of the grading game in writing and literacy classrooms, so that your grading mechanisms stop trying to be fair to everyone (i.e., treat everyone as if they are White, as if they have the same proximity to a White racial *habitus*), and start trying *NOT to be unfair*, not to be White supremacist. This latter purpose for grading ecologies in classrooms stems from an assumption that the literacy practices promoted in schools and colleges have and still are conceived of as White property, and that the standards and grading practices we all inherit, or that are forced upon us by principals, disciplines, departments, and programs, are White supremacist and seek to exclude, not include, by their nature and function, by default, regardless of how we justify them or who uses them. Trying not to be unfair is the only way one can ensure equitable and inclusive practices in inherently unfair systems that are by their nature inequitable and exclusive.

I'm reminded of the noted eugenicist and advocate for racial segregation, Lothrop Stoddard and his 1920 book, *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World Supremacy*. Stoddard was a White supremacist. In the book, he argues that increasing populations of peoples of color around the world threaten the White geographical, economic, and political center. White settlements are being taken over, he argues, by various people of color, and this is a bad thing. Strategically, Stoddard notes, there are inner and outer dikes. The outer dikes of civilization are those places in the world that contain mostly people of color, but the inner are those places on the globe that are White settlements in which people of color are increasing, and those areas must be protected. Just like the logic behind redlining to protect real estate property from Black Americans, the White settlements—the White property—that Stoddard speaks of are understood as crucial dikes that need protecting because they are the last defense of the White centers. Education, schools, and literacy in the US are inner dikes.

Stoddard's introduction to this discussion is instructive in how it so easily maps to arguments about holding or raising standards and the logic within the calls about literacy crises in the US today, most of which are attached to grades:

The inner dikes (the areas of White settlement), however, are a very different matter. Peopled as they are wholly or largely by Whites, they have become parts of the race-heritage, which should be defended to the last extremity no matter if the costs involved are greater than their mere economic value would warrant. They are the true bulwarks of the race, the patrimony of future generations who have a right to demand of us that they shall be born White in a White man's land. Ill will it fare if ever our race should close its ears to this most elemental call of the blood. (226)

There is no more fitting analogy to grading by a standard than Stoddard's. Schools, colleges, and universities today are literally and figuratively White settlements (many built on land stolen from indigenous peoples), which have become tacitly, as Stoddard makes clear, a White entitlement, an inner dike to protect. While our terms may be less overtly racialized today, we still talk and think of schools and universities as "true bulwarks" for standards, or as the centers of literacy promotion, which is the White property of those settlements. In Stoddard's terms, this makes educational institutions the "race-heritage" of each generation, or the "patrimony" to be passed on to the next generation—and that generation is racially White by this logic. This makes grading by a standard the method for protecting and cleaning out the inner dike, Whitening it. In short, schools are the inner dikes of literacy as White property. Grading is the gun and bayonet, which are used against all students to cleanse them, to Whiten them or drive them out. Again, the rules for grading must change if we wish to stop trying to Whiten the dike.

When we change the rules for grading dramatically, for instance, as when one stops using a White standard to grade student performances, we realize that we must choose something else to use to determine final course grades. This makes us mindful of our assumptions about grading, mindful about what we assume a paper or written product demonstrates to us about a student, mindful of what we think we can see and what textual markers we use that makes present so-called quality in a draft. It makes us mindful that we use a standard of our own and not someone else's, or something else, like labor or effort or engagement, which arguably are much closer to the act of learning than a draft or portfolio because these dimensions (i.e., labor and effort) embody the experience of learning itself. When we are mindful that we grade in particular ways, we have a better chance to pay attention to details about our own practices and how they happen. We have a better chance not to simply Whiten the dike. Using labor-based grading contracts, I believe, requires, even encourages, this kind

of mindful attention because the rules of the grading game are so dramatically different from conventional, standards-based rules. This book attempts to offer a way to change the rules of the grading game in classrooms.

## ASSESSMENT ECOLOGIES AND ME

In this book, I assume some concepts that come from my theorizing of classroom writing assessment as ecology (Inoue, *Antiracist*), so allow me to summarize the theory briefly here. Any classroom writing assessment ecology can be understood to be made up of at least seven elements: power, purposes, processes, parts, people, products, and places (176). Noticing and understanding these elements can help teachers create assessment ecologies that resist White language supremacy and racism that are structurally embedded in the academy and our society. Labor-based grading contracts attempt to form an inclusive, more diverse ecological place, one that can be antiracist and anti-White supremacist by its nature. The ecology does not use a single standard of so-called quality to grade students, and focuses time, labor, and attention on other elements in the ecology, realizing that these other elements construct more of the ecology than a standard, and even provides students with a chance to critique (through comparison) conventional grading practices and their own standards.

