

# WRITING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

*Theory and Intervention*

EDITED BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

### *Centering Difference in Composition Studies*

James Rushing Daniel, Katie Malcolm, and Candice Rai

Communicating equitably and ethically across the differences that divide and unite groups is arguably the central work of composition studies. To this core work, we might add the labor of understanding and responding to the unjust structures of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and other frameworks that unevenly shape literacy education and the terrains of communication. From explorations of decoloniality (King, Guebele, and Anderson 2015; Ruiz and Sánchez 2016), translingualism (Bou Ayash 2019; Canagarajah 2013; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue 2011), multimodality (Alexander and Rhodes 2014; Gonzales 2018), feminisms (Enoch and Jack 2019; Glenn 2018; Jarratt and Worsham 1998; Ratcliffe 2005; Royster and Kirsch 2012), gender and sexuality (Alexander 2008; Pritchard 2016; Waite 2017), disability (Cedillo 2018; Dolmage 2016; Kerschbaum 2014; Yergeau 2018), and race/antiracism (Cushman 2016; Inoue 2015; Richardson and Gilyard 2001; Royster 1996; Ruiz 2016; Villanueva 1993), the field has been animated by an attempt to understand how various axes of difference function to distance and distinguish, enrich and empower, and, frequently, marginalize and exclude. The field is also shaped by an activist energy aimed at transforming these axes toward more socially just classrooms and institutions. In attending to these issues, compositionists have long considered how writing practice and instruction can help negotiate division to create more equitable, inclusive, and diverse classrooms, though few in the field have engaged difference directly or acknowledged the extent to which composition relies upon and centers the concept. Instead, writing scholars have generally favored interrogating difference within the context of various subdisciplines. Scholars of translingualism, for instance, have discussed difference in their critique of monolingual frameworks and their concomitant promotion of pluralistic, nonnormative linguistic models (Bou Ayash 2019; Canagarajah 2013; Lu and Horner 2016; Malcolm 2017; Trimbur 2016). From a distinct, though

not unrelated, perspective, composition scholars working in the areas of race and antiracism have critiqued the presumptive Whiteness<sup>1</sup> of the writing classroom and have sought to center the language practices, perspectives, and experiences of students of color (Baker-Bell 2020; Gilyard 1991; Kynard 2014; Martinez 2020; Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, and Jackson 2014; Smitherman 1986; Smitherman and Villanueva 2003). Both these areas of inquiry are intensely invested in difference, yet few who take up these and similar critiques have named the concept as a specific core disciplinary concern.

Redressing this lack of attention, *Writing across Difference* gathers scholars who engage with difference in the field. Difference, in our view, is indispensable for understanding how communication takes place among individuals; for focalizing meaningful separations among groups that result from social, political, institutional, or linguistic forces; and for thinking programmatically about how racism, inequality, and colonial logics might be better theorized and combatted in classrooms, institutions, and broader public life. Accordingly, we believe a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of difference can illuminate how divisions among individuals or groups emerge; how they are maintained through rhetorics, practices, and policy; how they are variously occluded or made to “matter” (Barad 2007, Pitts-Taylor 2016); and how they can be bridged and negotiated in writing programs and instruction.

We believe this work is particularly necessary today as the fractures among individuals, identities, and communities deepen. One particularly critical site of division is the global economy—recent years have seen deepening economic inequality (Milanovic 2018; Piketty 2014), the explosion of student debt and its destabilizing effects (Zaloom 2019), and declining working conditions (Hyman 2018). In the United States, far-right groups are also growing (Neiwert 2017) and hate crimes are increasing (Faupel et al., *Washington Post*, August 13, 2019). The recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and many other Black people by police demonstrate not only the depth of longstanding racial divisions and White supremacy prevalent in our society but also the horrifying lengths to which those in power will go to protect the asymmetries that benefit them. Adding to this, the devastating global shifts of the Anthropocene, including climate change, pollution, and unregulated resource exploitation, increasingly threaten not only human life in ways that deepen inequities by affecting the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations around the world (Wallace-Wells 2019) but also multispecies life, given widespread scientific data that suggest we are on the brink of global ecological collapse and mass extinction.

