CHAPTER 14.

THE EXTRACURRICULUM OF WRITING ASSESSMENT

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In her contribution to the 2011 *College English* Symposium "How I Have Changed My Mind," Anne Ruggles Gere tells a tale that's part intellectual autobiography, part love story (Anson et al.). Her narrative concerns the way she first had a falling out with writing assessment scholarship, then developed a deeper passion for the topic as conversations about it blossomed beyond its psychometric roots—with writing assessment's conceptual branches extending into increasingly fruitful exchanges with rhetoric, linguistics, and genre studies, grounded in a focus on assessment's local relevance to writing pedagogy.

I came across this brief text around a decade ago, when I first met Gere. As I now re-read her reflection, what strikes me most isn't its narrative destination but the journey it describes. She writes,

> After publishing ["Written Composition: Toward a Theory of Evaluation"], I became increasingly disenchanted with the topic of evaluating writing. The ongoing dominance of the statistically based psychometric model led to a focus on issues of reliability and validity that pushed issues of meaning aside. I could see no way to forward the questions that mattered to me, *so I turned my attention elsewhere, investigating writing in the extracurriculum*, first in writing groups and later in women's clubs. I decided that it wasn't worthwhile to focus on the evaluation of writing; I didn't want to spend any more time on it.
>
> Flash forward thirty years, and I have changed my mind: the evaluation of writing preoccupies me. … I'm teaching a graduate seminar titled "What Makes Writing Good?" … I look forward to conversations about assessment. (112–13; emphasis mine)

In this telling, Gere's work on the extracurriculum of composition—the ways "writing development occurs outside formal education" ("Kitchen Tables"

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2025.2456.2.14

76)—occupies an interstitial space, sandwiched chronologically at the center of her assessment story. As I contend in this chapter, this narrative placement is oddly fitting, for as I have come to think of it, the extracurriculum is at the heart of Gere's field-shaping scholarship on assessment. For decades, she has challenged writing studies scholars to examine the discursive reach and disciplinary effects of evaluation beyond and outside the classroom—including in matters of everyday linguistic prescriptivism and discrimination (see, e.g., Gere, "Public Opinion"; Gere et al., "Communal Justicing"; Gere and Smith).

A growing body of scholarship now explores ways that extracurricular writing products, practices, and experiences can be enclosed by academic assessment—as when they're featured as topics for reflection in self-placement (e.g., Toth and Aull) or folded into efforts to appraise writing development (e.g., Gere, *Developing Writers*; Wardle and Roozen). Despite this attention to incorporations of the extracurriculum *in writing assessment*, the matter of writing assessment *in the extracurriculum* remains underdiscussed. Writing assessment scholarship arguably now finds itself in an epistemic predicament analogous to the one that, two decades ago, Gere warned was at work in the broader field of composition studies: "In concentrating upon establishing our position within the academy, we have neglected to recount the history of composition in other contexts; we have neglected composition's extracurriculum" ("Kitchen Tables" 79). There is, she charged, an unrealized "need to uncouple composition and schooling, to consider the situatedness of composition practices, to focus on the experiences of writers not always visible to us inside the walls of the academy" (80).

Something similar is true for writing assessment scholarship: We have neglected to recount the history of judgment and response in other contexts, focusing on the assessment experiences that are most visible to us inside the walls of our colleges and schools. We have neglected *writing assessment's extracurriculum*.

We can begin to work our way out of this epistemic predicament by braiding two strands of Gere's scholarship: her studies of assessment and its manifold consequences and her work on the "myriad" spaces where students and others "write their worlds" outside and beyond formal writing classrooms ("Kitchen Tables" 91). Doing so, we find in Gere's insights a series of reminders that writing assessment isn't always coupled with schooling; it extends also to the myriad extracurricular ways that we assess our worlds—and that our worlds assess us.

The social justice significance of "extending greater focus to how writing is assessed outside of formal education spaces" (Banks et al. 388) has recently been underscored by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on White Language Supremacy, which stresses that white

language supremacy and its violent systems for "defining and evaluating" aren't confined to college writing curricula, and can be found at work "in schools, academic disciplines, professions, media, and society at large" (Richardson et al.). Dismantling white language supremacy thus requires reckoning with the reality that academic assessment is only one site among many where responses to writing and writers can participate in social (in)justice. To this end, I begin in the next section by defining the extracurriculum of writing assessment, then offer four brief sketches of assessment's extracurriculum, selected to illustrate some of its dimensions and complexities.

