Essays

2023 CWPA Conference Keynote
Students' Right to Their Own Language: The Gordian Knot of Social Justice for Writing Program Administrators

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For WPAs, social justice lives in a liminal space between the personal and the professional. It involves us in both institutional and personal history, in administrative strategies, as well as self-examination. In this autoethnography, I'd like to explore key moments in my own, and the professions', attempts to do "social justice WPAing."

My thoughts are enriched by what I have learned from a true social justice activist—my wife, Rabiya Khan. What I have heard our community say about Rabiya is this: if there is a fight that requires a warrior, she is the one to turn to. She has done this work as an activist struggling against Islamophobia through the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an investigator and Commissioner for York City's Human Relations Commission, and an influential speaker on social justice issues in our community. I hope that one of the things that you will take away from my talk is that we cannot simply do social justice within academia. We must be bold like Rabiya and other activists who recognize language as a tool for either oppression or liberation.

The Gordian Knot as Metaphor

First a few words about my use of the Gordian Knot as a metaphor for my discussion of the WPA's dilemma. As recounted by the Penn Museum,

> While at Gordian, [Alexander] the Macedonian king learned about a special wagon that was situated in the Temple of Zeus. The pole of the wagon was tied to the wagon body with an intricate knot of cornel bark, and a prophecy had foretold that whoever could unfasten the knot would go on to rule over Asia. Seized by a longing to test the prophecy, Alexander tried to unfasten the knot by unraveling it, but when he was unable to do so, he drew his sword and cut right

> through it. From this comes the proverbial expression "to cut the Gordian Knot," meaning to cut right to the heart of a matter without wasting time on external details. ("The Gordian Knot")

In other versions, Alexander does find a way to untie the knot. He removes the linchpin from the pole to which the cart was tied, exposing the two ends of the rope and making it possible to untie it. Those two versions might represent our choice as we look at the injustices around us: do we act swiftly and decisively, or shall we continue to look for linchpins that will allow us to unravel the puzzle?

Let's start with a prior question—one that is frequently, and pointedly, asked of us. What does social justice have to do with writing program administration? I might answer that question with Heather Andrea Williams' words from *Self-Taught*, words that Justice Sotomayor cited in her dissenting opinion on the recent affirmative action decision: because enslaved people "'fuse their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom,'" she frames literacy as an "instrument of resistance and liberation" which "provided the means to write a pass to freedom" (Sotomayor 3). Sotomayor reminds us that the desire to deny literacy is, in effect, a desire to deny freedom.

The message of Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) is similar. I invoke that resolution—and I do mean this as a type of invocation—because of its central ethical message, succinctly captured in these two sentences:

> The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. (Conference on College Composition and Communication 19)

So why is social justice our business? Because we are among the social groups with authority to exert this dominance (or not); we are among the social groups giving immoral (or moral) advice to humans. The things we do aren't just professional acts. They are social acts. So how we do those things matters a great deal. Viewed this way, perhaps one linchpin—to which our scholarship has continuously tied multiple scholarly knots—looks something like this: We administer programs for institutions that expect us to teach standardized writing skills. How can we do that without becoming a "social group [that] exert[s] its dominance over another"?

Most of us feel this knot in our gut. While many teachers confront it in their classrooms, WPAs feel the full force of challenges like those posed by the Committee on Language Policy:

> Shall we place our emphasis on what the vocal elements of the public think it wants, or on what the actual linguistic evidence indicates we should emphasize? . . . We must decide what elements of our discipline are really important to us, and whether we want to share with our students the richness of all varieties of language, encouraging linguistic virtuosity. (Conference on College Composition and Communication 21)

The Committee also quietly (if with some intended irony) offered a possible way out: "Shall we blame the business world by saying 'Well, we realize that human beings use language in a wide variety of ways, but employers demand a single variety'?" (Conference on College Composition and Communication 21). Indeed, that is one way to cut, or at least to avoid, the knot. Following that path, our job seems simpler: prepare students for "success" within a social structure that we know devalues other dialects. As WPAs, the pressures to take that path are real. They are inscribed within our job expectations—and perhaps may even keep the immediate interests of our students in mind.

