

Refusal of Translation: Unsettling Writing Studies

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On March 1, 2025, President Donald J. Trump declared English the official language of the United States by executive order. This order proffers several falsehoods that the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) were quick to debunk point by point.

The White House order states that: 1. English has been the national language since the country's founding; 2. having a national language "is at the core of a unified and cohesive society," in which the country is strengthened by "a citizenry that can freely exchange ideas in one shared language"; 3. an official language will help the economy; and 4. communication will be streamlined and reinforce "shared national values" for a "cohesive and efficient society" ("Designating English").

The LSA's response references empirical research on the topics, which range from addressing the ahistorical myths the statement proffers to mono- and multilingualism's effects on cultures and societies. This research counters the White House's unfounded claims. The LSA does a point-by-point response, stating: 1. "The United States has always been a multilingual country, and this gives it strength"; 2. "Citizens of the US . . . inevitably have different linguistic ways of navigating their lives, and enforced monolingualism never achieves national unity"; 3. "Official English' policies do not improve economic prospects for those who arrive in the US speaking another language, nor do they improve communication for those who live in multilingual communities"; and 4. "Supporting and promoting multilingualism makes a nation stronger, not weaker" (Linguistic Society).

In the midst of the Trump administration's misguided war against multilingualism in the United States, a country which has never had an "official" language until now, it is imperative that institutions support the linguistic diversity of their communities. This article explores the ways that monolingualism contributes to the erasure of the knowledges of various communities and counters monolingualist orientations to institutional learning, through arguing for *refusals of translation*.

In winter 2015, I took an undergraduate course taught by Wesley Leonard (Miami Tribe of Oklahoma) called “Learning Native American Languages” at Southern Oregon University. In this course, we focused on developing practices for Indigenous language learning. For instance, we created word and phrase lists based on semantic domains; we created immersion environments by giving weekly presentations exclusively in our Indigenous target languages; and we augmented learning semantic domains with learning our language’s grammar structures.

One week, Leonard took us to the Stevenson Union, a place where people often congregate and where many student unions and clubs are housed. He required that none of us utter a word of English during this field trip. We were to talk to as many people as we could exclusively in the Native American language we were learning. If we ordered a coffee, we did so in that Native language. This served several purposes, but I will be focusing on one in particular: the fact that this exercise *unsettled* the space of the Stevenson Union because it insisted on Indigenous (language) presence in a settler colonial context where Indigenous peoples and our languages are expected to be in the past, deemed “dormant,” or worse, “extinct.” Leonard argues that terms such as “extinct” aid in the genocidal intent of colonization, as the term indicates non-existence and therefore, when applied to a language, which is necessarily connected to a people, says that the people, too, are extinct (“Challenging ‘Extinction’”). Leonard argues instead to apply terms such as “sleeping” to situations where there has been a rupture to the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages (“When Is an ‘Extinct Language’”). “Sleeping” more accurately captures the fact that Indigenous languages, even with such rupture, can be brought back—such as through consulting documentation (Leonard, “When Is an ‘Extinct Language’”).

I hadn’t thought about my experience in Leonard’s class, where we refused to translate our Indigenous languages for the comfort of those settled around us, for a long time, until I took a graduate seminar on First Year Composition pedagogy, instructed by Dan Melzer of the UC Davis University Writing Program (UWP). We were going over different approaches to grading, specifically the labor-based contract grading system which many in UWPs are proponents of. Labor-based contract grading considers the labor students put into work to determine a pre-agreed upon grade: if the student completes certain requirements and expectations (e.g., participation in peer review workshops), they will earn the grade which the “contract” states they will earn for doing that work (Inoue). This approach explicitly acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in grading (especially grading *written* assignments), as well as the fact that assignment creation is not divorced from the socialization (and therefore epistemological assumptions of) the instructor. Labor-based contract advocate Asao B. Inoue argues such assumptions more often than not come from “white, middle class teachers” (30). That is to say, assignment prompts themselves are “already biased toward a dominant discourse that is associated closely to a white body and a white discourse” (Inoue 40).

At one point during the pedagogy seminar, when we were in small groups discussing assignment creation within a contract grading system, my group discussed the fact that some students are technically being asked to do more labor than other students are. Sarah Biscarra Dilley (Northern Chumash Tribe) argued, for example, “Why should my students have to put in the extra labor of translation just for my comfort?” I was suddenly transported back to the Stevenson Union, thinking

about the dominance of English and institutionalized monolingualism, and how, despite research showing the benefits of bi- or multilingualism (and the fact that most of the world is bilingual, with monolingualism as the rarity), people *continue* to express concerns over the English skills of persons from non-English heritage language backgrounds (see work by Dewaele; Pittaka, Bielenberg, and Pittaka 173–175). With regard to the labor system we were discussing, we considered that some students might have work or family obligations that impact how much time they have to “labor” over assignments (see Carillo). Other students might have to undertake the additional labor of translating their heritage language into English.

A popular UWP assignment at UCD promotes practicing primary research methods by exploring the communicative conventions of a particular community. In this assignment, students choose a member of their chosen community to interview as a way of understanding the community’s discourse (see works by Melzer; Schmidt and Vande Kopple; Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff). Sometimes, that community is one that the student and their family belong to, and their interviewee is their parent, guardian, or other family member. Often, this person speaks a language other than English, and the interview is conducted in that language. But because the institution privileges English and assignments are expected to be submitted in English (so that their English-speaking instructor knows what they’re saying), students need to translate the community member’s words when they transcribe their interview and write their paper. They are therefore required to engage in extra labor that students exploring the conventions of an English-speaking discourse community do not have to do. This example describes an inequity that is supported institutionally by nature of English being the dominant language through which instruction is conducted and assessments are completed.