Ultimately, what this chapter offers is a kind of sequel to Gere's reflection in "How I Have Changed My Mind," continuing and complicating the narrative arc she sets in motion. For while Gere's narrative positions the extracurriculum as an "elsewhere" for assessment, my years of learning from and working with her have taught me that it is possible to view the extracurriculum and writing assessment as overlapping terrains, each of which can be discussed in ways that reinforce, rearticulate, and revitalize the other.

DEFINING ASSESSMENT'S EXTRACURRICULUM

The *extracurriculum of writing assessment,* as I use the term, names the myriad manifestations of writing assessment—public, private, popular, or professional—that are ubiquitous (and potentially iniquitous) outside schools and colleges. Assessment's extracurriculum is composed of the countless judgments of and responses to writing that are neither conducted in academic institutions nor compelled by them. Such assessments are enacted around the kitchen table, enmeshed in office culture, enlisted to provision public services and police public participation, encoded into algorithmic tools and platforms, self-sponsored and spread via social media, and mobilized to make "expert" determinations of various kinds—among them, judgments about mental "fitness."

Assessment may be endemic to the classroom, but it is far from exclusive to it. In Brian Huot's words, "in literate activity, assessment is everywhere. No matter what purpose we have for the reading and writing we do, we evaluate what we read and write on a fairly continuous basis" (61). Building on Huot's insight, Joseph A. Cirio has helpfully called for writing assessment scholarship to devote greater critical focus to "everyday writing assessment"—that is, "the interpretation and judgment of everyday written texts that lead to decisions, actions, or changes in everyday writing" (1). Writing assessment, viewed this way, saturates and shapes our everyday literate lifeworlds within the academy and without it.

We can gain a better (if still partial) understanding of assessment's extracurriculum when we consider the following four sketches, which speak variously to the ways that:

1. the extracurriculum of composition discussed by Gere and others is always already subtended by writing assessment;
2. public life is policed by extracurricular testing regimes;
3. everyday linguistic judgments are encoded into and enforced through digital programs and platforms; and
4. the specter of extracurricular assessment haunts and possesses academic assessment, conditioning curricular practices and priorities.

In the following sections, I turn to these cases, each of which invites challenging questions about assessment (in)justice.

ASSESSMENT AT KITCHEN TABLES, IN RENTED ROOMS

In the form of peer response and formative criticism, writing assessment functions as the lifeblood coursing through the writing groups, clubs, and literary societies discussed by Gere in her germinal work on the extracurriculum. A culture of self-sponsored evaluation sustains and structures these communities of correction and improvement. Detailing the work of groups such as the Lansing, Iowa Writers' Workshop and the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop, Gere notes how participants "offer one another encouragement as well as criticism and suggest revisions," and devote hours to "reading and responding to one another's writing" ("Kitchen Tables" 75). She notes, too, how writing groups not only "increas[e] positive feelings" but "discipline participants" (76), creating spaces for "'positive criticism'" (qtd. in 77).

Recovering scenes from the antebellum 19th-century extracurriculum, Gere describes how Margaret Fuller provided a subscription service whereby white women submitted compositions to be "read … aloud and canvassed [for] their adequacy" (qtd. in "Kitchen Tables" 84). Gere also recounts how members of the Black women's Female and Literary Society of Philadelphia "placed their anonymous weekly compositions in a box from which they were later retrieved and criticized" (84). This example speaks to a broader history of *rhetorical education through elective assessment* in 19th-century Black literary societies, described by Shirley Wilson Logan as spaces where members "performed and judged their own works and the works of others in order to perfect their skills and build their confidence" (94).

Directly responding to Gere's call for greater attention to the extracurriculum, Susan Miller stresses that the "evaluative urges" and "pejorative discriminations" associated with the composition classroom weren't originated by it, and are in

evidence in a variety of sites and artifacts far removed from institutionally mandated assignments and assessments ("Things" 106). She cites, as one illustration, a 1786 letter from Charles Mortimer to his son Jack, responding to—and critiquing—the latter's writing "at a level of particularity that applies the same evaluative paradigm that mass schooling applied a century later to discursive (and cursive) practices," equating matters of capitalization, legibility, and fluency in *written characters* with the *inner character* of the author ("Assuming" 246; see also Miller, "Things"). This letter testifies to the fact that we misunderstand the shape and scope of assessment's extracurriculum if we focus only on the ways writers seek out judgment from others. In the extracurriculum, writers may solicit criticism and feedback, but self-sponsored assessment also flows in the other direction: Unsolicited judgment can be *voluntarily supplied*, as when parents privately "rage at error with … loving frustration" (Miller, "Things" 106).