But the stakes are higher now. Those who wish to restrict civil rights have a strategy, unleashed seemingly all at once, with shock and awe:

- Roe v. Wade. Gone.
- Affirmative action in college admissions. Gone.
- Protections against acts of discrimination by businesses. Going and likely to be gone.
- Book banning—gaining traction through Moms for Liberty.

Among those strategies is restricting speech and literacy—which includes valuing only dominant voices. And it is not just us who feels it. It is our students. It is the communities we serve. Democratic deliberation is itself under attack.

All of us have likely asked how we might pull on the rope of social justice without further tightening the rope around our programs' viability—without risking the life and careers of colleagues and students for whom we are responsible. In the history of our discipline, however, compromise has often derived from a lack of strategy. Linda Adler-Kassner's work has been a consistent reminder of that. In *The Activist WPA*, one of those reminders cites Karl Llwellyn: "Strategy without ideals is a menace; but ideals without strategy is a mess" (qtd. in Adler-Kassner 5). If our organizational infighting over the last few years has taught us anything, it is that we are indeed a bit of a mess.

I worry too that, under these pressures, we have come to accept—even rely upon—our identity as targets, acting as the frog in the old parable: put it boiling water and it jumps out; put it in cold water and bring it slowly to a boil, and the frog remains and dies. We have been at a slow boil for some time, something I can see as I think back over a career of watching such moments.

I was a student already in 1971 when SRTOL was being written by a CCCC working group. As I innocently learned standardized English in an eighth-grade English class at the nearly all-white St. Katherine of Sienna Elementary School (and there is no one quite like Catholic nuns to guard language purity), there was a group of progressive scholars at work on SRTOL. When it was adopted by CCCC's Executive Committee in 1972, I was an entering secondary student at Archbishop Carroll H.S. in suburban Philadelphia. By the time it was published in *College Composition and Communication* in fall 1974, I was a junior there.

I, of course, was blissfully unaware of any of this. But I was aware that something was in the wind that felt like change. We were reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the Beat and Harlem Renaissance poets, and treating the activist lyrics of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Neil Young, and Bob Dylan as the new poetry. As I was experiencing atrocities through a child's eyes—the 1968 My Lai massacre in Viet Nam, the 1970 Kent State shootings, the 1972 Wounded Knee uprisings, as well as the oppression of civil rights activists and the assassinations of beloved civil rights leaders—my teachers had the freedom to teach from the world in which we were living. That is one of the important freedoms that is now being taken from educators—and from our students as they try to process all of this.

Yet even in that more progressive era, when reading was less constrained, the right to exercise ownership of writing was still off-limits, seen as the province of only "creative writers." For the rest of us, language had rules—rules that, according to those that taught us, were the pillars of the polite, civilized, and educated (i.e., MLA-compliant and white academic) society. In my privileged world, that was relatively comfortable; the language of my culture just needed some "finishing." But my recent work in the York, Pennsylvania community and with undergraduate researchers has made me mindful of how much larger and more painful a leap it is for others.

I am aware that my classmates and I experienced others' dialects largely as spectacle, as voyeurs getting a peak at exotic language and lived experiences outside of what we saw as the norm. Still, with all these limitations, I got a glimpse of a world where language's rules were not the measure of language's effectiveness. It left an impression. Those experiences are now under attack. School boards, and the Orwellian-named "Moms for Liberty," are

taking books away from young readers, and courts are taking people of color away from our college classrooms. Both will make our ability to do social justice work more difficult and less effective.

So why does this matter to me? As a privileged (but first-generation) college student, I advanced on the shoulders of a previous generation of DelliCarpini and Pellechia immigrants who never attended College—none of them—and for whom English was a second language. But it was what I learned from my ancestors—in their mix of English and their mother tongues—that drove my own language proficiency.

