

*Review Essay*

## Thinking Ecologically and Ethically about Assessment

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Dayton, Amy E., editor. *Assessing the Teaching of Writing*. Utah State UP, 2015. 216 pages.

Inoue, Asao B., *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*. WAC Clearing House/Parlor Press, 2015. 339 pages.

White, Edward W., Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham. *Very Like A Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs*. Utah State UP, 2015. 202 pages.<sup>1</sup>

Many WPAs find themselves in unfamiliar territory when it comes to writing assessment work. We may feel underprepared to claim expertise in assessment (as Chris Gallagher notes in his *WPA: Writing Program Administrators* article, “What Do WPAs Need to Know about Assessment?”) and find ourselves searching for resources to answer questions about how to collect and interpret assessment data in ways that are not only valid and reliable, but also ethical and fair. Luckily, assessment scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition is shifting away from technocratic and deterministic views of methods and towards a humanistic view privileging discussions of the ethics and effects of our assessment practices. Indeed, as the three books reviewed here exemplify, re-centering writing assessment on its human elements—both in terms of the professionals doing the work of assessment and students who face the consequences of assessment—is an important step towards the goal of creating the fairest assessment theories, practices, and policies possible.

Each of the three books under review call for mindful interpretation of assessment data by critically posing questions about what data we should be collecting, for what purposes it will be used, and how those interpretations

may affect the working lives of our faculty and the learning opportunities of our students. While these considerations may not seem groundbreaking, these three books collectively reflect an emerging ecological perspective on writing assessment and writing program assessment that complements ecological work in writing assessment (Dryer and Peckham; Wardle and Roozen) and writing program administration (Ryan; Kahn) while dovetailing with the overt philosophical commitments expressed in the emerging social justice turn in writing assessment theory.

I find the ecology metaphor to be especially useful because it is inherently relational. Ecology deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings, and to claim that writing assessment is somehow ecological enables us to consider what forces both within and beyond our control might affect our assessments. WPAs act within systems and institutions motivated by a plethora of interests, concerns, and imperatives, and recent writing assessment scholarship is helping illuminate how such forces shape our work. Thinking ecologically and thinking ethically about assessment go hand-in-hand for me because both lines of inquiry draw our attention to relational dynamics in our assessment acts and processes. The three timely contributions reviewed here cover the three important components of university writing programs—program review, teaching evaluation, and classroom writing assessment—from a wide array of standpoints, but what connects them is this underlying concern about operating ethically within our assessment ecologies. Indeed, these book share a similar aim: to create the fairest learning environments possible.

#### DESIGNING MORE ETHICAL PROGRAMMATIC ASSESSMENTS

In *Very Like a Whale*, Edward M. White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham situate their design approach for programmatic assessment within a whole host of forces shaping and reshaping higher education. Their title is a reference to a line in *Hamlet* that occurs at a pivotal moment in the drama wrought with many questions. They identify this moment as “one at which past and future swirl into that labyrinth of questions” (2). White, Elliot, and Peckham argue the field of writing assessment has reached a similar moment filled with “complexity and contingency, irony, and indeterminacy” (3). The way forward, they advise, is to take action and understand the complex context of our work in contemporary postsecondary writing program assessment. Fittingly, their aim is to empower WPAs through new models of writing program assessment as well as new strategies.

The book is arranged in five chapters, each of which ends with a set of questions that reflect key concepts in the form of generative questions that

can be used to apply the authors' Design for Assessment (DFA) model. Chapter one presents a history of trends about programmatic assessment, including the strong influence of postsecondary accreditation and the development of standards such as the WPA Outcomes Statement and *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* developed by CWPA, NCTE, and the National Writing Project. It also defines key concepts including writing program, validation, and construct. Chapter two explores case studies of writing programs that demonstrate program structures and categories of validation evidence that are integral to the DFA approach. Chapter three explains best practices for program assessment with special attention to sources of evidence, and chapter four reviews empirical reporting guidelines for evidence-based writing program assessment. These guidelines cover a wide variety of methods including descriptive statistics and coding systems for qualitative content analysis that the authors contend are capable of yielding comparative information. The final chapter presents a fuller explanation of the authors' DFA model that they suggest be used in advance of cyclical assessment mandates such as accreditation reviews.