What this labor imbalance essentially does is shift the focus from the student’s learning to a focus on the instructor’s linguistic comfort and ability to comprehend, thus restricting the student to writing only within the instructor’s range of knowledge, forcing tones and rhetoric into ones that are palatable to the instructor. As Heather M. Falconer argues, “how we position ourselves within the hierarchies [of disciplines and institutions] is impacted by the rights and duties we see as being internally and externally ascribed to us: what are we allowed to do and not allowed to do within this space?” (33). In this text, I ask the questions: in what spaces are Natives “allowed” to use our languages, and who is assuming the right to give us “permission” to do so?

I argue that promoting student *refusals of translation* can be one way of unsettling writing studies classrooms, in effect promoting the decolonization of pedagogy, literacy, and composition. When students engage in refusing translation of Indigenous languages, this practice results in Indigenizing the academy by supporting the sovereign and human right of Indigenous peoples to be Indigenous, to think in Indigenous ways, and to speak Indigenous languages in any and all spaces where we see fit. In the remainder of this text, I analyze how refusing translation fits into current social justice-oriented practices of Writing Program Administration assessment.

POSITIONALITY

There is a great deal of literature on why explicitly naming positionality is important in all

research pursuits. Here I draw primarily from Maggie Walter and Chris Andersen, who visualize a matrix consisting of social positions, axiology, ontology, and epistemology that leads to a thorough consideration of one's standpoint and how that standpoint informs research, specifically debunking claims of "objectivity" which insist on a singular Truth that is naturally existing and thus "discoverable" (also see works by Haraway; Hokowhitu; TallBear, "Native"). They instead argue that there are many truths that are in fact socially contingent and created. I apply Walter and Andersen's definitions here: axiology is "the theory of *extrinsic and intrinsic* values" (49); social position includes identifying one's positions in society such as race and class, including explicitly naming one's "invisible, unnamed, and unmarked" privileges (51); ontologies shape how we relate and categorize knowledge; and epistemologies are the "what" and "how" of knowledge production (47).

Interrogating positionality considers not only what someone's social positions are, but what the *implications* of those positions are for their research (Leonard, "Centering Indigenous Ways"). That is, whose axiologies, ontologies, and epistemologies have contributed to the conceptualization, design, and execution of the research project? Whose perspectives are presented, and whose are not? Whose definition of truth and reality are centered, and whose are dismissed or marginalized?

In explaining my positionality, I situate how and why I've come to think about promoting refusing translation pedagogically. I do this in the hopes that it might highlight where my strengths might be, as well as where I am missing particular views that should be explored so as to create a fuller understanding of the issues at hand.

I am enrolled in the Karuk Tribe and am a grassroots organizer for Konomihu music reMatriation. My family's ancestor, Grandma Ellen, was recorded singing Konomihu songs by ethnomusicologist Helen H. Roberts. These are originally on wax cylinders, which are currently housed at the Library of Congress. There are copies at Cal Poly Humboldt and UCLA. Some of my roles have included making connections across archives that host Grandma's recordings, collaborating with stakeholders to create protocol for sharing and use of the recordings, and organizing meetings between the community and archivists to foster relational accountability.

My background coming to this music project is primarily from doing language reclamation work. I held an internship with my Tribe's language department in summer 2016, and for my undergraduate senior research project I explored what knowledge surrounding gender and sexuality was being passed in the Karuk language community. I served on the 2023 Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS) Youth Leadership Development Conference steering committee, and I was a graduate student researcher for the UC Davis Native American Studies Department's Native American Language Center. I am also a lecturer at Cal Poly Humboldt. My main areas of research are Native writing, rhetoric, composition, and literature, and I have had the privilege of teaching upper and lower division courses in both writing studies and Native American Studies.

These are the positions from which I look at the issue at hand, which is how the dominant expectation of English as the primary language of student assignment submissions in writing classrooms in the US limits opportunities for linguistic inclusion and justice and also burdens multilingual students. In response to this expectation and the ideologies it reveals, I argue that students should have the option to refuse translation.

REFUSING TRANSLATION *OF WAYS OF KNOWING, BEING, AND DOING* IN WRITING, RHETORIC, AND COMPOSITION

A discussion of positionality leads nicely into one of the major benefits of “refusing translation,” which is that Native students can effectively position ourselves via our languages (for commonalities among Native introductions, see work by Bissett Perea). This is particularly pertinent considering how “authentic” Native identities are confirmed or valued. In the current sociopolitical environment, for example, some “pretendians” (pretend Indians) are not being held accountable for their actions of committing ethnic fraud. When non-Natives claim Native identity, they build material wealth and prestige from doing so, take up space meant for Natives, colonize Indigenous knowledge by stealing Native intellectual labor and production, and, sometimes, simply make things up and claim that those things are Native (for discussion of self-indigenization, see works by Deloria, “Playing Indian”; Jaschik; Owen; Palmater and TallBear; TallBear, “Indigenous”; Teillet; Viren). Dwanna L. McKay (Muscogee (Creek) Nation) analyzed the US Census Bureau to find that “more than 67 percent of people self-identify with a racial identity of American Indian (and an ethnic identity if they purport a tribal affiliation) without official tribal membership status” (13). These numbers show an increase “from 524,000 in 1960 to 5.2 million in 2010” over the course of just 50 years (McKay 13). Pretendians speak over actual Native voices; usurp funding, opportunities, and other resources reserved for Native peoples; and cause emotional and other traumas to Natives who trusted them.