I became proficient at writing because my father was unable to write Edited American English. An Italian immigrant, he started his career in the sweatshops of New York's garment district. As he started to earn a living wage, he felt that all businesses—retailers, contractors, service providers—were out to cheat him. So, the deal he made with me was this: If he felt that he had been cheated (which was almost always), he would ask me to write a letter of complaint. If we received a refund or compensation, we split it. So, as a young student, I did not learn about the sophists. I was one. I was a hired language gun. That was my education in early Greek rhetoric. See figure 1.

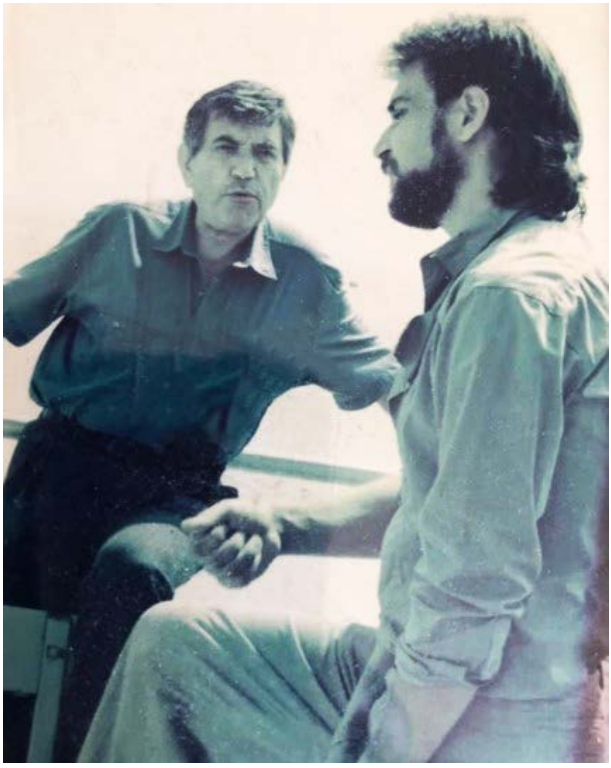

Figure 1. Domenick DelliCarpini, father of the author, counseling his son Dominic. Photo by Lisa DelliCarpini (reprinted with permission).

I also learned about rhetoric from watching my uncles play bocce, where they showed me that rhetoric was superior to geometry and physics. The winner wasn't determined by who actually got their bocce ball closest to the *pallino*. It was decided by who could convince the others that it was closer. They never measured; they argued until someone conceded. That was my education in Roman rhetoric. See figure 2.

Figure 2. Men arguing about whose bocce ball is closest to the pallino without benefit of a measuring device (reprinted by permission of INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo).

But their world was not what my parents wanted for me. They pushed me to pursue a college education so that (as my father always said), I wouldn't end up as a "ditch-digger." As a young adult, I didn't know why that was his term of choice. Only later did I realize why. My father had watched his father work as a "ditch digger" for the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression. My father later told me that when the Corps members didn't have enough work to do planting trees, they were made to simply dig ditches and then fill them back in—an early version, I suppose, of "welfare reform" to keep folks from getting lazy. That was my "three Cs," emblazoned on the shovel my dear, ditch-digging Grandpa used—and that I still use. And yes, I am in the possession of stolen government property, for which I'm sure Dad is smiling down on me. See figures 3, 4, and 5.