Writing program assessment is a key term for White, Elliot, and Peckham and one worth considering carefully. Their definition of writing program assessment is "the process of documenting and reflecting on the impact of the program's coordinated efforts" (3). They later describe such assessment as a "longitudinal process of accountability" designed and controlled by WPAs (4). White, Elliot, and Peckham help us understand how assessing a writing program is different than assessing the writing of students who pass through that program, and they also point out the opportunities that are missed when writing program assessment is reductively understood as synonymous with writing assessment. However, I am conflicted regarding how far the authors expand the definition of a writing program. If we talk (as the authors argue we should) about pre-enrollment placement, the first-year course sequence, writing center, WID/WAC work, and even graduate thesis and dissertation guidelines as elements of one unified writing program, then audiences in higher administration may receive that message as an invitation for additional managerial responsibility for a single WPA. Although I agree with White, Elliot, and Peckham that writing programs are foundational and integral to undergraduate education, part of me could not shake the feeling that this line of reasoning might unintentionally result in even more uncompensated and unrecognized work for already over-burdened WPAs. To be fair, I do not mean to suggest that White, Elliot, and Peckham are insensitive to labor issues; in fact, they are exceedingly sensitive to the effects of the adjunctivization of higher education and mention several times that salary and benefits for all our faculty

colleagues should be part of strategic plans for the financial stability of a program. Yet, as a junior faculty member with pre-tenure program assessment responsibilities, I find the expansive definition of a writing program rhetorically tricky; it could certainly help unify what might otherwise be isolated islands of writing instruction and support into one coherent campus unit, but it could also inadvertently expand the scope of my position. That being said, this critique of the definition would be moot if a team of WPAs and writing specialists at an institution were working synergistically, which is perhaps what the authors were envisioning.

In much writing assessment literature, quantitative methods are viewed with skepticism given their assumed relationship to positivism and psychometrics, yet White, Elliot, and Peckham convincingly argue that we need not think of institutionalized discourses and the empirical methods they often employ (or ask WPAs to employ) as weapons to be wielded against us. *Very Like a Whale* adeptly translates complex concepts and methods from educational research in ways that are immediately useful for WPAs unaccustomed to or untrained in quantitative research methods such as descriptive statistics. Indeed, while many have adopted this combat metaphor to signal a pragmatic need to brandish the weapon of assessment for our own purposes (something akin to the oft-cited White's Law of Assessment—assess thyself or assessment shall be done unto thee), what if these empirical and quantitative methods could be more of a shield than a sword? What if we wielded these methods not with the intent of fighting for our pedagogical and philosophical interests, but to protect those who are disproportionately affected by certain assessment practices within classrooms and writing programs such as students from minority groups and contingent faculty colleagues? Understanding the potential of using quantitative methods might help assuage the typical perception of disharmony between our humanist instincts and such empirical, quantitative methods. White, Elliot, and Peckham go as far as arguing that programs in the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies should begin to incorporate more writing assessment training, including formal training in quantitative methods to complement the typical research methods course, which may be an interesting proposition for graduate programs with a strong tradition of WPA training.

In addition to providing much needed background in empirical analysis, reading *Very Like a Whale* also helped me consider transferability as part of writing program assessment. Although localism is the most prominent tenant of contemporary writing assessment theory and practice, White, Elliot, and Peckham make a compelling argument that localism and inter-institutional collaboration are “not mutually exclusive” and can in fact

work synergistically (64). Hyper-localized and context-sensitive assessments yield crucial information about specific student populations. Yet such situated assessments risk failing to fully address omnipresent calls for accountability from more distant sources like accreditation agencies. Returning to the ecology metaphor, White and his co-authors help illuminate how our writing programs exist in not only institutional ecologies, but also in interinstitutional ecologies. White, Elliot, and Peckham provide guidance in how we might begin to design our programs and assessments in ways to make such collaboration across institutional boundaries possible.