A grading contract, like any grading system, frames and contextualizes all the activities and people that form the classroom ecology. While any ecological element can be considered and manipulated separately, all seven ecological elements are interconnected and consubstantial to each other (93), often morphing into one another at different moments in the historical unfolding of the ecology. An activity (process) becomes a rubric (part) becomes a figurative place of agreement and contention (place), etc. As complex ecological theory explains (Dobrin 144), ecologies are holistic in nature, and any given element in the system is more than what it is. The ecology itself is more than the sum of its parts (86). Understanding the writing assessment ecology of a classroom in this holistic way can help us form antiracist, anti-White supremacist, and other social justice projects through our most fundamental aspect of any course, its assessment ecology. Understanding how my classroom's assessment system is an ecology has allowed me to take advantage of what a labor-based contract offers.

I should note an initial paradox that is not lost on me, and it has significant bearing on my labor-based grading contract ecologies. I realize the oxymoronic, haunting Whiteness, as Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe would say, in my own discourse in this book. This is part of the problematic of writing assessment that led me to grading contracts, which I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2. My own brand of code-meshed English, like everyone's, is a product of my history in

schools and growing up in poor and working-class areas, all culturally, linguistically, and racially mixed. I left those discourses behind, or so I thought. The discourse from the academy, the White, middle-class discourse I worked so hard to take on, seemed to give me access and opportunities that I likely wouldn't have had otherwise. But if I'm really honest, my own striving for the dominant English I currently practice started with an impulse not to be poor, not to be seen as stupid, not to be brown, not to be in the outer dikes of the US. I thought I wanted to be White. And this was the lesson that all of my writing assessment ecologies taught me in school.

You see, I was raised on Stats Street in North Las Vegas, the bad part of town, the Black part, a city created by banks' redlining practices. Everyone in my neighborhood, except for one college-aged neighbor, my brother, and me, were Black. We lived in roach-infested, government-subsidized housing. By the later years of elementary school, we'd moved to a White working-class neighborhood on the edge of several Latinx communities in the southeast part of Vegas. We moved from an outer to an inner dike, all the while following the carrot of economic success and the promise of upward mobility, an upward mobility that was easier for us than our Black neighbors on Stats. To my knowledge, we were the only ones from Stats that left. It wasn't easy. We were never accepted in the new community. Inner dikes are socially engineered to Whiten themselves automatically. Our new White working-class neighbors in Pacos Trailer Park explicitly told us on many occasions, often whenever they had the chance, that they didn't want "people like us" living there. They didn't want us brown folks in the trailer park. They used worse language. But I was determined (in all the senses that that word can mean) to stay just long enough to leave, to move in the system of dikes. What was required was school, learning, literacy, the dominant English. This meant "good grades." I didn't understand how docile this made me in school. I didn't understand the internal colonization. I didn't understand how grading by a single standard in all those classrooms of my youth were sending me one message: Be White or be gone. I loved getting good grades in school—I won't lie—but I hated how I had to get them. It was like lying every day until the lies became me, until I couldn't tell anymore what was a lie and what was me.

While I've gained much from my education, I've also given up, or forgotten, much of my own working-class, ghetto, African-American English that I began my schooling with. The aspects of my own *habitus* that I accentuate in my classrooms and scholarly work now are ones of growing up half Japanese and working poor (not working class), and of having a mom who would say she is White, but I'm not convinced she fully believes it. We have Greek, English, and Scottish ancestors on her side. My mom is not fair skinned nor fair haired, but fair enough to pass as (or to be) White in the US today. I never was. She never

got a college degree, was single most of my childhood, and worked three jobs so that we could be working poor. She would say to me, “Get good grades,” “do the extra credit,” “no one asks how you got your A,” “a B-student is an A-student who didn’t apply himself.” She was telling me to labor, to work. My mom is smart, detail-oriented, and beautiful in her work-ethic. She led by example. She labored every day to exhaustion without complaint, often collapsing on the couch late at night. I love my mom, and she always showed her love to me, but she was also stern about grades and school, sometimes to the point of unfairness. I know it was because she didn’t want me to do what she had to do, to work and work and work and still never have enough money, or clothes, or food, or time with your family.

The lesson I took from my mom was a simple motto that I carried with me into college and my career: I may not be the smartest guy in the room, but I damn well will be the hardest working one. In college, I made sure I did more work than anyone else. I leaned heavily on the doing of things, tried hard to savor the work, focused on enjoying the labor, since I couldn’t always depend on how others would judge the products of my labors. What I realize now is that I slowly over the years turned this motto into a pedagogy, then an assessment practice, which would become labor-based grading contracts. What I also realize now is that I got the first part of my motto wrong. To be judged the “smartest guy in the room” means there’s a single standard to judge what smart means. That standard has always been a White racial *habitus*, a White discourse, so of course, by definition, I literally can never be the smartest guy in the room. I cannot be a White guy speaking well, to alter Quintilian’s definition of an orator.