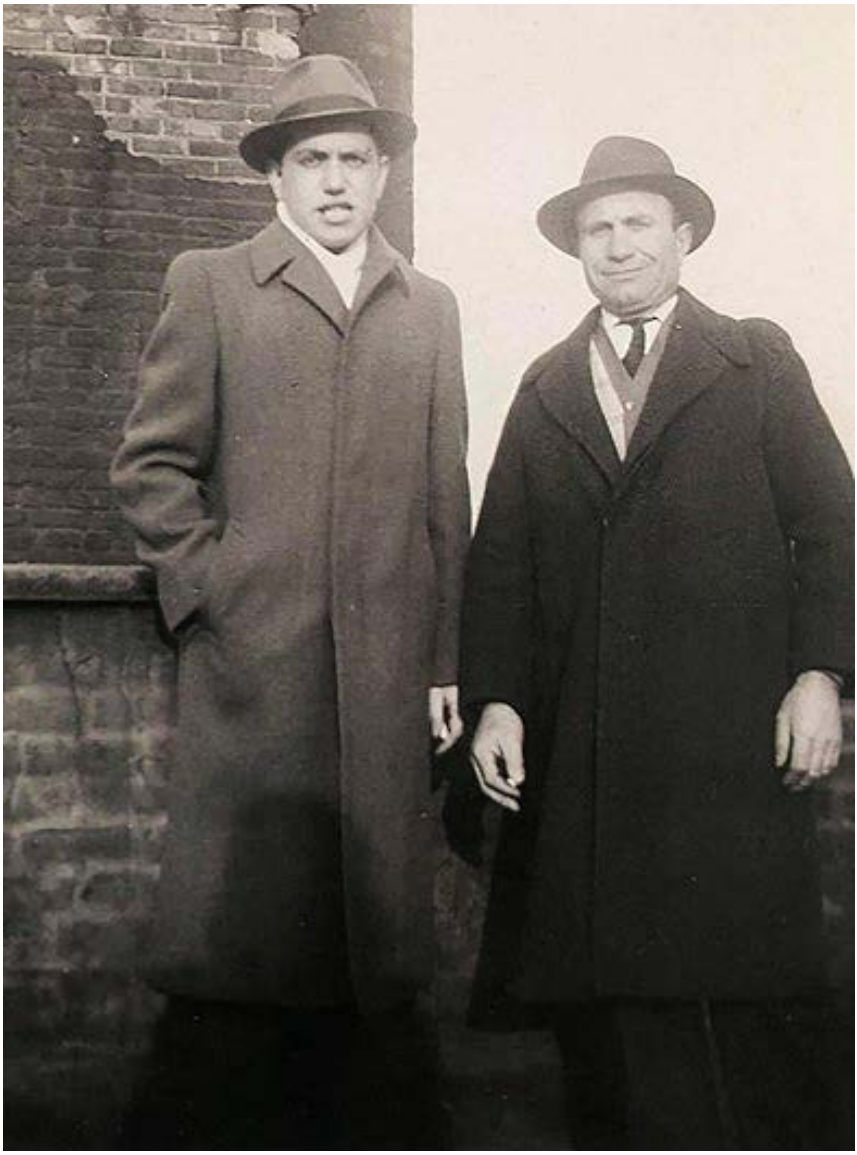

Figure 3. Domenick DelliCarpini and Giovanni DelliCarpini, the authors' father and grandfather, posing near their Bronx, NY home. Photo from DelliCarpini family albums.

Figure 4. Grandpa's Civilian Conservation Corps shovel, used in his "ditch-digging" days with the Civilian Conservation Corps. Photo by Dominic DelliCarpini.

Figure 5. Detail of Grandpa's Civilian Conservation Corp shovel showing the CCC inscription. Photo by Dominic DelliCarpini.

When I moved on to college, I needed to take on a new persona. I became even whiter. Handed the opportunity to move beyond my family's lack of access to higher education, I climbed to the pinnacle of white privilege: I studied literature at the University of Pennsylvania. I had moved as far as a person could from ditch digger; I studied the Liberal Arts. That is, until my family roots made me start to feel useless and guilty.

After graduating with my BA in English and having the usual English Major "what next" moment, I taught high school English in Philadelphia and its working-class suburbs. I began my teaching career with underprepared students in South Philly (called "4th track students"—those without hope of college). Two things happened as I taught those students: First, I realized that I could help them toward literacy by building on their natural language skills and lived experience—South Philly Italians, who felt very much like my people, can be very persuasive. Second, I lived in the community in which I taught—Philadelphia's "Little Italy." There, I recovered proficiency in my mother tongue—the language of urban, working-class Italians. Yo, Yous know what I mean?