Despite these troubling trends and forces, the growing collective will and civic-mindedness emerging to address many of these crises of difference bring hope. In recent years, activists across the globe have marched against exclusion, inequality, antidemocratic norms, and climate change with the Women's March, climate strikes (Gambino, *Guardian*, September 7, 2019), and, most notably, the global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 (Savage 2020). As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (*New York Times*, June 8, 2020) writes of the latter, "For once in their lives, many of the participants can be seen, heard, and felt in public. People are pulled from the margins into a powerful force that can no longer be ignored, beaten, or easily discarded." For Taylor, these protests raise the crucial question of how the country must change in order to deal with its history and maintenance of division. In her view, it is not simply a matter of addressing racial difference but, crucially, of confronting the extensive, intersectional forms of inequality that afflict the nation "beyond the racism and brutality of the police." As she writes, "We must also discuss the conditions of economic inequality that, when they intersect with racial and gender discrimination, disadvantage African-Americans while also making them vulnerable to police violence." Effectively, while various forms of difference appear to be increasing, so too are coalitional and intersectional efforts to confront them. Building on a long tradition of scholarship in public and community-based activism and writing, scholars in composition studies are also notably devoting increasing attention to foregrounding socially just collective action (Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch 2018; Blair and Nickoson 2019; Grabill 2007; Lee and Kahn 2020); community-based approaches and interventions (Guerra 2016; Handley 2016; Gonzales 2018; Kells 2016); developing ethical dispositions for listening and cooperating across radical difference (Blankenship 2019; Diab 2016; Duffy 2019; Glenn and Ratcliffe 2011; Ratcliffe 2005; Stenberg 2015); and cultivating capacities for intervening in public writing and rhetorics (Ackerman and Coogan 2013; Farmer 2013; Rai 2016; Reiff and Bawarshi 2016).

We acknowledge that increased attention to issues of difference—not only with regard to how differences divide, exclude, and perpetuate inequities but also concerning how they enrich and open possibilities for new ideas, ways of being, and collaborating—is crucial for addressing deepening inequity, division, and precarity. We also recognize that difference is a troublesome construct. While it serves as a productive framework for isolating the kinds of divisions balkanizing the contemporary world, difference is always an act of judgment and an assignment of deviation that participates in the reification or institutionalization

of division. As Stephanie Kerschbaum (2014) argues, naming difference holds the potential to “fix individual writers or groups of writers in time and space” (6). Because difference implies a normative center, a site from which something differs, naming an axis of difference risks normalizing privileged identity markers and endorsing subordination. We additionally acknowledge that attention to difference can also risk the co-optation of minorities to serve institutional needs. As Roderick Ferguson (2012) argues, while minority difference was once effectively banished from the academy, contemporary institutions now seek to domesticate difference, “trying to redirect originally insurgent formations and deliver them to the normative ideals and protocols of state, capital, and academy” (8). For Ferguson, difference is ultimately vulnerable to institutionalization and repurposing that would rob it of its radical capacities.

With respect to the conflicted aspects of the concept, chapters within this collection draw upon theories of intersectionality to challenge notions of difference that render various categories of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization as discrete, static, or monolithic. Coined by legal scholar and Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her groundbreaking 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” *intersectionality* is a qualitative and analytic praxis for understanding and transforming the various ways different forms of oppression (based on categories such as race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, faith) interlock to compound the discrimination and material harm experienced by particular individuals and communities. Crenshaw critiques White feminism’s erasure of Black women’s experiences in its treatment of all forms of gender discrimination as homogenous; she contends that one cannot understand the discrimination Black women face through the axis of gender or of race alone but only through an analysis of lived experiences that reveal how gender and race (or possibly other categories of marginalization) collide to doubly or triply discriminate. The theories of intersectionality, which have been taken up by scholars in various fields, including writing and rhetorical studies (Bliss 2016; Chávez and Griffin 2012; Nash 2016) and in this collection by Laura Gonzales and Ann Shivers-McNair; Stephanie L. Kerschbaum; and Sumyat Thu, Katie Malcolm, Candice Rai, and Anis Bawarshi, help us resist and challenge conceptions of difference as essentializing and equivalent or as additive and discrete. Intersectionality, as we understand it, must focus on how structures of exclusion, inequity, and discrimination multiply the burdens and negative impacts for certain individuals and communities. Hence, when we imagine what it means to write across difference,



we consider how intersectional forms of discrimination interlock to unevenly shape the mechanisms of access, mobility, exclusion, erasure, and reward associated with various language and literate practices, cultures, and identities.