Then, there was a point in my adult life when I stopped trying to deny the language of my upbringing, the language of the streets of North Las Vegas, and I moved to retain enough of that old discourse to use as a critical optic or phonic apparatus, as a way to look and listen for the Whiteness around me and in me. I stopped resisting my body’s need to move when talking. My body must move with my words, even when write. As I’m typing and reading this now, I am moving my body to feel the sentences, to feel what I need to say. I’ve been told I’m quite expressive and “passionate” when I speak, or teach, or just shoot the shit with others. This ability to deny a Black discourse and adopt a White discourse is a White privilege I know I have, one I must acknowledge and problematize continually, one I resist, yet know that I am allowed to take advantage of professionally.

I ain’t proud of leaving the language of my nurture behind, or trying to leave it behind—a paradox in the problematic, especially when I meet students today who language the way I did back then, when my own feedback to their languaging pressures them toward a White racial *habitus*. Then again, I ain’t all White,



middle-class *habitus*. I often draw on this in my languaging with students. Another paradox. I claim my Japanese heritage, my dad's family, despite growing up not knowing him at all. Another paradox. My mom is Scottish, English, and some Greek. Imagine that: A Japanese American, usually mistaken for Latino, who started in life speaking African-American English, living in African-American communities, yet speaking mostly Standard White, middle-class English now, and raised by a poor, working mom who sees herself as White. Paradoxes. Like everyone, I code-mesh. This thing you read now is code-meshed. My work with labor-based grading contracts is in part a coming to terms with my own intersectional, racialized educational and linguistic history through my students and their languaging. Knowing these things about me may help you understand just how many grains of salt you should take with what I offer. It should also suggest the ways I honor labor and how deeply I have felt its importance in my life, classroom, and scholarship.

It should also tell you how I might respond to critiques of my use of the term "labor." Some may have problems with the way it is often associated with childbirth, or with manual labor in economies that take advantage of the very populations of students I'm trying to help—am I making light of such activities, some of which are gendered? Some may feel that joining the terms "labor" and "contract" to then create a grading ecology is a contradiction, that the capitalist language of contracts is far from liberatory, and accentuates particular relations of power, usually understood through one's relation to labor and the means of production in capitalist economies. I use the term "labor" because it does have these associations, and I wish to flip its too-often negative connotations. It's a positive word for me, and I try to make it so in my classrooms. My discussion of labor in Chapter 3, I hope, will alleviate some concerns about an uninformed use of an important Marxian term. Finally, labor is a reference to doing things, to acting, to performing, to working in honorable, embodied ways. And it is understood tacitly as an embodied set of practices, not simply intellectual, like much academic "work" is. So I keep the term "labor." When I do my academic "work," I labor. It is generative and creative, hard and painful at times, and always embodied.

And so, labor-based grading contracts is a big part of the methods I use to enact my social justice agenda in my classroom's antiracist writing assessment ecologies. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies are, in a sentence: "a complex political system of people, environments, actions, and relations of power that produce consciously understood relationships between and among people and their environments that help students problematize their existential writing assessment situations, which in turn changes or (re)creates the ecology so that it is fairer, more livable, and sustainable for everyone" (Inoue, *Antiracist* 82). This



agenda means I try to create conditions that allow for my writing classrooms to question meaningfully the White racial *habitus* that determines (in the Marxian sense, as in creates limits and boundaries, and applies pressure in a particular direction) standards for the judgment of writing and expectations teachers and others have for languaging. I want my students to have real choices in their labors of languaging. And how do I do this work knowing that my classrooms are always already situated in larger societal and institutional ecologies that determine much of how my students act in my classroom? Their languages will be graded next quarter or semester. Labor-based grading contracts is part of my answer to these questions.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

In rest of this book, I offer two kinds of discussions: a theoretical discussion of grading contracts and labor, and a practical discussion of how to design and use them in literacy classrooms. I find each discussion necessary for the other, but if one is so inclined and accepts the arguments I've made and alluded to in this introduction, then you could skip the early, more theoretical chapters and read the later, more practical chapters, that is, Chapters 4, 5, and 6. This means that some readers may hear some repetition in the chapters' discussions. Part of this is so that readers can jump around, reading single chapters as cohesive and complete discussions. But I'm also resisting a dominant White, academic, linguistic disposition that defines "clarity," "grace," and "eloquence" as a lack of repetition in texts. Repetition can be rhetorically effective. Repetition can slowly reveal the important keynotes in a discussion. Repetition can help a reader feel the ideas more viscerally—feel ideas, not understand them alone. Repetition can help embody—make bodily—otherwise textual arguments. Repetition can be a compassionate, mindful rhetorical practice. And in my case, repetition also satiates my need to help broaden our academic dispositions about language in a counter-rhetorical way, as I've already mentioned above concerning my use of White language supremacy. So, I want you to return to particular ideas through my use of a counter-rhetorical repetition that invites you to be mindful of these ideas, attend to them more frequently, see something deeper in them, or feel more of your relations to them.