Natives are indeed confronted with an odd paradox—required to prove our “authenticity,” often through explicitly colonial means such as enrollment, phenotype, speech, and sometimes through metrics such as alignment with what’s dominantly deemed to be “tradition” (McKay). Regardless of these challenges, because there are indeed non-Natives who get away with claiming Native identities, it is necessary that we *somehow* evidence our claims of Native affiliation. Ellen Cushman (Cherokee Nation) argues for key rhetorical points which provide convincing evidence to many Native audiences of tribal affiliation, such as “clan affiliation, participation in tribal communities and religious practices, language use, a family’s historical and current contribution to the community, and knowledge of and practice in the traditions, art, and history” (“Toward a Rhetoric” 342). I would argue, as Cushman does, that it’s not about proving our identity/relations to non-Indians; rather, it’s about being legible to our *own* communities, who can then confirm our relationship.

This approach of necessitating tribal corroboration of affiliation claims is based on the fact that Native nations are sovereign and thus have the right to determine who their own people are; this can and does go beyond enrollment and into intimate details of tribally specific community dynamics and histories (see Barker). Such messiness is sometimes part of what “authenticates” claims to Indian identity, as knowledge of intimate details are understood within a community that may not be understood outside of it (Cushman, “Toward a Rhetoric” 356). Refusing to translate an Indigenous language has the potential to reach Native communities in provocative ways, promoting a literacy that necessitates community involvement in the evaluation of identity claims.

Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) uses an approach similar to refusing translation in a chapter of his book, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, called “Writing Indigenous

Space.” He argues for creating writing that is only for Native audiences, where non-Natives are asked not to read. In a similar vein, Falconer argues for learning and writing in counter-spaces, which are “intentional spaces where individuals with a shared identity can be free to work, talk, study, etc., without the physical or emotional pressures of specific oppressions and without the presence of potential oppressors” (36). I argue that such spaces can be created, too, by writing in Indigenous languages and refusing to translate them. This has various potential effects—one being that persons who are not from the language communities cannot know what is being said. Additionally, such spaces serve to support tribal sovereignty, the right of Native peoples to self-governance. Refusing translation protects knowledge generation meant to direct such self-determination. These spaces also become centers of linguistic justice.

Such approaches could be powerful means by which we are able to signify our Indianness to our audiences. While of course not everyone can speak/read their tribal language, I am imagining more so a space for Native students who are part of their language communities to continue the reclamation work they do outside of school in an institutional space (the university classroom) that was not made for them. This counter-space would explicitly make the classwork they are doing relevant to their own goals and interests. Moreover, because many California Indian language reclamation programs promote speaking over writing Indigenous languages (see Hinton), this is also well-tailored to multimodal projects and pedagogies. Such opportunities to refuse translation in assignments could also encourage Native students who are not part of their language communities to join those communities.

Furthermore, although I’ve focused on language thus far, my argument of “refusal” goes deeper than language—it goes into composition, and, at its core, is about refusing assimilation into dominant worldviews. Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz Indian Tribe) and Theresa Warburton show how composition goes beyond the content of a piece. From various Native worldviews, “compositions” can be epistemologically derived from culturally relevant vessels (such as baskets, bodies, and canoes). Beyond the items themselves, the composition of such vessels includes the process of creating them; the materials they’re made of; the relations, reciprocity, and respect practiced in creating them; and the cosmological significance of any aspect of the piece (Washuta and Warburton 4). Washuta and

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Warburton state that these elements all hold true and manifest in the composition of a written piece as well; the vessel being the page.

Additionally, rhetorical components of Native writing tend to be another area where instruction based on Western composition norms

fail Native students. Greg Younging (Opaskwayak Cree), for example, states that “Indigenous writing contains elements of storytelling that appear repetitious to a non-Indigenous mind, but which are not repetition” (24). The intention of refusing translation goes well beyond not translating non-English languages. It includes refusing to force one’s ways of knowing, being, and doing into the

confines of settler-colonial communicative logics.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: EPISTEMOLOGICAL RIGHTS

When some students are required to translate their research (be it from primary or secondary sources) of writing and others are not, the translation process—again, not only language translation, but of ways of knowing—can be assimilatory in nature (for specific problems in translation of Native languages, as well as examples of contexts where translation is appropriate, see Swann). To uphold one language as the language of institutional access is to gatekeep knowledge production and insist on only worldviews that are developed out of that one language. Moreover, “inclusion” of “other” languages more often functions as a form of extraction. For example, this can happen in fields such as linguistics, where languages are dominantly viewed as objects of study that can be detached from their people and are valued for what they can contribute to linguistic science (see works by Leonard, “Centering”; Davis, “Resisting”; Cushman, “Translingual”; Schultz).

Institutional monolingualism colonizes knowledge production and commits ontological violence. In contrast, if or when a monolingual English-speaking instructor finds themselves in a position where they do not know what a student has written/said, this creates an opportunity for them to fight the colonial hunger which seeks to know everything and assumes that everything should be or can be known, especially by anyone who wishes to know it. Robinson theorizes this “hunger” (desire to know) specifically from Stó:lō perspectives via the Halq'eméylem language, where *xwelítem* means “white settler” and is literally translated as “starving person” (2). This word emerged through contact: in 1858, Stó:lō people saw “the largest influx of settlers to the territory . . . [who] arrived in a bodily state of starvation, and also brought with them a hunger for gold” (Robinson 2). This “hunger,” Robinson argues, continues to be part of the “settler’s starving orientation” from which settlers assert a right to “knowing” (hearing, comprehending, *owning* and controlling) Indigenous knowledge (2).