#### TELLING THE WHOLE STORY ABOUT TEACHING

The contributors to Amy E. Dayton's collection are also concerned about creating fair and ethical ecologies of assessment. Continuing the theoretical and practical investigations in *Evaluating Teachers of Writing* edited by Christine Hult in 1994 and responding to the contemporary rhetorical scene wherein WPAs increasingly face pressure to demonstrate the efficacy of writing programs, the contributors to Dayton's collection argue that in the swirl of internal program reviews, institution-wide assessments, and accreditation cycles assessment of arguably the most essential element of writing programs—the teaching of writing—has been elided. Their focus on pedagogical and professional aspects of assessing the teaching of writing adds a much-needed dimension to current conversations about writing assessment. Two core questions guide the collection: 1) what counts as good assessment data to evaluate the teaching of writing and 2) how can that data be interpreted in meaningful ways? Contributors offer compelling answers to these two queries that both engage familiar modes of assessing (such as the ever-present course evaluations) and introduce emerging technologies related to student learning that may be applicable to assessing the teaching of writing (e.g., multi-institutional student engagement surveys).

*Assessing the Teaching of Writing* has two sections: one describing theoretical frameworks for assessing teaching and one exploring the impact of new assessment technologies. The frameworks in the first section are impressive in their variety and in their consideration of assessment methods (both familiar and new). For example, Meredith DeCosta and Duane Roen develop a framework from Ernest Boyer's model of teaching-as-scholarship and provide a heuristic for evaluating teaching. Dayton examines several interdisciplinary meta-analyses of student evaluations of instruction to address common concerns about the questionable validity and potential biases associated with this form of evaluation (32). Brian Jackson explores the challenge of classroom observations, especially for those who may be

uncomfortable with the manager-employee binary that often emerges when observations are done by a WPA. He advocates a formative approach and includes a handy observation sheet intended to structure the evaluation around specific skills and practices valued by a writing program while still allowing enough free response for seasoned teachers to impart wisdom on their newer colleagues. Gerald Nelms writes about a new approach: mid-term in-class focus groups, which he describes a class interview facilitated by “instructional consultants” from a faculty resource office or center for teaching excellence (68). Lastly, Kara Mae Brown, Kim Freeman, and Chris W. Gallagher argue that digital teaching portfolios can serve a much more generative function than simply being repositories of syllabi, assignments, and responses to student writing. Their formative approach envisions the teaching portfolio as a space to negotiate many of the tensions inherent in teacher evaluation (e.g., the request to both honestly reflect on one’s pedagogy—including possible weaknesses—and to demonstrate one’s effectiveness as an instructor).

The second section of Dayton’s collection explores technologies for assessing the teaching of writing. In this section, we learn about contexts and trends that are pushing the boundaries of assessing teaching, including the use of big data to better understand the dynamics of our writing programs. Although I was initially wary that this split focus on theory and technology might inadvertently reproduce decades-old false dichotomies about the theory-practice divide in writing assessment, the division ended up working well as an organizational structure given the intended audience of WPAs. We may at times turn to a text for theoretical grounding from which to build an argument for changing policies of writing assessment. At other times, we might reach for a primer on a technology of writing assessment that is new to us or for a pragmatic guide for how to handle an assessment situation within our writing programs. Dayton’s volume would be a helpful resource in all three scenarios.

One of the highlights of the collection is an explicit acknowledgment that assessing teachers and teaching can often feel much more invasive than assessing student learning. Although pedagogical and programmatic goals may guide such evaluations, it is imperative to recognize that assessment of teaching is also a labor issue; power differentials and the institutional precarity of certain academic labor subjectivities, such as contingent faculty positions, become amplified when we assess the work of writing teachers. Dayton’s chapter on the ethical and responsible use of student evaluations of instruction—arguably the most ubiquitous form of assessing teaching in higher education contexts—tackles the tensions that arise from these high-stakes assessments. Reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions are