One noteworthy critique and limitation of this book is that even as this volume strives to theorize the possibility of encounters across various forms of difference and to decenter dominant forms of identity and language it nevertheless operates through a form of institutionalized and raced academic discourse that has long functioned to protect rather than eliminate differences. This, of course, is a contradiction endemic not just to this collection but also to academic discourse more broadly. Even as scholars in the humanities are increasingly engaging in institutional critique (Newfield 2018; paperson 2017; Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019), our discourse remains largely constrained by publication conventions, disciplinary and standardized language norms, and the instrumental function academic publications serve with respect to career advancement. While this volume is mostly rendered using conventional academic English, we nevertheless recognize and celebrate those scholars in the field who enact critiques of difference through language, employing nonstandard forms, code-meshing, and multimodality to question disciplinary conventions, scholars like Vershawn Ashanti Young (2007), Iris D. Ruiz (2016), and Jonathan Alexander (2017). In this collection's approach to translingualism, narrative, and challenging disciplinary, academic, and cultural norms, we seek to affirm the extensive value of this work and we hope this collection sparks conversation on these questions and inspires future scholarship that adopts a wider range of linguistic repertoires, forms, and genres.

#### FRAMES OF DIFFERENCE IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

This volume emerges from numerous prominent conversations in composition studies that explore difference. Most centrally, we build on recent work by Juan C. Guerra (2016), whose concept of “writing across difference” (146) in *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* orients our collection and inspires our title. Guerra critiques discourses that standardize identity, calling upon teachers of language to approach identity, and identity difference in particular, as social, rhetorical, and mercurial enterprises: “We, as educators in composition and literacy studies, must delve into the intricacies of what it means to live in social spaces where nothing—not our languages, cultures, identities, or citizenship status—ever stands

still" (2). Guerra advocates the teaching of insurgent language practices, "multilingual (code-switching) and translingual (code-meshing)" (28) and teaching students to conceptualize identity and difference as emergent and dynamic rather than static and locked in normative categories. Our collection embraces this dynamic understanding of language and identity as performances in motion—always constrained, situated within social and material contexts, and subject to asymmetrical power—but nevertheless shifting, transforming, and nimble. We also subscribe to the position of Thu, Malcolm, Rai, and Bawarshi, who argue in this volume that such an embrace of linguistic diversity and fluidity—hallmarks of translingualism—must be paired with antiracist analysis that explicitly calls attention to and seeks to transform the unevenly sedimented structures of power and privilege, and of White supremacist and settler-colonial logics, that underscore and become associated with certain language practices, identities, and bodies.

We are additionally inspired by the work of Kerschbaum (2014), whose research on disability has deeply informed composition's engagement with difference. In *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, Kerschbaum interrogates how discourses constructing difference as fixed and essential destabilize productive encounters with identity (6). Against such essentialist models, she proposes "marking difference" (7) as a tactic for acknowledging the performativity and rhetoricity of identity differences. Marking difference, she contends, "can reveal a way to simultaneously attend to the myriad resources available for working through our own and our students' classroom identities . . . and to the specific and situated classroom encounters in which and our students bring differences alive" (7). Essays in this collection particularly resonate with her rejection of binary difference, a rejection notably shared by other disability scholars in the field (Dolmage 2016; Jung 2007; Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson 2001), and with her contention that unruly perspectives and idiosyncratic subjectivities are often discounted through articulations of equivalence.