Through all of this, I was unaware of SRTOL, the resolution; I was simply observing that when their own language was valued, students' self-esteem, confidence, and ability to communicate ideas improved dramatically.

The real watershed moment came at a recent Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies. As part of my work as Naylor Endowed Professor, and through the generous endowment offered by Mr. Irv Naylor, York College has for the last nine years sponsored an annual workshop that invites undergraduates from around the country to gather and work on their research in progress—a small, undergraduate version of Dartmouth's Seminar for Writing Research. The Naylor Workshop has given me insight into what matters to our students and what they ask of us. Their work is often not a disembodied intellectual interest, but an affective attachment directly related to their identity and lived experience. I saw these motives in their applications to attend, which I shared in my recent article in *Pedagogy*:

- Maria Clara Melo of Florida State University wrote, "I'm a first generation Brazilian–American Queer woman and trauma seems to stick to me like lovebugs to a windshield during a Florida June" (qtd in DelliCarpini 11).
- Kayla Watabu from the University of Hawaii wrote, "Rhetoric became a way to understand the condition of our existence. I saw how rhetoric can be used to both construct and deconstruct identities and realities. As a person of Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) descent, I believe studying rhetoric and its impact on our identity to be a significant part of my kuleana (responsibilities, privileges, duties) …giving voice to those that do not have the same privileges as I do" (12).
- Alan McKenzie of Marymount Manhattan College offered this: "My interest in literacy education started almost 10 years ago when I had to repeat the 3rd grade. It was a dark period of my life filled with humiliation and alienation. Not only did I feel like I was incompetent and slow, I also felt misunderstood by my teachers. . . This is exactly why Hip-Hop pedagogy is needed in education. Like many children my age, Hip-Hop is the only place where I saw my struggles and circumstances authentically displayed. In the times we live in today, where so many minorities in this country feel marginalized and alienated by society, education and literacy can arm them with the knowledge to combat oppression" (12).
- And Nidhi Gandhi from Hofstra explained, "This [work] is important to me as a researcher because, as an immigrant with immigrant

> parents, I can see the communication problems my parents have when conversing with native English speakers" (12).

The principles embodied in students like these made the core principles of SRTOL more urgent, especially when Nidhi stood up in our final general session and said (without anger, but with commitment): "You all love to talk about student's right to their own language. When are you going to actually allow us that?" Nidhi's question leads us back to the knots we feel as WPAs. Why do we have so little freedom to follow what we know from our research? Why can't we build our programs (like other fields) on disciplinary knowledge without public outrage? At first, I thought it was just because we have strayed into social justice instead of staying within our "designated area," to borrow a term from Linda Brodkey's work.

But now I'm wondering something else. Perhaps we in fact do have some power, voice, and authority? Perhaps we should, with Justice Sotomayor and Justice Jackson, have faith in the power of offering dissenting opinions—and helping students offer dissenting opinions in their own voices. But our history tells different stories, stories of surrender.

Brodkey v. the Conservative Media, or a Genealogy of the "White Guilt Trip" Narrative (circa 1990)

It did not take long for the backlash against the social uprisings of my childhood to visit. The policies of Ronald Reagan (1981–89), George H. W. Bush (1989–1993), and Bill Clinton (1993–2001), were responses to the civil and human rights revolts of the decades before. In our profession, those times brought things like the so-called troubles in Texas—which many of you have read about, but which I lived through at a formative moment.

As I entered my PhD program at Penn State in 1990, the backlash over Linda Brodkey's "Writing about Difference" curriculum was being debated in both public and academic venues. In May 1990, Kirby Moss interviewed University of Texas (UT) English Department Chair, Joseph Kruppa, for the *Austin American-Statesman*. Kruppa explained that the curriculum "will allow students a chance to examine landmark court decisions on civil rights and affirmative action" and that it was "designed to show the necessity of understanding social implications of differences of race, ethnic background, age, gender, sexual preference and religion" (qtd. in Moss B2).