The colonial assumed right to Indigenous knowledge is akin to claiming ownership over the knowledge itself. Robinson shows that multicultural and inclusion initiatives within musicology, for example, are a means primarily of allowing settlers the opportunity to consume (listen to) Native music, where “[l]istening itself may become an act of confirming ownership, rather than an act of hearing the agonism of exclusive and contested sovereignties” (13). These methods which may seek to “include” Indigenous peoples continue the ownership model grounded in colonialism and empire.

Models of inclusion that are not based on individualistic ownership, then, must recognize the collective nature of Indigeneity. This nature is relational rather than “identity”-based because “identity” models can turn Indigeneity into a possession that one has or owns in a vacuum. Kristin L. Arola and Adam Arola argue that rhetorical sovereignty is often misinterpreted in Composition Studies to refer to individualistic agency, when it instead refers to a Tribe’s collective agency. An example of this is examined by Cushman, Baca, and García, who critique the ways that Malea Powell uses the concept in this very way (11–12). Cushman, Baca, and García state: “Stories told in Powell’s scholarship recenter the self-told, self-validating story as *prima facie* truth told—it is claim

and evidence of the claim at once, a self-identified knowledge (who can question the grounds and evidence for such a story?)” (11). While Powell claims Indiana Miami tribal heritage, her approach to writing and story disallows for community verification of said affiliation and stories. Arola and Arola state, further, that “when understood by outsiders to [Native cultures], [cultural specificity] is lost” (211). I suggest that, in a writing studies context, an instructor’s potential experience of having no means to know what a student has said, written, composed, or otherwise created, unsettles the institution and diversifies knowledge production by making the right to generate knowledge in Native or heritage languages accessible to students. While potentially “extreme” to some, refusal of translation protects that knowledge from assimilatory assessments based on assumptions, stereotypes, and misinterpretations. These kinds of assimilations of Native languages are not uncommon and not unlikely. Refusing translation makes space for any number of worldviews to emerge, while promoting accountability to one’s community.

We might glean examples of how stereotypes can inform an assessor’s feedback by considering ontological paradigms. Ontologies include the taxonomies we use to make sense of our worlds and relate knowledge (Walter and Andersen 52). Genres, then, fall within ontological taxonomies; texts within contexts are related to each other. Students in writing studies are often asked to practice rhetorical analyses of different genres in order to write across the curriculum or decipher the conventions of diverse genres of writing.

But Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation) interrogates the fact that many of Indigenous peoples’ writings are excluded from the genre of “literary realism” (a highly valued Western genre, informed by Western ontologies of what counts as “real”). For instance, even when an Indigenous author explicitly states that literary realism is their intended genre, Justice shows how dominant literary practices demarcate the author’s literature only as “realistic” if it caters to stereotypes of Indigenous peoples (141). Examples of such “realisms” based on stereotypes include: representing Indigenous peoples as peoples of the past, as deficient, or as having “lost” Indigenous cultures and languages (Justice 142). These are the “realities” that Western society has constructed for Indigenous peoples.

Further, the “reality” of literary realism privileges Western ways of knowing, particularly those considered “objective,” which renders many Indigenous realities “subjective” and thus not real (Justice 152–153; Maracle, “Memory” 76). For example, spiritual experiences, which many Indigenous peoples would assert belong categorically within genres depicting reality, are forced into genres such as fantasy or speculative fiction (Justice; see also Swann 4). Indigenous authors are also faced with the expectation that Indigenous character development should include an arc of “returning home.” This is a problem because it standardizes a trope in Native literatures, creating a singular Native genre in which all Native writing is expected to conform to similar conventions. The “return home” story arc is expected of Native peoples because Natives have been forcibly removed and confined to reservations, rancherias, and the likes, which results in a restrictive conceptualization of where “authentic” Indigeneity exists (see works by Goeman 119–159; Maracle, “Memory” 75–76). Therefore, a *real* Indian will be, or should aim to be, on a reservation or ancestral territory in order to be able to embody their true authentic, nature-connected, rural self. “Home,” defined as such, is

the ideal place for the Indian; knowing where Indians exist enables control over where we then go. This is not to say that returning home isn't a major arc of Native literatures. It's to say that "home" for Natives is conceptualized in much more nuanced, decolonial, and creative ways that are not restricted to colonial mappings.

Highly relevant to this discussion of so-called literary "real" markers of Indigeneity is the ability within nonfiction and especially academic writing to push back against misconceptions about Native peoples, such as restrictive, romanticized narratives which "immobilize Native emotional responses" (Washuta and Warburton 10). For instance, the noble savage stereotype, which insists that Natives are inherently hyper-spiritual and ultra-connected to "Mother Earth" is more than mythicizing rhetoric—it also imbues a mystical quality to Natives. Such stereotypes flatten Native peoples in a way that makes the full range of human emotion unexpected from a Native person—an ultra-spiritual person is not expected to get *angry*, for instance. Human reactions such as anger at injustice are unexpected from Native peoples, and, when they occur, are perceived as the binary opposite stereotype—the ignoble savage, the bloodthirsty warrior, the angry Indian. Philip J. Deloria argues that this binary perception of Natives is a form of political pacification, as both stereotypes disallow for Native sovereignty and reinforce ideas that Native peoples, savage or spiritual (or both), must assimilate into dominant society (Deloria, "Indians" 8). This racist view can result in institutions "including" only Native people who don't disrupt the status quo, who can be cited as a statistic, or who will perform their Nativeness in ways that don't disrupt the settler institution. Such inclusion contributes to the institution's perception of itself as culturally diverse. Rarely does this inclusion mean the inclusion of Native structures that challenge or dismantle settler structures. In writing studies, those structures include dominant compositional models and genre conventions that don't account or allow for Indigeneity in them.