We additionally strive to answer Asao Inoue's call for rigorous self-examination and greater attention to difference made in his 2019 CCCC chair's address, "How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, or What Do We Do about White Language Supremacy?" As Inoue contends, contemporary "linguaging" fundamentally involves racial and racist judgement grounded in the perception of difference. He connects the racist conditions that dehumanize minorities to the practices of "White language supremacy" (355) that pervade the contemporary scene of language including, notably, the composition classroom. Inoue

accordingly calls upon composition teachers to interrogate their “White racial *habitus*” (358) and to examine their “White fragility” (361) as they consider their personal biases. In conceptualizing this collection, we have similarly strived to engage in rigorous self-examination regarding the often implicit role of Whiteness in theorizing difference and similarly advocate for others in the field to consider the normativity entailed in naming difference.

The call for a disposition of listening and empathy across radical difference is an additional thread in composition scholarship that this collection explores. Radical listening is commonly imagined as an ethical imperative for negotiating collective life in the face of radical, incommensurable ideological, political, cultural, species, and other forms of difference—whether explicitly for participating in democratic publics (Farmer 2013; Fleming 2009; Jackson 2007; Weisser 2002) or for engaging across radical difference with an interest in increasing the chances of understanding, cooperation, and more equitable social transformation. John Duffy, for example, has recently critiqued the “intolerant and irrational, venomous and violent, divisive and dishonest” (2019, 5) nature of contemporary US discourse, calling for greater attention to the study of ethics in order to prepare students for the work of intimate connection, to give them opportunities “to ‘talk to strangers’ and perhaps begin to repair the broken state of our public arguments” (12). *Writing across Difference* accordingly figures difference as a modality of forging alliances and connections in a sociopolitical context of increasing divergence.

Responding to these and other disciplinary interventions, the following chapters represent an array of approaches to difference through the lenses of antiracism, decoloniality, interdisciplinarity, trans work (approaches in composition to translanguaging, transmodality, transdisciplinarity that theorize the fluidity, resources, challenges, and politics underscoring new communicative practices in our increasingly interconnected digital and global contexts), and numerous other perspectives. Together, they provide a range of theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical resources for understanding the role difference plays in the field of composition and for addressing difference more conscientiously in the classroom. While each broadly examines difference as it relates to writing pedagogy, educational policy, or writing program administration, the problems these chapters raise, the methods they utilize, and the solutions they offer are as variegated as the field itself.

The chapters in part 1, “Personal, Embodied, and Theoretical Engagements,” offer conceptual investigations and interventions on difference, working in the areas of autoethnography, narrative, and critical

and cultural theory to analyze division, exclusion, and inequity as they relate to the teaching of writing. In “An Embodied History of Language Ideologies,” Guerra explores the concept of language ideologies through narratives of his own embodied engagements with language—both in his personal life and in his teaching career of nearly five decades. Guerra speaks poignantly of his experience as a monolingual Spanish-heritage speaker forced to unlearn Spanish and of his subsequent work as an academic seeking to address the language and cultural needs of underrepresented students. Conceptualizing translanguaging and multiculturalism as pluralistic alternatives to monolingualism, Guerra calls on teachers of writing to respond more proactively to the restrictive ideologies that govern the contemporary scene of language. In “‘Gathering Dust in the Dark’: Inequality and the Limits of Composition,” James Rushing Daniel questions disciplinary claims regarding the capacity of the composition classroom to materially empower students and enable social mobility. Illuminating the increasingly unbridgeable class divides of twenty-first century neoliberalism, Daniel contends that rather than striving to promote students’ social mobility in the short term, scholars should instead shift their attention to service learning in order to engage students in the necessary long-term work of combating economic inequality. In “*Desconocimiento*: A Process of Epistemological Unknowing through Rhetorical *Nepantla*,” Iris D. Ruiz draws on her identity as a Chicana/Indígena/India/Mexicana/Latinx academic as she questions dominant constructions of race, identity, and disciplinarity. Employing Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *nepantla*, a term denoting marginal, liminal, or otherwise uprooted subjectivity, Ruiz conducts a decolonial critique of composition studies, analyzing the field’s Western and imperialist tendencies and calling for a disciplinary culture that embraces difference and Indigenous knowledge. In the section’s final chapter, “Exploring Discomfort Using Markers of Difference: Constructing Antiracist and Anti-ableist Teaching Practices,” Stephanie Kerschbaum builds upon her concept of “marking difference” (2014, 6) to theorize the teaching persona and its relationship to difference between students. As she argues, antiracist and anti-ableist pedagogy necessitates that teachers reconcile their identities and teaching methods with the histories, interrelationships, and presences of racism, sexism, ableism, and classism that permeate higher education environments throughout the United States. She specifically calls upon teachers of writing to reflect on their experiences of pedagogical discomfort to discover how these narratives can reveal underlying assumptions and practices that foreclose possibilities for engagement and learning.