At the same time, Kruppa justified the course within more conventional outcomes. He noted that those materials played a similar role to composition "readers," and that "Freshman composition will still basically be a course in argumentation—how to weigh evidence and build cohesive

arguments" He assured the reporter that "students will also continue to write compositions after receiving classroom instruction on how to plan and organize their topics" (B2).

But more troubling was the fact that Kruppa felt the need to extricate the course from the lived experience of UT students. He assured Moss that "the change is *not* a reaction to spring demonstrations at UT seeking ethnic diversity." "The change," said Kruppa, "was planned 'concurrent' to the protests." This, despite the fact that Kruppa also admitted on the record that "actually a lot of this was already happening on campus because students wanted to discuss ethnic and racial issues" (B2).

I cite this at length not to be critical of Dr. Kruppa. In fact, as administrators, we certainly can empathize. We frequently tie ourselves into knots as we try to explain what we do. I note it to raise a few other facts of our lives: 1) we feel compelled to apologize (in both the common and rhetorical sense) for examining social justice issues in our classroom; 2) we feel compelled to subordinate social justice work to protecting language purity as we administer what Sharon Crowley has called the "universal requirement" of FYW; and, 3) we often feel compelled to ardently deny that our curriculum is a response to students' lived experience.

But when we accept the premise that teaching argument is only an academic exercise—that it should not be tied to the identities and experiences of our students—we concede too far. After all, it's not as if after conceding a few points, the curriculum was blessed; instead, it was attacked more vehemently in public venues and put on hold by the Dean, much to the delight of columnists like William Murchison of the *Kilgore News Herald*. In August 1990, Murchison called the course "a lousy idea," and went on to assure readers that "we can relax at last" because "The dean of liberal arts, Dr. Standish Meacham . . . has shelved 'Difference—Racism and Sexism' for a year's study. Cremation would have been a more fitting solution" (Murchison 4).

We should have learned by now that when we concede our values, the reaction is not gracious. It is to continue to burn them until they are ash. Simply stated, this ain't working.

Particularly telling are the reasons why Murchison calls the course "a stinker"—all familiar parts of our Gordian Knot. After adding the obligatory "nobody denies, I hope, that educated people need to understand the various cultural strands that make up America," Murchison asks, "Do you center an English composition course on the viewpoint—telegraphed in the course title—that it's time to write about the great evils that society must combat and overcome? How does this make for objective thinking? Or for objective grading?" (Murchison 4).

He also ties us up in the "universal requirement" knot of our own making (this was "a syllabus to which 3,000 freshmen would have been subjected") and the language purity myth ("Were the students going to learn to write clear English—or to think Correct Thoughts?"). He even capitalizes "Correct Thoughts," emphasizing his belief that this course sounds "like Indoctrination 101" and that it imposes upon "White America," a "guilt trip" (Murchison 4). Future policies in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere had their test case.

But, if we listen closely, we might also hear some fear in the "we can relax at last." There was anxiety that 3,000 first-year students would be asked to read court documents about civil rights as related to race and sexism. There is worry that it might allow for discussion of students' concerns about ethnic diversity. Brodkey was onto something. Asking students to read and consider primary source documents that are affecting the world in which they will live is not indoctrination. It is a lesson in civics, active citizenship, and analytical reading—and even conservative thinkers agree that attention to American civics is much needed. We had exposed a removable linchpin that might have helped us unravel the knot; but instead of pulling it out, we surrendered. Six years later, in 1996, we waved the white flag again.