almost always informed by data from student evaluations, yet Dayton comments that faculty and WPAs often have little-to-no control over this institutional assessment mechanism. What we can control, however, is how we interpret and use this data, and Dayton provides a generative ethical framework that acknowledges the “important material effect on the professional lives and career prospects of postsecondary teachers” (32). She returns to the two core questions of the collection to consider how teaching evaluations might be considered valid assessment data and how the data might be interpreted in meaningful ways. While weaving in important findings from two meta-analyses of student evaluations, Dayton focuses on the ethical tensions that arise from student evaluations of instruction and argues for WPAs to adopt “a more nuanced understanding of student evaluations—particularly concerning validity, interpretation, and survey design” (32). In addition to recommending that evaluations be tailored to specific courses, aligned with course outcomes, and written in accessible language that teachers and students actually use in the classroom, Dayton also recommends that data from student evaluations be interpreted by a community of teachers guided by communally-developed interpretative guidelines (38).

Because the authors in *Assessing the Teaching of Writing* consider teaching to be a multifaceted activity, they collectively argue that fair and ethical assessment of teaching requires multiple measures to “tell the whole story”—a refrain that appears in one form or another in several chapters that draws a lovely parallel to the goal of capturing richer accounts of student learning in Wardle and Roozen’s ecological model of writing assessment. While summative evaluations of teaching may be seen by some as a perfunctory process that relates only to personnel decisions, Dayton and her fellow contributors recast the assessment of teaching as an opportunity for formative assessment that can promote pedagogical growth and programmatic reflection. Without diving too deeply into overly technical discussion of validity and reliability (concepts that are covered in much more detail in *Very Like A Whale*), *Assessing the Teaching of Writing* emphasizes the advantages of formative assessment that make it worthwhile even when it requires additional time, energy, and money. Cindy Moore explicitly addresses how well-informed scholars and teachers can “struggle themselves to match theory with practice when placed into a supervisory role” such as being a WPA (134). Her chapter adopts a pragmatic approach informed by what she identifies as common administrative priorities and recommends WPAs acknowledge the fact that multidimensional assessment undoubtedly requires more time. However, she contends we can work to invent new arguments to justify the additional time investment required for more robust and meaningful assessments in ways that address local administra-

tive concerns as well as the concerns of external audiences such as regional accrediting agencies.

Helping administrators understand the value of the additional time and resources needed for multi-dimensional assessment requires a delicate rhetorical and ethical balance, which Moore outlines very well in her chapter, but such assessment also requires the buy-in from faculty members who are being assessed. In chapter seven, Chris Anson discusses how faculty often resist assessments done in a manner that resembles surveillance of what many often consider to be the most private and autonomous part of our jobs. To ameliorate this tendency to react defensively, Anson advocates a multi-dimensional approach that embraces assessment as a collaborative and reflective form of professional development. I read this chapter while preparing my binder for annual review, which at my previous institution was a decidedly non-reflective and non-collaborative process, and the juxtaposition between what I was reading and what I was doing was stark. Anson's arguments added considerable rhetorical possibility to the perfunctory task that appeared as the next item on my to-do list.

The programmatic stakes of writing assessment have arguably never been higher, and the tenor of the technology-related chapters within *Assessing the Teaching of Writing* harmonize well with White, Elliot, and Peckham's DFA model in their emphasis on negotiating local priorities with the priorities of other stakeholders on campus and beyond. As the second section of Dayton's collection indicates, we have new data collection tools at our disposal that may help us craft more accurate and persuasive arguments about what writing teachers do and how well they are doing it. One premise of Deborah Minter and Amy Goodburn's chapter on big data as a means of supplementing traditional means of documenting effective teaching (e.g., teaching portfolios, peer observations) is that WPAs and teachers have an obligation to "educate ourselves on what big data can—and can't—do" in terms of assessing teaching (197). As they rightly point out, institutions and systems of higher education are increasingly turning to learning analytics as a way of measuring instructor and program performance. We need to understand these tools in order to insure the responsible use of new technologies in our home institutions. In addition to familiarizing ourselves with the technologies of big data, White, Elliot, and Peckham would likely add modes of statistical analysis as well so that we may critique arguments informed by learning analytics when they negatively impact our programs.