The chapters in part 2, “Classroom and Curricular Praxis,” consider practical, classroom-based approaches to many of the issues of difference theorized in the first section. Examining such diverse pedagogical contexts and issues as disability, disciplinary language and conventions, and political difference, these chapters strive to demonstrate how attention to difference can productively inform the composition classroom. In part 2’s opening chapter, Nadya Pittendrigh’s “Whole-Self Rhetoric: Teaching the Justice Situation in the Composition Classroom” poses restorative justice as an alternative to forensic rhetoric, a model of rhetoric the author contends problematically saturates not only the justice system but also argumentation pedagogy and the composition classroom. As she argues, restorative justice is a species of “whole-self rhetoric,” a rhetorical stance that, unlike courtroom rhetoric, promotes the bridging of difference and foregrounding civic engagement and vulnerability. Megan Callow and Katherine Xue’s “Rewriting the Biology of Difference: How a Writing-Centered, Case-Based Curricular Approach Can Reform Undergraduate Science” challenges dominant narratives in science and technology studies (STS) that defend a biological basis for difference, elaborating how undergraduate science education, through critical, investigative, and narrative-based assignments, can introduce students to the epistemic construction of difference—among groups, scientific categories and fields—and, accordingly, promote more sophisticated writing and better science. In the following chapter, “Disability Identity and Institutional Rhetorics of Difference,” Neil F. Simpkins analyzes disability in the context of higher education through the framework of difference. In a qualitative study, he analyzes how three rhetorical forms—diagnosis, bureaucratic institutional structures of accessibility, and interpersonal encounters with classmates—function to shape the experience of disability identity for college students. As Simpkins argues, analyses of these forms demonstrate how difference works rhetorically to shape identity categories as well as impact how or if disabled students access classroom spaces. Part 2 concludes with “Interrogating the ‘Deep Story’: Storytelling and Narratives in the Rhetoric Classroom”<sup>2</sup> by Shui-yin Sharon Yam, a chapter contending that inviting students to interrogate and share their worldviews through personal narratives could promote mutual inquiry across difference. Drawing upon a series of assignments and activities developed from the model of invitational rhetoric, Yam analyzes students’ writing and reflections to demonstrate how mutual listening and inquiry function as an effective means to cultivate self-reflexivity and ethical relations with others who do not share the same positionality.

The collection's third and final section, "Institutional, Community, and Public Transformations," examines how consideration of difference in a variety of contexts beyond the writing classroom, both within and beyond the university, can attend to the politics of exclusion and to the work of creating inclusive, antiracist communities in various institutional settings. In the section's opening chapter, "Designing across Difference: Intersectional, Interdependent Approaches to Sustaining Communities," Laura Gonzales and Ann Shivers-McNair defend a multiperspectival approach to difference, arguing that three conceptual topoi—intersectionality, interdependency, and community sustainment—are vital in supporting an informed engagement with the concept. Employing these topoi, Gonzales and Shivers-McNair develop a set of interventions in research, teaching, and community building that strive to redress contemporary manifestations of difference. In the following chapter, "Antiracist Translingual Praxis in Writing Ecologies," Sumyat Thu, Katie Malcolm, Candice Rai, and Anis Bawarshi forward a translingual writing praxis grounded in an antiracist critique of structural inequity, which they argue requires ongoing activist work by writing instructors and writing program administrators to transform the structures of privilege and inequity embedded within writing program ecologies. The authors anchor this conversation within stories about the efforts their own writing program has made to realize an antiracist translingual praxis. The book concludes with "Confronting Superdiversity Again: A Multidimensional Approach to Teaching and Researching Writing at a Global University," in which Jonathan Benda, Cherice Escobar Jones, Mya Poe, and Alison Y. L. Stephens employ the term "superdiversity," a concept that acknowledges complex forms of diversity related to national origin, mobility, race, and economic privilege, to analyze difference across multiple educational sites at Northeastern University (NU). As they contend, superdiversity both illuminates and obscures the movement of multilingual writers through the writing program at NU. Through this analysis, they argue that writing programs must focus on the intersections of privilege and language emerging in multilingual classrooms.