Speaking to a related form of error-fixation in the extracurriculum, Gere points us to a popular 19th-century tradition of officiating assessment in writing groups and clubs through selecting a formal *critic*: "Usually elected on the basis of skill in identifying errors, this critic assumed special responsibility for noting faults of syntax and diction in papers read before the group" ("Kitchen Tables" 83). The corrective responsibilities of the critic included the "evaluation of the effectiveness of an argument" by means of "identifying … rhetorical issues such as persuasiveness and appeal" (Gere, "Public Opinion" 266). Proponents of this assessment-centric office imagined that it provided a powerful, *positive* machinery for improving writing and writers: "In rhetorical terms, the critic's observations enhance writers' audience awareness, helping them to see their work from the perspective of others. At the same time intellectual growth results from enhanced self-critical abilities fostered by recognizing one's own 'defects and errors'" (Gere, *Writing Groups* 13). This framing of improvement through criticism hints at an ever-present danger: Assessment in the extracurriculum can rehearse the kinds of prescriptivist error-fixation—the hunt for *defects* and *errors*—characteristic of the punishingly "reductive forms of assessment" too often found in the academy (Gere, "Kitchen Tables" 88).

Assessment's extracurriculum is thus a domain that may promise meaningful alternatives to the academy's cultures of correction and professionalization. Yet within that domain lurks the potential that even at kitchen tables and in rented rooms, judgments of composition can recompose discriminatory social hierarchies.

EXTRACURRICULAR TESTING REGIMES

Gere rightly observes that classroom instruction in "composition frequently serves a gatekeeping function" that doubles as "an initiation rite" ("Kitchen Tables" 89),

cleaving writers *from* their communities and cleaving them *to* "the language and perspectives of others" (90). Yet when we consider the prevalence of extracurricular testing regimes, we find that the extracurriculum offers only a partial escape from exclusionary gatekeeping and assimilationist initiation. Indeed, the discriminatory power of such regimes can complexly shape, even sponsor the kinds of extracurricular writing practices, programs, and organizations discussed by Gere and others.

For one historical example, we can look to the Citizenship School Program, in operation from 1957–1970. Susan Kates explains that the Citizenship Schools, a literacy campaign by and for Black adults in the Southern US, emerged explicitly as a community response to an extracurricular exigence: state-mandated literacy tests that regulated access to the ballot box. These racist "technologies of disenfranchisement," as Natasha N. Jones and Miriam F. Williams term them, weaponized judgments about reading and writing ability as pretexts for anti-Black voter suppression. These tests did so as part of a broader tradition of white supremacist extracurricular assessment, complementary to the inculcation of white language supremacy via schooling (Inoue; Kates; Prendergast).

Speaking to this history of extracurricular testing regimes, Catherine Prendergast notes that government-enforced efforts to police literacy as "White property" (and as a defining property of whiteness) also targeted immigrants and putative foreigners:

> Beginning in the nineteenth century, literacy abilities were frequently imagined as parsed to different races, and literacy tests for immigration and naturalization were advocated under a potent racial rubric. These literacy tests were offered as the most efficient means to identify those who were of the most pure specimens of the White race. (8)

Fueled by nativist fears and eugenic fantasies of racial engineering, early 20th-century extracurricular examinations such as the New York State Literacy Tests were mandated as part of a legal machinery for regulating citizenship and restricting the flow of immigration (Serviss). Such technologies of disenfranchisement reveal the violent forms that "entrance" and "qualifying" examinations can take in the extracurriculum. They offer painful reminders that writing assessment outside academic institutions isn't always voluntary from the vantage of those assessed—and can be both high-stakes and life-altering in its cruelty.

AUTOMATING EVERYDAY PRESCRIPTIVISM

In recent years, Gere has charged that to dismantle unjust academic assessments at scale, we must intervene in the disciplinary infrastructure that enables and

encourages them—that is, the assemblage of publications, policies, platforms, pedagogies, and imagined pasts that shape disciplinary assessment practices and imperatives (Gere et al., "Communal Justicing" and "Response"). A corresponding attention to extracurricular assessment infrastructure may lead us to investigate the ways that assessment imperatives are covertly encoded into or enacted by the very platforms and tools we rely on in everyday writing.