In this cultural moment when teacher expertise and judgement is often undermined by reductive modes of teacher assessment driven by an accountability agenda, there is much opportunity to reclaim writing assessment as one means of demonstrating the value of our work in our



own terms. (Gallagher, *Reclaiming*). Because Dayton's collection addresses many of the pedagogical, political, and programmatic issues related to the assessment of teaching and offers practical descriptions of new and familiar technologies of assessment, it would be an interesting text for graduate courses on WPA issues, writing assessment, or program design. However, the theoretical background related to assessment felt thin at the beginning, and I found myself filling in conceptual gaps with my knowledge from my own background in assessment theory. For example, in her introductory essay, Dayton recites the foundational purports to definition of validity and rightly argues that data and interpretations are what we validate, not assessment tools or tests. Her one-paragraph-long discussion of validity is impressively succinct, but it lacks the depth and nuance of White, Elliot, and Peckham's discussion of construct representation as it relates to validation evidence. Dayton does delve deeper into consequential validity in chapter three, but the theoretical overview of validity first presented in the introduction glosses much. As a result, I was left with the impression that this book might not be the best first introduction to writing assessment within Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies—a niche filled by Brian Huot, Peggy O'Neill, and Cindy Moore's *A Guide to College Writing Assessment* and Huot and O'Neill's *Assessing Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*. However, it certainly remains a valuable addition to the growing canon of writing assessment scholarship, especially for graduate students and WPAs already familiar with writing assessment theory and practice who are looking for new ways to create more ethical and sustainable cultures of assessment within their programs.

#### MAKING RACE PART OF THE STORY

Asao Inoue similarly invites us to reexamine our pedagogy and assessment practices to ask if writing assessments are not only productively connected to programmatic objectives like course outcomes but also informed by a sense of ethics and fairness within our writing classrooms. In *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, Inoue argues that WPAs have an imperative to consider how race and racism may overtly or tacitly inform our theories and practices of writing assessment. Echoing and extending previous calls for more racially-aware assessment (Inoue and Poe; Poe et al.), Inoue makes a powerful case for critical examination of writing classrooms as sites where we can calibrate our theories and practices of assessment to be more appropriate for our increasingly diverse student populations. For Inoue, approaching writing assessment as an antiracist project requires more than doing away with outmoded assessment practices that may perpetuate

inequality because of racial, class, gender, or sexual bias. For example, he discusses racism and racializations within larger-scale assessments such as IQ tests, the ACT, SAT, AP, and CSU's English Placement Test, and WPAs interested in resisting institutionally mandated standardized testing could use Inoue's analysis as grounding for arguments to revise or reimagine large-scale placement tests that have historically produced racially aligned results. However, Inoue's identification of classroom writing assessment as means for creating a more socially just educational environment remains his unique contribution among the three books within this review.

In the simplest of terms, Inoue argues that writing assessment guided by an antiracist agenda can be an instrumental means of promoting justice, fairness, and equality, and in this way his book reflects the philosophical commitments expressed in the emerging social justice turn in writing assessment theory, a turn that complements the broader public turn in Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies. Generally associated with the notion of assuring equitable social opportunities, social justice work is guided by a commitment to the protection of the least advantaged members of a society. In response to a confluence of socially-conscious writing pedagogy and theory and growing anti-testing sentiment at all levels of public education, social justice has been taken up as a way for writing assessment scholars to challenge status quo policies, practices, and politics that by design offer advantages to students of certain social backgrounds and disproportionately disadvantage students of other backgrounds. Although his argument aligns with principles that are likely quite familiar to writing teachers and administrators, Inoue acknowledges that thinking about racism in our classroom assessment practices can be uncomfortable but nonetheless important.