While the chapters gathered here represent a broad array of approaches and orientations, they nevertheless collectively suggest a set of personal, curricular, and programmatic strategies teachers and administrators of composition can adopt to address and navigate difference in teaching, research, writing programs, and community-engaged collaborations. First, these chapters exhort compositionists to undertake a rigorous and pluralistic accounting of difference in

ways that highlight personal biases and divisions between individuals, particularly those in the classroom, in preparation for developing opportunities for equity, connection, and encounter. They encourage scholars to investigate, theorize, and historicize difference in order to understand how it operates, how it appears, how it is occluded, and how it is represented and misrepresented in language, pedagogy, institutions, and publics. Per Kerschbaum, this work must entail an ongoing, meticulous *self*-interrogation in which teachers of writing must evaluate how their teaching, grading practices, writing, and research methods create or deepen difference. For Guerra, we must concomitantly seek to understand the complexities of identity and language, how translanguaging “behaves in the world,” and how to address the needs of minority students who, because their languages and identities do not conform to accepted norms, “often find themselves in worlds not designed for them” (chapter 1).

Second, these chapters encourage compositionists to create spaces of encounter so that students can engage with one another, and with writing, in ways that evade the social, cultural, and institutional logics of difference. As scholars in this collection argue, teachers and administrators of writing must position students to interrogate and resist the racist, sexist, ableist, classist, homophobic, transphobic, and otherwise discriminatory views that pervade our society and our spaces of higher education. Pittendrigh advocates implementing the methods of restorative justice in the composition classroom in place of traditional modes of persuasion, a method that positions students as collaborators engaged in discovery and self-exploration rather than adversaries engaged in rhetorical warfare. Yam similarly encourages the interrogation of *deep stories*, affectively entangled narratives that often link identities to political orientations, in order to “help eradicate toxic and dehumanizing rhetoric across political difference and positionality” (155).

Third, writing across difference also entails working to transform our institutions and communities such that inequitable differences are not structurally reproduced. As scholars in this collection contend, difference must be addressed through the application of solidaristic and antiracist values to institutions and writing program ecologies. Gonzales and Shivers-McNair advocate for creating “space for all our expertises, vocabularies, and practices to intersect across institutional and disciplinary boundaries in ways that highlight our interdependence” (185). Thu, Malcolm, Rai, and Bawarshi similarly advocate identifying and eliminating various forms of monolingual racism in our institutions by (re)orienting writing ecologies toward the intersectional values of



antiracism. As they argue, such programmatic work should be guided by the view that “antiracist translingual praxis is an ecological phenomenon” (210)—work that requires an ongoing commitment to reflection and action in all our institutional spaces.

Cumulatively, we see this collection as a practical and methodological intervention at a time when social, political, economic, and personal divisions are deepening. We specifically understand it as aligning with the expansive and coalitional goals of the protests that, as of this writing, continue to erupt across the country and the world. While composition alone cannot hope to address the issue of difference on an expansive enough scale to appreciably redress global society’s deepening divides, the scholars gathered here defend the value of transforming our classrooms, institutions, and teaching selves in ways that support solidarity and social justice in an immensely divisive time. As the contributors to this volume contend, writing and writing instruction can resist the contemporary proliferation of hatred, violence, and inequality; critique and transform the world in ways that bend toward social justice; connect dislocated interlocutors and build community; and illuminate what forms such connection might take and what implications they might hold.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of our rationale for capitalizing the term, see chapter 10.
2. This article first appeared in *Composition Forum*, volume 40, fall 2018.

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