Washuta and Warburton state that Native nonfiction writers disrupt "the expectation that Native peoples remain as *subjects spoken about* rather than as the *subjects speaking*" (13). But they also argue that most Native nonfiction is relegated to the realm of autobiography, which effectively "assumes a methodological framework grounded in a desire for cultural authenticity that can be easily translated to and for a non-Native reader" (Washuta and Warburton 13). Moreover, as Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza contend, autobiography is "an essentially Christian and Western genre" (289). The roots of a given field, practice, and legacy—and, I would argue, a writing genre—even if actively rejected contemporarily, are still going to have some remnants practitioners will need to consider. For example, Falconer highlights that within STEM, "When discussing race, science textbooks often explore the topic from a seemingly impartial viewpoint that nevertheless embraces a particular belief system about the relationship between genetics and race," despite the fact that research shows this serves to reinforce biological essentialism and has "a clear connection to the eugenics movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries" (32). When Native writers don't conform to Western expectations of Native-ness, and it's demanded that we make our Native-ness legible to non-Native readers, this necessitates performing cultural markers that are based on stereotypes, which points to another problem in research and writing concerning ethnographic methods.

Consider the history of why anthropology came to ethnology to begin with, as detailed by

Vassos Argyrou. The studying of “the other” was a desire to redeem “the others” by uncovering some secret universal, shared ontological worldview which in fact would reveal “the other” as “not so different from us” (Argyrou 60). Argyrou argues that ontological anthropologists, then, assert power by aiming to gift enlightenment/knowledge to the “others,” because early anthropologists hoped to show that “human unity” exists (51). This idea of the universal relies on a “need to believe in the existence of an ethical order” over which human control can be asserted (Argyrou 63). Studying “others” stems, then, from a desire for control—and to control is to wield power. Additionally, Asao Inoue shows, applying a Foucauldian analysis, that power dynamics in grading also reveal that instructors dominantly have beliefs about what constitutes “honest” or “authentic” voices, and that those beliefs come down to employing writing that caters to “a middle class set of tastes but a clear white racial set of experiences and perspectives” (28). These, in turn, make grading and assessment “an exercise of power” (Inoue 28).

An instructor socialized into the dominant culture will have expectations of Indigenous peoples (whether they know it or not), and those expectations have often come from academic and research-based ethnographies and the unifying aims of this method (regarding ethnography’s role in solidifying the “otherness” of Indigenous peoples, see works by Deloria, “Indians”; Risling Baldy; Teves 84). Assessment by such an instructor is bound to also function to “unify” or assimilate “the other” and exert power via the so-called “gift” of Western knowledge. With regard to writing studies, this has been clearly identified as an institutional inequity for first-year writing courses which, as Kate Vieira et al. show, often act “as a checkpoint of assimilation . . . instructing their students on the conventions of academic writing” (41).¹ They add: “most institutions of higher education require students to complete a first-year writing course, the success of students in higher education can hinge on their ability to ‘write white’ in order to compete with ‘White Americans’” (Vieira et al. 41–42).

The problems of academic writing assessment also violate Indigenous sovereignty. Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Dakota) argues that “rhetorical sovereignty” is “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (Lyons 449). Despite his foundational argument, writing assessment, often categorized in rubrics with criteria such as “knowing your audience,” by extension impose restraints on when, where, and how Indigenous peoples use our languages. Refusing translation brings out the entitlement inherent in wanting to always be the target audience (as an instructor typically thinks they’re entitled to be).

Student worldviews, themselves, are at stake when translation (making the composition legible according to the instructor’s expectations, forms, and ontologies of literacy) is demanded in composition classrooms. Through refusing to translate what students think and say, students can refuse to be known/knowable and therefore capable of being *controlled*.

CURRENT APPROACHES OF EMBRACING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN WRITING STUDIES

I analyze the potential of refusing translation through the above frameworks as an explicit means

of centering Native American languages. I also see the broader concept of refusal as being relevant to non-Native American languages which are marginalized in US institutions as well. Refusing translation can be combined with similar decolonial approaches that have to do with embracing literacy diversity in writing studies.

Language is intimately connected to people, so when a language is devalued, so are its people. As H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman have shown, standard(ized) English is explicitly connected to whiteness and white ways of knowing. They show that white people continually obsessing over former President Barack Obama's speaking (specifically labelling him "articulate") was part of "exceptionalizing discourse" (Alim and Smitherman 41). These labels function to either make Black people an exception to racist expectations (e.g., expectations that Black people *wouldn't* sound "articulate"), or to "[cast] them and their speech behavior as White" (Alim and Smitherman 44). In writing programs that focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access, de-emphasizing standard(ized) English (with its socioeconomic, racial, ableist, and other hierarchical roots) includes liberatory approaches such as contract grading. These approaches can and should include assignments and assessments that support refusal of translation. Including word minimum criteria in assignments, for instance, is not conducive to refusing translation. For example, in Karuk, if I say "Nikxurikth nanu'araarahi," Microsoft Word counts this as two "words," whereas written in English it is five words. Other examples abound.