In Chapter 1, I offer a discussion of my own problematizing of my classroom assessment situation, which I hope offers a way to see the importance of considering alternatives to conventional, standards-based grading practices in secondary and post-secondary literacy classrooms. This chapter also discusses a way to see one central practice that I believe labor-based grading contracts provides a better ecology for, Freire's problem-posing practice. This theoretical

and reflective chapter is one way I've posed problems about grading as a teacher who is trying to be reflective about his grading practices and their consequences to student learning, but it is also a practice that students should be doing in classroom grading ecologies.

In Chapter 2, I narrate my path from conventional grading to hybrid grading contracts to labor-based contracts. This chapter offers the salient research and scholarship I've used over the years to help me understand and come to my own practice. I attempt to explain the differences in various grading contract models available and offer an argument for the strengths of labor-based grading contracts. I discuss the research on grading contracts, but attempt to do so in a way that situates that research and scholarship within my own history of coming to labor-based grading contracts.

In Chapter 3, I theorize labor since it is the foundation for my contract system. Using Marxian theory, I draw an important distinction between the ways we typically value labor, and express that value, in classrooms and other economies, from labor's worth. I propose an understanding of labor as three-dimensional that may help teachers and students problematize their labor as a practice so labor's value and worth can be understood and used meaningfully in classrooms. Using Hannah Arendt's work in *The Human Condition*, mindfulness and contemplative theories, and Barbara Adam's scholarship on conceptions of time, I end the chapter by translating my theory of three-dimensional labor into practice for classrooms, which I call "mindful laboring."

In Chapter 4, I show what my labor-based grading contract looks like and the four main philosophical assumptions that I ask students to work through and respond to when negotiating the contract. This more practical chapter explains how my contract is used in my classroom and discusses a set of framing activities that help students understand and negotiate the contract, then do the reflective work that I'm arguing makes for a more critical and politically conscious ecology for students.

In Chapter 5, I discuss an increasingly important feature of my grading ecologies, our charter for compassion. I adopted the charter several years ago from Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion, which was originally designed for such uses among interfaith conflict. I have found that the charter is easily used in a writing class like mine, one that uses a lot of peer feedback and discussion, and directly addresses difficult discussions of race, racism, Whiteness, and White language supremacy. I provide a few ways my students and I think about compassion and negotiate each charter at the beginning of every quarter/semester. I discuss how it fits into my labor-based grading contract ecologies without it being about students' spiritual traditions or about religious proselytizing.

Chapter 6 is a kind of FAQ. The chapter contains fourteen questions con-

cerning the use of labor-based grading contracts that I gathered from various teachers and others from across the US and on the WPA-L. In my view, this chapter does some heavy philosophical and theoretical lifting, particularly around the pedagogical assumptions I hold and that I believe make my version of labor-based grading contract ecologies effective, meaningful, and fair. This chapter's discussion is more practical and less "researchy." It is similar to the conversations I have with teachers over coffee, or dinner, or in Q&A sessions. I consider this chapter mostly practical, not a theory chapter.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the ways I've measured and found my labor-based grading contract ecologies effective. I offer the five primary goals of my own grading ecologies and how I've measured each, and what conclusions I've come to about effectiveness along each goal. These particular goals not only question conventional notions of effectiveness for writing courses and programs, but are ones a teacher might have for their labor-based grading contract ecology. They are the ways I define "effectiveness" in my labor-based grading ecologies. Mostly, the chapter is meant to offer some theoretical and practical guidance toward understanding and assessing effectiveness of a range of labor-based grading contract ecologies.

Finally, in the Coda chapter, I pull back from labor-based grading contracts and conclude the book by thinking about a larger social justice issue that many in the field of composition studies and elsewhere in the academy have become more and more compelled to consider, and see connected to their classrooms. I borrow a question from Ihab Hassan, rehearsed by Mary Rose O'Reilley, which explains the central concern of the chapter: "Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" I suggest that perhaps one way to think about how we assess and grade in our literacy classrooms may offer a response to this kind of social justice question, one that attempts to counter the violence we see around us every day.