

Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future, by Asao Inoue. Fort Collins, Colorado: WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2015. 330 pp.

Reviewed by Raquel Corona, St. John's University

I begin this book review with the personal, because it is at the center of Asao Inoue's *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*. He develops an entirely different approach to assessment that is both theoretical and practical, based specifically on a framework that accounts for the localized environment from which students enter the classroom and their efforts (labor) as they try to navigate, identify, and work with the various demands of standardized edited American English (SEAE). In understanding the environments from which our students come, we must encounter and manage issues related to race as well as the abundance of language varieties that arise as a result. Inoue develops this approach in an effort to help educators understand the dynamic impact of race on both language and our work in the writing classroom. As a Latina born and raised in Long Island who has attended and worked in Ivy League and other elite, predominantly white institutions, I can empathize with Inoue's experience navigating collegiate spaces as a person of color. I am sincerely committed to recognizing my own stance and to analyzing my attraction to what Inoue proposes. Inoue asserts that in order to implement his approach to assessing student writing, instructors must be honest with students about their backgrounds and histories as well as how backgrounds and histories necessarily shape writing. As human beings, while we constantly make determinations about writing and the world based upon race and other factors of personal identity, Inoue argues that race and identity go too often unacknowledged in conversations on assessment. As such, it is with the personal in mind that Inoue ventures on an antiracist assessment approach: he opens the book with the premise that many scholars have discussed assessment practices, but none have placed racial theory alongside assessment or used critical race theory as a way to reshape current attitudes toward student writing.

Inoue's work involves a two-part proposition—half theory and half practice—for a new pedagogy in writing classrooms. He spends the first chapter creating the theoretical framework that grounds an understanding of how race is socially constructed, and how social structures within the United States have developed according to a racial divide. He also introduces a key term, “white racial *habitus*,” which Inoue coins from various sociologists and compositionists in order to define the language practices of predominantly white, middleclass Americans. However, the “white racial *habitus*” also encompasses the dynamics

at play regarding the impact of race on attitudes about language. Inoue uses this term to explore how nearly every writing assessment is a racially infused undertaking. Much of Inoue's success in this book lies in his very useful examples of how race is embedded in assessment, from the use of the intelligence quotient (IQ) exams in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries to present uses of assessment by even the most well-intentioned instructors and scholars in our field. He essentially announces that the writing privileged within classrooms and across the United States, SEAE, is controlled, maintained, and reinforced by white, middleclass hegemonic values. Inoue draws a connection between race and language in order to delve into the value of certain kinds of language over others, stressing that it is not that people cannot comprehend a language variance outside of SEAE, but rather, that the individuals using such variances (that is, people of color) are valued less in our society than those who use SEAE (that is, whites). Everyone can sing along and follow the meaning of rap songs and hip hop culture, Inoue argues, but the value of non-SEAE language is rarely emphasized in classrooms because structural racism does not allow for it. Inoue calls for readers to discover the local diversity surrounding the classrooms where they teach in order to better understand the wide array of students' language practices.

In chapter two, Inoue takes a three-pronged theoretical approach to develop his antiracist assessment ecology, outlining the basic foundational tenets for his ecology. Inoue invokes the use of the term ecology to reframe our current conception of writing assessment in our classrooms. He asserts that our writing assessments determine the way students function within the classroom environment. Ecology as a term is used to encompass a living and breathing space that takes into account all the stakeholders in an environment: students and instructors alike. The first theory he utilizes to explicate the essential theoretical principles of said ecology is a labor-based pedagogy centered on Freirean ideology. Inoue calls for instructors to equalize the writing classroom by grading students according to their labor in the class rather than judging them on their ability to mimic SEAE. Students in Inoue's ecology likewise have an active hand in their own education by shaping how they are graded: they develop a grading contract for the course as well as the rubrics that hold them accountable for learning. Such Freire-inspired pedagogy offers Inoue the opportunity to turn the classroom into a place that evaluates language practices from the perspective of students. Instead of instilling the belief that students should free themselves from their home language varieties, Inoue argues it is the classroom that needs to be freed from the dominance of SEAE. As students engage with these ideas surrounding evaluation Inoue encourages students and instructor to focus on a second tenant of his ecology, which is language's link to the political power differentials existent within the writing