I also want to situate refusal of translation within the context of writing program administration, because the power structures which support English-language privilege are institutional and structural. Cushman argues that changing small details within these structures and frameworks does not effectively deal with their problematic roots (e.g., roots of white supremacy), and argues instead for structural change ("Translingual and Decolonial Approaches"). For example, Marc C. Santos provides an overview of structural-level position statements on language diversity, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language" statement (160–161). Santos argues that the statement, although expressing "passion and idealism," is far from how the majority of the college composition classrooms actually function (161). Santos theorizes the potential of contract grading as an antiracist pedagogy, given that the majority of traditional writing rubrics, even if they don't outright assess grammar, still "make token acknowledgements of students' rights to linguistic diversity but then frame linguistic diversity as out of line with the specific rhetorical context of academic writing" (161). The message to students when their language choices are not valued in terms of how they are assessed is that their languages are "valuable"—but are not academic languages.

"The message to students when their language choices are not valued in terms of how they are assessed is that their languages are 'valuable'—but are not academic languages."

One means of supporting refusal of translation and changing these structures is through writing programs' promotion of innovative criteria for writing assessment. Critiques of inequitable labor acknowledged, one such example is contract grading. Labor-based contracts de-emphasize

instructor *expectations* for the assignment content and emphasize student choice over elements such as language. Contract grading differs from point systems where grammar, punctuation, organization, and content are assessed in regard to how “correct” the writing is (which represents what the student is thinking/learning). These views of “correctness” are dominantly based on how much each student’s composition conforms to standardized forms or dominant discursal knowledge. These kinds of standards raise the question of “whose truths” are being valued or erased. Dominant forms of language, writing, rhetoric, and composition were *standardized* because they are the “truths” (how language is heard/spoken/written) of those in power, who then enforce them as “correct,” but not because they naturally, “objectively” are so.

Within majoritized white knowledge systems, if a piece does not meet predetermined ideas of “standard,” the instructor typically provides feedback which guides the student in how to assimilate to those standards in future writing—in turn imposing rhetorical and compositional assessment structures which assimilate not only the student’s writing, but, as Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski argue, also change the very thought process and logics which appeared in the original rhetoric and composition that the student created. To refuse translation is to refuse the possibility of feedback which aims to assimilate. As such, approaches like contract grading, which emphasizes labor through the completion of required assignments and flexible/accessible expectations of “participation,” is well suited for “assessing” a student’s work if a student refuses translation. Understanding what the student has written is not necessary for checking off completion of a task where labor (the writing or composing of *something*) is the goal. Therefore, refusing translation already fits within contract grading approaches that aim to embrace linguistic diversity in writing studies courses.

UNSETTLING EFFECTS OF REFUSING TRANSLATION IN WRITING PROGRAMS

Building off of Paulette Regan’s concept of “unsettling the settler within,” which places responsibility on settlers to “confront their own colonial mentality, moral indifference, and historical ignorance” towards Indigenous peoples (x), I argue that there are at least two key ways that refusing translation can contribute to an “unsettling” in writing programs. These are ethnographic refusal and centering ethnolinguistic identity.

Audra Simpson (Mohawk) identifies that Indigenous peoples practice ethnographic refusal by not sharing “insider” community knowledge with ethnographers because sharing some information can lead to misuse, misrepresentation, and appropriation of Indigenous knowledges on the part of ethnography. This method of “refusal” has taken off as an Indigenous research approach wherein Indigenous peoples refuse access to certain knowledges on the premise that the academy simply does *not* have the right to all knowledge. As Eve Tuck (Unangaâ) and K. Wayne Yang state, these refusals “attemp[t] to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (225). Robinson offers a critique of this approach, stating that Indigenous actions which are “oriented

toward, defensive against, or responsive to the work of settler colonial sovereignty” (such as refusals) actually function to center settler colonialism (67). Nonetheless, “refusal” has resonated for many Natives as a way to articulate what we’re doing when confronted with expectations of Indigeneity that don’t align with our lived experiences, and I extend the concept into writing program administration.

Indigenous languages and languages which are not the language of instruction can and should be used by students as a way of refusing assimilation and colonization of students’ ways of knowing. This process also refuses settler comfort/entitlement in which the settler assumes the right to know and “correct” what the “other” is saying or thinking. A student’s refusal in turn creates a situation where the reader must sit in the potential discomfort of cluelessness, rendered by the institutional privileging of English. This can encourage instructors and administrators to engage in reflection and take responsibility for decolonization and *unsettlement* in their classrooms and programs, as described by Regan.

The unsettling of writing, according to Rachel C. Jackson (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma) and Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune (Kiowa), is necessary because through settler colonialism, non-Native institutions have placed “limits on Indigenous voices, practices, and perspectives” such that settler narratives (e.g., of Native disappearance) may reign (41). One narrative that is reinforced through settler colonial rhetorics and invigorated by settler colonialism’s goal of Indigenous eradication, is the *expectation* that Native peoples are peoples of the past.

I draw from a very specific theory of “expectations” as outlined by Dakota historian Phil Deloria. Deloria notes how framings of “expectations” trade in harmful “stereotypes” that become normalized by masking the violence of their colonial ideological roots (“Indians”). Stereotypes, etymologically and when applied to people, mean that people within a given group are exact replicas of each other, and the simplicity of such monolithic representations fail to address the colonial reasons behind what non-Natives, and sometimes Natives ourselves, think about Native people (Deloria, “Indians” 8–9). Deloria argues that the ideologies behind expectations of Indian people come down to a few core beliefs about Indians: that we are disappearing, that we existed in a “pure” state prior to European contact, and (as discussed earlier) that we are either noble or ignoble savages (“Indians” 10). Deloria’s analytic of “unexpected” offers an intervention through analyses of the assumptions that are related to but that are not necessarily the stereotype itself, which reveals how ideologies of expectedness are rooted in histories and ongoing practices of genocide and dispossession.