His first two chapters extend the theoretical groundwork laid in his earlier co-edited collection with Mya Poe, *Race and Writing Assessment*, and explain his concept of antiracist writing assessment ecologies. This concept of antiracist writing assessment ecologies is premised on the idea that writing assessment "is not simply a decision about whether to use a portfolio or not," but a complex system of beliefs and practices that can be cultivated and nurtured (12). An antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology, then, is one that is designed and implemented in ways that promote fairness and honor the complexity of diversity. Inoue's explanation of antiracist classroom writing assessment ecologies in chapters one and two involves definitions of familiar terms like race, racism, racial formation, and the introduction of a new term—*racial habitus*—to describe how racism may manifest consciously or unconsciously in classroom writing assessment. Inoue's term is a redeployment of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which Inoue defines as "an historically organizing set of structures

that structures social interactions and society” (42). These structures, Inoue explains, are entangled in a complex feedback loop with perceptions of the world and practices of social division. Habitus is simultaneously a “structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices” of social division and also a “structured structure” that is reified by these perceptions and practices (Bourdieu qtd. in Inoue 42–43). Inoue’s adoption of habitus to explain the socially-constructed nature of race in a slightly different light is complex but useful for writing assessment scholarship because it focuses our attention on the way social identities can be rendered visible in language, on bodies, in pedagogical practices, and through social performances. For instance, he explains how race can influence the assessment of student writing in classroom settings because conventions of academic writing remain wedded to the dominant discourse that is associated with white racial formations (31).

Although Inoue’s definition of *racial habitus* as a related group of principles that construct and are constructed by racial designations is theoretically interesting, what stood out to me most in this first section of the book was Inoue’s engagement of previous writing assessment scholarship, including a critique of Brian Huot’s emphasis on student individualism as opposed to students’ subject positions in social formations; a commentary on the conceptual limitations of Patricia Lynne’s proposed lexicon of non-technocratic terms such as ethicalness and meaningfulness; and an extended retort to Richard Haswell’s response that identified antiracism as aporetic in Inoue and Poe’s 2012 collection on race and writing assessment.<sup>2</sup> For example, the major point of contention between Haswell and Inoue is centered around the effects (both intended and unintended) of antiracism as a principle shaping the design and implementation of writing assessments. On the one hand, Haswell writes that we cannot endeavor to eradicate racism without also reifying the concept of race (e.g., adjusting outcomes by using benchmarks that are also informed by racial formations reaffirms the concept of race). But if antiracism is not enough to help us escape racial constructions, what is? Haswell’s answer is that “Racial aporias will end only when race itself ends” (para. 12). On the other hand, Inoue argues that antiracism is essential for eradicating racism and emphasizes that it is possible to end racism without erasing race. I understand and identify with both perspectives: Haswell articulates many of the nagging concerns I had about unintentionally reifying race and racism by adopting an antiracist agenda, and Inoue’s response ameliorates those concerns to a great degree by reminding me of the precise end goal at hand. I imagine this debate is far from over, but the tension between Haswell’s and Inoue’s respective stances is a productive one.

While Inoue's reflective and generative engagement with critics like Haswell in these first chapters felt well-paced, parts of his theoretical framework felt somewhat rushed. Inoue borrows elements of Freirian critical pedagogy, post-process theory, Marxian political theory, and Buddhist theories of interconnectedness in order to produce a theoretical foundation capable of supporting his vision of writing assessment ecologies. However, this theoretical blend is at times disorienting, not because of theoretical incompatibility or complexity but in the sheer number of concepts. I greatly admire Inoue's enthusiastic embrace of so many concepts, but I found the result to be at times overwhelming. As a reader, it was not always clear to me what each theory or concept was adding to writing assessment theory more broadly. I would have preferred one thoroughly developed theoretical lens. At a moment when writing assessment is experiencing an exciting explosion of theory-building, an astute scholar like Inoue who is attuned to issues of race in writing assessment has much to offer. I fear his buffet of theory may not accomplish the kind of theory-building he intended, although it certainly contributes many concepts to the ongoing discussion about writing assessment theory.