As one case, consider the ubiquitous scrutiny of writing—curricular and extracurricular—conducted by Microsoft Word's grammar checker, an "ever-present corrective force" (McGee and Ericsson 454) that "combines the functions of software as tool for correction and evaluation and software as a medium for communication in a single software package" (Whithaus 171; see also Cirio 37). The "Editor" found in the Microsoft 365 version of Word automatically evaluates and assigns writers a percentage-based "Editor Score," accompanied by recommended corrections and refinements (and the option to scan "for similarity to online sources"). More generally, past iterations of Microsoft Word have, for decades, marked writerly errors and infelicities with a squiggly underlining of text, an aesthetic invocation of the iconography of classroom assessment. "Even in its screen appearance," Tim McGee and Patricia Ericsson observe, "it harkens back to the red pencil of the obsessive English teacher who bled over 'mistakes' and paid little or no attention to the quality of thinking" (464).

Microsoft's error-fixated checking systems merit our scrutiny because their infrastructural embeddedness in extracurricular (and curricular) writing ecologies renders them, in Anne Curzan's words, "arguably the most powerful prescriptive language force in the world at this point" (64). What's more, this evaluative force "serves to reify attitudes about nonstandard grammar being 'error,'" marking expressions of African American English and other "nonstandard" language varieties as impurities in need of correction or refinement (79). Critical investigation into everyday algorithmic prescriptivism may thus have special importance for those of us committed to the promotion of linguistic justice and the dismantlement of white language supremacy (Inoue; Richardson et al.)—aims that may be in tension with the proliferation of commercial products for algorithmically generating writing (Byrd; Owusu-Ansah) and formatively evaluating it (Hazelton et al.). To the extent that these algorithmic innovations encode Standardized (white) English as correct, normative, and universally intelligible, they rehearse a tired and ignoble prescriptivist tradition: devaluing "nonstandard" language as *sub-standard*.

EXTRACURRICULAR HAUNTING

Academic assessment always exists in dialogue with public opinion and is no stranger to popular deficit discourses about (il)literacy "crises" and "Why

Johnny Can't Write" (Gere "Public Opinion"; Gere et al., "Communal Justicing"). Haunted by these discourses, some writing educators go so far as to self-consciously position academic assessment as a violent "hidden curriculum" (Jackson) of sorts, subjecting students to linguistic bigotry in the classroom in a paternalistic effort to prepare them for violent assessment in the extracurriculum.

Consider David Johnson and Lewis VanBrackle's study, "Linguistic Discrimination in Writing Assessment," in which they found that raters of a state-mandated writing examination not only identified features of African American English (AAE) as "errors" but penalized them more harshly than other (actual) errors. When discussing possible reasons for the anti-Black linguistic racism documented by their work, Johnson and VanBrackle write,

> raters may be simply trying to prepare students for the "real-world" where AAE errors will be less tolerated by potential employers, so raters fail them now in the hopes that the students will address these errors. This brings into question the pedagogical wisdom of giving students a "right" to their dialect. … The "real-world" of standardized writing tests and job applications will most likely continue to penalize AAE features more harshly. (46)

Herein can be found the logic of *extracurricular haunting* that too often possesses curricular assessment: Anticipating that students will be judged harshly—perhaps even unfairly—in assessment's extracurriculum, writing educators resolve to discipline and punish them in and through the curriculum. These educators submit to and surrogate racist violences they might otherwise profess to oppose.

Speaking to this haunting brand of vicarious discrimination, Vershawn Ashanti Young describes the contradictions at work when writing educators present themselves as antiracist allies, helplessly marionetted into linguistic racism by an unseen extracurricular hand:

> teachers say that they recognize the importance of language diversity for students but they tell their students that they have to get ready for … the employer who will not hire them—if they don't speak or write a certain way.
>
> The feat here is that the teachers want to present themselves as antiracists, while at the same time they are the ones enacting the very prejudice on the student they say the student will experience outside.
>
> In other words, the teacher is saying, I'm not racist, but I'm going to teach you in a way (how to switch off yo black) and

> grade in a way (that is down if you black in yo writin) that will prepare you to be acceptable to the folks who are really racist. The teacher then becomes the stand-in, the proxy, for the would-be racist. (x–xi)

Notably, examples like this one invert and subvert a core promise of the extracurriculum, as discussed by Gere: that it represents a break from writing instruction that is *disciplinary* in multiple senses of that term ("Kitchen Tables" 87). For the kind of instructor Young describes, the extracurriculum offers not a material departure from the disciplinary violences of schooling but instead an imaginative point of departure for authorizing and enacting them.