As Leonard argues, the dominant expectations of Natives are also imposed onto our languages, despite the prominent and active presence of Indigenous language work and activism in and outside of settler institutions (“Challenging ‘Extinction’”). Language reclamation efforts, for example, insist on Indigenous language presence, and refuse the expectation that we and our languages will disappear (Leonard, “Challenging ‘Extinction’”). One way to bring language reclamation into the writing classroom is to insist on our right to use our languages in all genres, texts, and spaces where we choose to. Submitting assignments in our Native languages in *any* class and refusing to translate them is part of our right to exist. Further, the instructor need not know what we’ve said.

Refusing to translate our languages also challenges the problematic “two worlds” model where the expectation is that anywhere beyond certain confines of “the Native community” (often delegated

to reservations) constitutes an entirely different “world.” James Joseph Buss and C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa draw upon Vine Deloria Jr.’s lamentation “that scholars of all types ha[ve] created a crisis by theorizing Native people as . . . trapped ‘[between two worlds]’” (Buss and Genetin-Pilawa 1). They explore how this trope reinforces Native peoples as savage, and Western culture as civilized. The impact on Native identities that such a narrative has is restricting, as Indigenous identities cannot be fractured and forced into a dichotomy (see also Raheja 110). University classrooms are constituted as non-Native “civilized” space, and Natives are not *really* expected to be in these spaces, and if we are in them, then we are perceived as having lost some essence of our “authentic” Native-ness. When Natives are in what’s constituted as non-Native space, we are also considered exceptions to the rule. Refusing to translate Indigenous languages in these spaces, then, functions to unsettle the Two Worlds model. As such, refusing translation supports a healthy, whole identity that refuses the idea that ‘authentic’ Native-ness is confined to certain spaces.

This trope must also be understood through histories of removal, politics of migration, and economic choices made by Tribal Nations (Davis, *Talking Indian* 5). Jenny L. Davis (Chickasaw Nation) frames diaspora for Indigenous peoples as Indians who “are no longer located in their homelands, [. . .] are not authorized to exhibit political control over the entirety of their original territories, and/or [. . .] do not have access to full political sovereignty, even if they may practice various levels of tribal sovereignty” (*Talking Indian* 8). Because some Indigenous students may attend educational institutions in the circumstances of diaspora, supporting the use of Indigenous languages in the classroom maintains their connection to the broader communities from which their identities as Indigenous, and thus their existence in the world, are founded.

Therefore, Indigenous peoples asserting our *presence*, rejecting narratives of absence from certain spaces, and refusing translation are means of unsettling the composition classroom and dominant understandings of “literacy.” Because, as Vieira et al. argue, bodies are subject to assumptions, “bodies marked as ‘illiterate’ may experience obstacles for accessing the material conditions of literacy, further reifying power structures” (43). Speaking, writing, and thinking in Indigenous languages, without making them legible to settler colonial ways of knowing, promotes Indigenous presence, unsettling classroom and institutional structures of privilege and power, and promoting language reclamation efforts more broadly.

WHAT BECOMES OF THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR?

I have anticipated (or outright been told of) a few drawbacks to refusing translation. One is the longstanding critique that if instructors are too “progressive” in these sorts of ways, it denies students the “tools they need to succeed.” The other is that if a student were to refuse translation of an entire paper, an instructor might have no means of providing feedback. In this section, I show why these positions continue the project of colonization, and offer ways to engage students in refusals of translation pedagogically.

In keeping with Cushman’s arguments that institutional structures and systems should be the pressure point for change, and not individuals within systems, I am confident that it’s the means

of feedback and assessment which require change, not the individual student's language, writing, and knowledge production. Note that I am not saying all feedback is assimilative in nature, and I hold that instructors and students can have valuable reciprocal relationships in all areas of learning and teaching. However, this section explores the role of the instructor when traditional teaching of the colonizer's language and thought processes are removed. Moreover, I argue that the role of the instructor can be to provide space for refusal of translation alongside a critique of the *why* and *how* of dominant forms of writing and language—and for students to engage in these approaches and critiques in ways that will serve their needs and goals.

Alim and Smitherman call for instructors to cease claiming that teaching standard English is 'just the way it is,' and that doing so is well-meaning. They argue for "changing the game" and urge instructors to "stop apologizing for 'the way things are' and begin helping our students imagine the way things can be" (Alim and Smitherman 191). This includes considering "How and why . . . we continue to measure the worth of People of Color largely by their level of assimilation into dominant White culture, a culture that rewards all students for 'sounding White'" (Alim and Smitherman 175–191). As we can be fairly sure that students will encounter "the game" (of sounding white), my goal as an instructor is that students are able to effectively challenge all pedagogies which require that they play such a game at all.

It is of course true that there are students who express desire to acquire "the tools of the master," despite the well-known argument from Audre Lorde, who states that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112). However, even being taught dominant tools won't necessarily mean one "masters" those tools. Alim and Smitherman make the key point that "Asking people to unlearn or abandon their language is like asking them to go back magically in time and select a different speech community to be raised in [. . .] How many White speakers, for example, would be able to pass the test of sounding 'authentically' Black?" (58). Diane Lynn Gusa also shows how standard English upholds white privilege, stating that "people of color are evaluated aversely with Whiteness's dominant societal standards [and] nondominant groups are assessed as deficient in comparison to the White collective" (471). Gusa continues this critique, stating that "Whites are privileged in that they are not required to concede or exchange a part of themselves (Logan, 2002), have their U.S. citizenship questioned (Grimes, 2002), or have their culture viewed through deficit framing" (471).