Chapters three and four take a more practical turn in which Inoue describes and analyzes his own classroom practices. Chapter three presents seven related elements— power, parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places—that constitute a classroom writing assessment ecology and includes a heuristic demonstrating how the elements are interrelated (176). Possible excessive alliteration aside, Inoue's seven elements encapsulate many of the important components and systems of smaller-scale writing assessment that work together to paint a fuller picture of his vision of a writing assessment ecology. When describing his upper-division writing course at Fresno State (Inoue is now at the University of Washington, Tacoma) in chapter four, Inoue both recounts his own experiences of racism as a person of color in academia and reflects on his struggle to address the aporias of race and writing assessment in his own classroom. This chapter features Inoue's use of contract grading as one means of cultivating an anti-racist writing assessment ecology. He explains that as an artifact that articulates labor expectations while acknowledging racial diversity in the class participants, the grading contract is an effective alternative to traditional grading systems. Moreover, the use of contract grading, Inoue suggests, has the potential to create "productive antiracist borderlands in the course's writing assessment ecology because the parts can reflect the local diversity of language use while not penalizing students through ecological products like grades" and "offer students landscapes to problematize their existential writing assessment situations" (185). By resisting the dominant practice of

focusing on ecological products like grades, Inoue noted a change in the way both he and students attended to the labor of writing (191). In short, he concludes that the contract rendered visible previously obfuscated elements of the ecology (especially processes, places, and people). He documents this shift with student voices, which are an effective way of highlighting student involvement in assessment because they are the ones doing the actual labor of writing that will be evaluated.

In chapter five, Inoue explores the connections between the concepts from the earlier chapters and his experiences in this 160W writing course in Fresno. The result is a heuristic for designing antiracist writing assessment ecologies, which I found to be one of the most useful parts of the book. Built around the seven elements of classroom writing assessment ecologies, Inoue's heuristic provides pointed questions that can help teachers and administrators design and implement sustainable and ethical assessment ecologies. He complements this heuristic with a handful of "final stories of writing assessment ecologies" from his own childhood and early adulthood. These stories reflect his final major point: It is often more fruitful to consider classroom writing assessment ecologies as dynamic and relational concepts rather than static physical spaces (295).

Inoue's book provides a conceptual vocabulary for thinking about many of the same design questions addressed in the other two books under review here but is guided by a more localized and qualitative perspective. Overall, the many heuristics provided in these three texts offer diverse ways to reconceptualize the design and implementation of writing assessment in writing programs and writing classrooms.

## MOVING FORWARD

The political and intellectual stakes in writing assessment are higher than ever. University writing programs and the WPAs who run them face more pressure to assess student learning at the same time that our disciplinary understandings of learning and literacy have become significantly more nuanced. Put simply: We have more complex stories to tell to increasingly impatient audiences. Figuring out how to proceed is a challenge, but we can begin by interrupting reductionist thinking about writing assessment and writing program assessment through programmatic and pedagogical intervention. The heuristics and theoretical foundations presented in these texts provide us many productive starting points.

Assessments of writing and teaching as they are typically constructed are not politically neutral; we sense this as educators who are in tune with the rhythms of learning. The books reviewed here help us understand the

importance of proceeding from an explicit assumption that writing assessments as they are typically constructed are political. In this way, they not only complement recent work on writing assessment as social justice—including a special issue of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* on equity and ethics and a special issue of *College English* on writing assessment as social justice—but also provide ways of illuminating the tacit and pervasive assumptions we and others make about the teaching and assessing of writing. In fact, their greatest contribution is their encouragement for us to take up the politicality of writing assessments in ways that are in harmony with our disciplinary values in order to foster the fairest learning ecologies possible.

## NOTES

1. To avoid a conflict of interest, Norbert Elliot, one of the current *WPA: Writing Program Administration* book review editors, was not involved in the procuring, processing, revision, or editing process of this review. Jacob Babb, his co-editor, was solely responsible for the work associated with publishing this review.

2. I have written about this elsewhere in “Working Against Racism: A Review of *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*” which was published in *Journal of Writing Assessment Reading List*. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 12 Jan. 2016, <http://jwreadinglist.blogspot.com/2016/01/working-against-racism-review-of.html>.

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