Review of *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and assessing for a socially just future*. By Asao Inoue. Parlor Press, 2015. 348 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60235-773-0. Available at https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/inoue/

Reviewed by Christine Watson, *Biola University, La Mirada, California*

Experienced writing instructors are familiar with the all-too-common narrative students tell: they hate writing, or they enjoy writing, but not for academic purposes. In *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future,* Asao B. Inoue asserts that this narrative is a result of widespread racism present in hegemonic writing assessments. Also, Inoue argues that many current writing programs attempt to avoid racism altogether, an act he calls "complicity in disguise" (24). If his intended audience—writing instructors, WPAs, and graduate students—can see his argument as a pedagogical challenge, and not an indictment on teaching the academic discourse, then they may gain new awareness about the value of diverse discourses.

Inoue uses the data of underperformance by students of color on standardized tests in chapter one as his main evidence for the problem. He claims that Standard Edited American English's (SEAE's) dominance in the academy at the expense of other local discourses contributes to systemic racism. Using the term *racial habitus*, he argues that because language is closely associated with race, privileging SEAD, the "white dominant discourse," in assessment practice perpetuates racial inequalities. He further contends that many well-meaning systems, and the people within them, subordinate diverse populations by offering "sentimental education" (62) marked by a type of patronizing, parental obligation to conform all forms of diverse discourse to a white-washed version of English.

In chapter two, Inoue proposes an antiracist assessment practice that favors labor over traditional merit, one where students learn to problematize their own writing as well as others'. Students assess in a community of peers, taking into consideration their interconnectedness and racial *habitus*, which ultimately promotes a more ethical, sustainable assessment ecology. Inoue argues that these ecologies become "more than" (90) the sum of their parts, as students learn to question the very meaning of judgments used in assessments. He proposes that the assessments, themselves, need liberating from the confinements of hegemonic structures. He outlines seven major elements of the assessment ecology: power, parts, purpose, people, processes, products, and places, and he give special attention to the communal *process* of making rubrics (which sometimes becomes a *part*, and sometimes a *place*) in the ecology. Inoue asserts that practitioners who focus strategically on these pedagogical elements can achieve an interconnected ecology of antiracist writing assessment.

Inoue argues in chapter three that subjectivity and inconsistencies exist inside traditional grading practices, and alternatively proposes the use of grading contracts which emphasize student labor over the quality of writing. These contracts, along with writing rubrics, are carefully designed in collaboration with students in an attempt to reorient them toward "labor to learn, not labor to earn" (193). Through the use of negotiated rubrics (which encourage disagreement and tension), peer writing groups, and reflective practice, Inoue presents examples of how students problematize their ideas and often experience frustration within the "borderlands" of writing (209). He proposes that these existential conflicts lead to a healthy questioning of power structures, critical awareness, and ultimately, antiracist attitudes.

Inoue claims in chapter four that students who attempt to create perfect documents experience fairly insignificant learning in the process. Instead, students who interact with peers

as readers, reflect and begin to problematize their ideas and their discourse learn more. He notes that it takes time and effort for instructors to de-center themselves as experts, and to foster a kind of healthy conflict and interconnectedness between students which leads to critical consciousness in writing. These processes are salient because, as Inoue further asserts, classes which claim to teach writing cannot do so unless instructors share control with students in spaces where "local diversities, dominant discourses, and hegemonic structures of norming and racing clash and shock . . . one another" (282).

Inoue's reflective forms of assessment are useful, as is his contribution to the ongoing discussion of problematic hierarchies in higher education. His argument about the damaging effects of unintentional racism in assessment serves as an important reminder for writing instructors entrenched in the process of grading. Inoue's claims echo the prior arguments of Freire, hooks, Anzalúnda, and others who concern themselves with marginalized populations in education. In a time when students of color are entering the academy at a higher rate than ever, his commitment to questioning a hierarchical system of assessment, and shedding light on its limitations is provocative and timely. In addition, his seemingly radical notions about assessment practice as a means to combat social injustice are balanced with both compelling placement exam data and experience. Though his methods appear unconventional, specific examples of student reflections ground his abstract notions about existential dilemma, and the ecology of systems that "inter-are" (p. 103). And in the process of seeking antiracist assessments, Inoue offers a method of abstraction and mindfulness which scholars have shown is needed for transfer of knowledge (see, for example Alder-Kassner and Wardle 2015; Perkins and Salomon, 1992). Inoue's experience with Hmong and Latino students at his own university

inform his research, which is less about defining categories and more about the complexity of these diverse populations striving to thrive inside longstanding hierarchical systems.

On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine students, many of whom have not settled on a major, deciding the extent to which they will liberate themselves by approximating the dominant discourse—or not. Because of students' inexperience in the academy, it would seem that handing control over to them in the way Inoue proposes may be risky, if not unwise. Were it not for Inoue's consistent reflections on his own pedagogy, both its triumphs and its failures, the abstract nature of his research might read as unattainable at best, and inaccessible at worst. However, Inoue demonstrates the kind of methodological awareness he expects of his students by questioning his own pedagogical process incorporating retrospective reflections throughout his book. He practices the critical consciousness of problematizing drafts by situating the reality of student writing next to what could be. In addition, Inoue uses student work as thick description not only to illustrate students' transformative journeys into a liberating racial *habitus*, but also to show escalating moments of critical consciousness.

In the final chapter of the book, Inoue explains his personal experience of racial *habitus* by narrating his childhood adventures of writing stories on a typewriter during school vacations. He lived these experiences in relative poverty, facing overt racism, yet also, enjoying the unusual interconnected community. Inoue's nostalgic memories of making stories together with his identical twin brother illustrate the notion of a communal ecology, even in the midst of adversity. The story of his boyhood writing, not unlike his research claims seems idealized, even romanticized, for they both describe spaces where racial identities are valued, and writers assess features of writing together. Here, Inoue's approach embodies the writing process he proposes, which is often lost in the classroom setting. As practitioners, if his methods unsettle us, then

perhaps we are exactly where he might want us: in the borderlands of literacy, a place where real learning takes place.

References

Alder-Kassner, L., Wardle, E. (2015). *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press.

Perkins, D. N., & Salomon, G. (1992). Transfer of learning. *International encyclopedia of education*, *2*, 6452-6457.

About the Author

Christine Watson teaches in Biola University's English Writing Program and is currently working on her doctorate in higher education at Azusa Pacific University. She researches the challenges faced by historically underserved student populations, as well as instructional design models exploring how writing practices transfer across disciplinary boundaries. She has also served as assistant co-director of the writing program and coordinates its annual high impact practice, the Celebration of Student Writing.