classroom, institutions of education, and American society as a whole. Finally, his third tenet embraces Buddhist principles of interconnectedness within the antiracist assessment ecology, a space where every individual is responsible for the success of the larger class. This is quite contrary to the general American sentiment, which is rooted in individual success. He also emphasizes the idea that the classroom ecology is constantly changing, becoming. Accordingly in Inoue's classroom, an ecology is seemingly inevitable, because it is composed of people and their connection to those around them.

Chapter three continues the work of defining and unpacking the concept of ecology: in it, Inoue delineates the seven essential elements of an antiracist assessment ecology—ecological power, ecological parts, ecological purpose, ecological people, ecological processes, ecological products, and ecological places. To unpack each element, Inoue works with a wide range of social theorists and compositionists to understand how writing classrooms are affected by the decisions instructors make in their courses. Throughout his examination he provides examples of classroom practices to support each of his ecological elements, including a list of readings to spark discussions of race in general and white racial *habitus* in particular. As the book moves forward, readers receive an abundance of resources for developing antiracist assessment ecologies of their own.

Indeed, chapter four gives readers an even sharper image of Inoue's classroom, showcasing how one of his upper-level writing intensive courses at Fresno embodies key features of an antiracist assessment ecology. Through examples of student writing he demonstrates students' experiences negotiating race and language. Building on the work of various composition scholars, he examines how the use of grading contracts, student reflection, student-teacher conferences, peer review, and other forms of group work help to create and sustain an antiracist assessment ecology.

Inspired by these resources, I decided to alter my own writing classroom and attempted to implement some antiracist assessment practices. Similar to Inoue's experience, I struggled to convince students to buy-in to a different way of functioning in a classroom, to create an ecology where they had decision-making power in the way the course unfolds. As I attempted to get their input and investment in decision-making, students were often quiet. I worked hard to gain their participation, and as the semester progressed they slowly became engaged, developing new peer review activities, and taking part in large class discussions about altering workload and establishing deadlines. As an instructor of color, it was daunting to assign readings and discuss issues related to structural racism and language, but it was an exciting beginning in a journey to reshape my pedagogy. As evidenced by my own and Inoue's experiences, implementing antiracist assessment ecologies requires adjustment time for

instructors and students. Students will especially need some time to acclimate, to become active classroom agents and decision makers about pedagogy. And while novice and otherwise vulnerable instructors may find implementing the labor-intensive adjustments Inoue advocates daunting, my own experiences suggest that the benefits outweigh the costs. The primary benefit I experienced came as a result of the inclusion of activities and readings that helped students demystify and debunk the dominance of the SEAE. I would strongly urge others to experiment with these as well. As an instructor who values creative writing and accepts all of the language varieties students bring to the classroom, working with students to cultivate their unique languages and to challenge the hegemony of SEAE offered me an opportunity to see social change in action.

Still, having read *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* within the context of a graduate seminar, I have to attest to the concerns some of my classmates had with Inoue's pedagogy. Perhaps predictably, the racial makeup of our seminar was overwhelmingly white, including high school teachers and college instructors of literature and composition. Although many of my classmates struggled with Inoue's emphasis on the white racial *habitus* of the writing classroom, they walked away from the conversation changed. I am unsure what impact Inoue's work has had on their own teaching practices, but I wonder, if Inoue's work can get instructors to think twice about what they find familiar, has he already changed these teachers' landscapes? As instructors we rarely have planned time for reflection, and in as much as Inoue's book forces teachers to think about what we do, how we do it, and why we do it, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* successfully alters our conception of assessment in the writing classroom by coming to terms with the existing backdrop in the field and the inherent inequalities built into institutions of higher education and the prominence of SEAE at the college-level.

Jamaica, New York