CONCLUSION

In ways big and small, assessment saturates and subtends composition's extracurriculum. It participates in sponsoring our everyday relationships to and through writing. It partly structures whether (and how) we navigate contexts and communities that operate outside the academy. It accompanies us when we privately compose via digital programs or platforms—its trace, legible in squiggly lines underneath the words we type or the aggregated "liking" (cf. Elbow) that accretes to our social media posts. Its shadow can even follow us into the classroom, haunting responses to student writing.

Though they represent only a brief turn of talk within what must be a broader conversation, the cases I have presented productively complement and complicate existing discussions about the extracurriculum, raising questions about (in)justice and extending lines of inquiry initiated by Gere.

Assessment at Kitchen Tables, in Rented Rooms

"The extracurriculum," as Gere frames it, "is constructed by desire, by the aspirations and imaginations of its participants" ("Kitchen Tables" 80). Whose desires construct assessment's extracurriculum? Those seeking assessment, those sponsoring it, or those supplying it—parties whose aspirations and imaginations may clash? If composition's extracurriculum depends on and deepens affective attachments to criticism, habituating us to the exercise of our evaluative urges, what role does writing assessment at kitchen tables and in rented rooms play in promoting social (in)justice?

Extracurricular Testing Regimes

If the extracurriculum is a domain partly defined by the voluntary pursuit and provision of assessment, it's also a domain where writers compose their way

through a maze of compulsory "gatekeeping" examinations. What role does extracurricular testing play in sponsoring and shaping not only large-scale social disparities, but also ostensibly "voluntary" extracurricular writing activities—such as soliciting peer feedback in writing groups or imparting "positive criticism" to others? Put differently, in what ways has composition's extracurriculum emerged as a response to the threat posed by extracurricular testing?

Automating Everyday Prescriptivism

If understanding composition's extracurriculum requires examining its infrastructure—including the "local circumstances" and "material artifacts" essential to its "cultural work" (Gere, "Kitchen Tables" 90)—we must ask the following questions: Does this infrastructure introduce backdoors for linguistic prescriptivism? As the algorithmic generation and judgment of writing becomes more commonplace, in what ways is automated assessment sedimented into the infrastructure of everyday writing? Indeed, in what ways is everyday writing assessment suffused and preoccupied with appraisals of algorithmically assembled texts?

Extracurricular Haunting

It may be true, as Gere suggests, that "schooling in general and composition in particular … inscribes itself on students' bodies" ("Kitchen Tables" 87). Yet there's also a sense in which extracurricular imaginaries can be implicated in curricular efforts to discipline writers' bodies and bodies of writing—notably, when academic assessments are patterned on discriminatory preoccupations that we fear (or fantasize) predominate in the great extracurricular beyond. To what extent do we treat our curricular writing assessments as conduits for the extracurriculum to inscribe itself on students' bodies?

EPILOGUE: "WHAT MAKES WRITING GOOD?"

It's only fitting to close by offering an epilogue to Gere's account of "How I Have Changed My Mind," the *College English* reflection that opened this chapter (Anson et al.), because her narrative is, in its way, the story of how she changed my mind as well.

As it happens, my very first course as a doctoral student was a section of "What Makes Writing Good?"—the very seminar on assessment Gere references in her reflection as an outgrowth of her renewed interest in the evaluation of writing. My earliest idea for a term paper was to craft something not unlike this chapter, a piece calling for greater disciplinary focus on writing assessment's

extracurriculum. This topic was one that I ultimately jettisoned, fearing that because I had more questions than answers, I couldn't do it justice.

Flash forward a decade, and I have changed my mind about assessment's extracurriculum—though not about the ethical importance of greater attention to it. What's changed is this: The extracurriculum of writing assessment once again preoccupies me not in spite of the questions it raises, but because of them. Following Gere's example, I've come to think of justice in assessment less as a noun than as a verb—that is, as *justicing*, "an iterative and collective process" that demands that we continuously investigate (and where necessary, revise) disciplinary assumptions and aims concerning assessment (Gere et al., "Communal Justicing" 384).

Where once I was fixated on doing justice *to* a topic, Gere has helped me to recognize the deeper importance of doing justice *through* a topic. In "rethinking the narratives we construct about composition studies" (Gere, "Kitchen Tables" 90) and the ways we "share and respond to one another's writing" (91), we're prompted to rethink the scope, significance, and social justice stakes we associate with writing assessment. The importance of this work becomes clearer when we consider that to ignore assessment's extracurriculum is arguably to ignore the majority of the appraisals that our once-and-future students encounter and engage in as they read, write, and yes, assess their worlds.

"What makes writing good?" has never been, and never will be, a question that the academy alone can own or answer.

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