School Board Culture Wars, WPA Outcomes, and/or Rhetoricians as Change Agents (circa 1996)

Six years after the Troubles in Texas came the Troubles in Oakland. The Oakland School Board, citing linguistic evidence that Ebonics featured "systematic, rule-governed and predictable patterns" of grammar—that is, that it constituted a legitimate language—resolved that

> As in the case of Asian-American, Latino-American, Native American, and all other pupils in this district who come from backgrounds or environments where a language other than English is dominant, African-American pupils shall not, because of their race, be subtly dehumanized, stigmatized, discriminated against, or denied.

This, like SRTOL, called out "an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another." The media backlash was swift, as seen in an editorial by Brent Staples of *The New York Times.* In that editorial, Staples

- refers to Ebonics as "broken, inner-city English," as "street talk" and as "urban slang";
- claims that Ebonics "patronizes inner-city children, holding them to abysmally low standards";

- objects to "declaring all students to be equal regardless of whether they have difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language"; and
- asserts that the resolution will undermine serious education as "time that should be spent on reading and algebra gets spent giving high fives and chattering away in street language" and will further isolate "children who are already cut off from mainstream values and ideas."

If we can look beyond the stereotypes about AAV and African-Americans, we find many of the usual tropes—most centrally that our primary goal should be educating students in "mainstream values and ideas" (i.e., the dominant culture's ideas and values). Much like the Brodkey case in higher education, this case brought literacy education at the secondary level under scrutiny.

But we don't seem to know how to defend what we know, at least not publicly, even when we are right. In response to public outcry, the resolution was amended. As noted by Baugh, "the amended text expresses the aim of . . . 'a program featuring African Language System principles to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency'" (qtd. in Messier 6). The concept—that students' own language has value—was re-framed as a bridge to teaching "English proficiency"—i.e., standardized English. That still makes "the language patterns they bring to school" not just different, but wrong, inferior, of less value—and makes our job homogenization.

At the same time that the Ebonics debate was playing out, work on the WPA Outcomes Statement was beginning. There are, of course, multiple narratives of why and how the WPA Outcomes Statement, perhaps CWPA's most influential document, came to be. As chronicled in 2023 by Patricia Freitag Ericsson, on March 13, 1996, Gordon Grant (University of Charleston) asked WPA-L list members for "a pithy and effective list of objectives for their writing programs," since the members of the committee drafting outcomes for writing "either refuse or are unable to acknowledge that a body of scholarship guides our work, and they are relying on their own prejudices and memory of their own current-traditional classroom experiences" (1-2). In response, Roni Keane agreed, noting that it would be "useful for people like myself who are the only ones in their departments who are trained in the field" and would provide "some 'authority' to invoke when we find ourselves under siege" (Ericsson 3).

The WPA Outcomes Statement was written to give such isolated and beleaguered WPAs "some 'authority' to invoke when we find ourselves under siege." It accomplished that purpose for me as a new WPA and for

many others. Yet, when we layer SRTOL over it, the knot again tightens. The recent CWPA turmoil has raised questions not only about the content of the Outcomes Statement, but whether we can or should have one. The question of whether this Outcomes statement, or any revision of it, is still of value as "a curricular document that speaks to the common expectations, for students, of first-year composition programs in the United States" (Yancey 323) remains.

That question is beyond the scope of this talk; but if we believe the Outcome Statement's premise that FYC should help students learn "the relationships among language, knowledge, and power," (Yancey 324) we must create opportunities for students to inquire into that power dynamic, much like the undergraduate researchers at the Naylor Workshop.

An Ex-WPA as an Agent of Social Change (2015–2023)

Before bringing us back to 2023, let's have one last glance at the past. 1996 also saw the publication of Ellen Cushman's landmark essay, "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change." In this essay, Cushman called out the "colonizing ideology" of scholars who "maintain a distance from people" (11) as they do community-based research. In 1997, I became the WPA at York College, and focused my attention to the civic goals of FYW in that role.

But it is my current work as Dean of our Center for Community Engagement that made clear that we cannot afford to maintain a scholarly distance from our communities. As Cushman reminds us, language is always already embodied in people, in their sincere need to express their thoughts, emotions, aspirations—and (as I have seen in a deeply segregated and impoverished York City) their grief and their longing. We cannot separate language from the multiple tongues that speak it and the multiple hands that write it. Our students, and our communities, are crying out for both tangible and moral support. While admissions departments may be compelled to ignore race and the history of racial inequity, we need not do so. It is wrong to go out into the community as anthropologists, ready to study other cultures from a distance without returning anything to them. And we ought not blame the business world for only accepting a homogenous language while we uphold the structure that homogenizes it.

My work in the community has helped me to let go of my own false biases that one "community" is fundamentally better than the other because it is more prosperous—and that one language style is fundamentally better than another because it is the *lingua franca*. Yes, generally speaking, the places where people use standardized English are more prosperous, and

certainly enjoy more privilege. But better? And is communication stronger in my suburban home than in the impoverished city in which I work and in which people lend support to one another every day? Not in my experience. Yet somehow—and it likely comes from a place of kindness and a sense of justice—we came to believe that it was in our authority to recognize, or not, the viability of various community languages. My work in these challenged communities has helped me to see language variety as a form of community identity. Communities don't need us to affirm their right to their own language; they own and use it anyway, and quite effectively.

The use of standardized language is not a natural condition for entry to prosperity; it is (as universal design would suggest) a fabricated barrier that academia has constructed for entry. If entry to our culture requires the loss of identity, then what are we to say to students like the ones I cited, who are committed to social justice?

We may have missed from the start more effective ways to defend SRTOL. We might start by articulating our reasons for SRTOL differently—not as an act of graciousness, but as largely for the benefit of monolingual students who lack experience with larger cultural competencies and communication methods that are embedded in our communities. Those are the students who would benefit by learning about the very effective dialects and language styles used in various communities as part of what higher education is fond of calling "preparation for the real world." The real world is diverse, speaks many languages and dialects, and requires multiple language competencies. We can only prepare students for it by being less prescriptive and by valuing our students' experiences with varied language styles beyond our classrooms. Engagement with our communities—and I mean our own engagement, not just students—can help us to build a less constricted real world, if we add the tools of reflection, respect, and rhetoric (a new three R's).

What I've been wondering, and I what I invite you to wonder with me, is this: what would happen if we ignored those who control access to, and forms of, literacy education in our classrooms, asserted what power we do have, and slipped out the back door of the classroom (with our students) and into our communities.

That is where people already know their rights, where they already exercise their own languages, and where people don't tie themselves up in knots.

An Afterword (2024)

This piece combines a somewhat self-indulgent review of my own life and career with a call to see the moral obligations that inform our work as

WPAs. Drafting this plenary address as I near the end of my career was a deeply emotional experience for me. I recalled my first experiences as a novice WPA, learning how to do this work at the WPA Workshop in Houghton, Michigan in 1997, where I was touched by the genuine care and counsel I received. I revisited my time as CWPA President, a responsibility I took on to repay old debts to this organization, but which is not without its own regrets for opportunities lost. And I recalled my four decades as a teacher of writing, during which time I was keenly aware of students' right to their own language because my family language was not that of the academy. Though as a WPA, I refused to allow a strict focus on Edited American English to exclude the language that our students brought with them to the classroom, I also feel remorse that, like many of us, I did not do enough.

As I look now at the struggles of CWPA to survive our recent reckoning with exclusionary practices that silenced the voices of women, of minoritized peoples, and of those whose first language is not (standardized) English, I wonder if the humane practices that originally knit me to this organization can still save us. In a deeply violent world, and in an academy increasingly starved for resources, the impulse to burn it all down is understandable. The coming years will determine whether the generosity of spirit that drove this organization can be extended to those whose voices we have silenced—not only students, faculty, and administrators, but communities whose citizens we will never see in our classrooms because of the deep inequities and iniquities of language policies. My central hope is that we can work together to make CWPA a voice for those communities, relinquishing power to those whose natural languages have much to teach us.

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