When a student from a nondominant group does not perform whiteness to the approval of the assessor, this can be framed as a failure of the individual student. But as Falconer states, "The 'you can be anything if you believe in yourself' perspective ignores that there are very real vectors of oppression working to reinforce and reinscribe particular social structures and hierarchies" (33). In addition, Gusa situates how dominant means of assessment follow settler colonial notions of American individualism. Gusa states: "Historically, individualism, self-reliance, and independence were all essential principles for prosperity in the American frontier society of the 1800s and 1900s," and this "intertwined with the capitalist ideology of property, profit, and competition" (468–469). These ideologies, based on the false assumption that people have equal opportunity, place blame on the individual for not achieving the "American Dream" of upward mobility, rather than recognize

that those who hold cultural capital are positioned to have better access to opportunity (Gusa 469). Indeed, the “Fact Sheet” from the White House regarding Trump’s executive order making English the official language of the United States references the “American Dream” as achievable through linguistic assimilation into English: “This Order celebrates multilingual Americans who have learned English and passed it down, while empowering immigrants to achieve the American Dream through a common language” (“Designating English”).

However, even if students of color do “master” sounding white by using standardized English, they are typically still seen as “deficient.” Here I highlight Inoue’s point that continuing to cling to the idea that teaching white, Western “tools” is the equitable thing to do subscribes to false assumptions about race and language (31). One of these assumptions is that “people aren’t racist toward people, but they may be toward the languages people use” (Inoue 32). This is false; racism towards BIPOC occurs regardless of the languages they use, because society structurally, systemically racializes bodies (Inoue 31). But, when bringing language into the mix, BIPOC bodies are further stigmatized (Inoue 32). Inoue states: “When we read the words that come from the bodies of our students, we read those bodies as well, and by reading those bodies we also read the words they present to us, some may bare stigmata, some may not” (34). This point is echoed by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa, whose research shows that racialized “students classified as long-term English learners, heritage language learners, and Standard English learners can be understood to inhabit a shared racial positioning that frames their linguistic practices as deficient regardless of how closely they follow supposed rules of appropriateness” (149). Furthermore, as Gusa states, “Whiteness is not based on complexion; rather it is a socially informed ontological and epistemological orientation . . . reflecting what one does rather than something one has” (468). Gusa continues, outlining that “Historically, from the inception of the United States as a nation, the dominance of European culture produced an Anglo-Saxon core society rooted in and identified with English language and customs” (468). This aligns with an important point that Flores makes, which is that “any attempt at institutionalizing policies to ameliorate racial inequalities will inevitably reinforce the white supremacy that lies at the roots of institutions responsible for ensuring their implementation” (“Developing a Materialist Anti-Racist Approach” 567). Essentially, hiring more BIPOC without actually addressing issues (such as linguistic justice) is not going to change the white supremacist ideologies of the institution. There will just be more BIPOC harmed and assimilated into playing white.

Pedagogies that purport to give students the “tools they need to succeed” through standard writing, rhetoric, and composition models actually reinforce racist language ideologies and prevent cultural change aimed at creating a world in which we no longer need the tools of whiteness to succeed. In regard to the claim that teaching standardized English is a “tool for success,” it is helpful to consider what we mean by “tools.” In general, tools are things that are useful. For instance, students ought to have “tools” to engage in critical thinking. But what is actually meant by “tools” when people say “tools *they* need to succeed?” Note the othering pronoun usage that often accompanies this litany—who are “they”? These “tools” are referring to elitist *rules* of language, rhetoric, grammar, and composition often found in academia. Such language is not inherently, and is especially not exclusively, a “tool.” It is an ideology which positions epistemologies of whiteness at the top of the

literate, academic hierarchy. Flores, who analyzed elementary school teachers' assumptions that their Latinx students are "lacking" or "deficient," illustrates that "academic language is a raciolinguistic ideology that frames racialized students as linguistically deficient and in need of remediation" ("From Academic Language" 22). Flores notes that educators define "academic language" as "content-specific vocabulary and complex sentence structures" (22–23). This definition ignores the fact that students' heritage languages do, in fact, have those very features—not to mention that, quite often, the teacher is largely "illiterate" in these students' linguistic background (Flores 23). Flores argues that pedagogies which acknowledge students' full linguistic repertoires—as ought to be the expectation—"are integral to the development of [students'] academic identities rather than simply a bridge at best or a barrier at worst" (28). Moreover, Flores reminds us that it is "important to keep focus on the larger political and economic factors that lie at the root of the marginalization of the language practices of racialized communities" (29). Even if a writing instructor as an individual does not provide instruction that expects assimilation, students are still and always encountering assimilatory pedagogies in other classes or society. Because this is the case, an instructor whose curriculum asks students to critically engage with the hierarchical roots of "standard" English and writing composition need not teach those "standard" forms to a student who expresses desire to learn them. Unfortunately, the student can and will receive such instruction elsewhere. I argue that instructor goals should instead provide a space for writers to explore their voices and ensure they can critique the project of assimilatory instruction if and when it is provided unsolicited in other contexts. Specifically, it would benefit students to be able to provide the assimilatory instructor with evidence for why the instruction contains agendas of white supremacy, ableism, and a range of other power structures that privilege the communicative styles of those in power. As Inoue states, "this antiracist project begins in our classrooms because it is the only place we, as writing teachers, can begin" (29).

Now to address the second concern, which is how instructors might provide feedback or "assess" student work in languages they may not know. Creating assignments that promote refusal of translation requires a change in the structure of assessment. I have addressed the labor aspect of doing the work of the assignment in any language earlier in this text, but I also want to emphasize that feedback can come in various forms. For example, observations of collaboration in groups; the exploration of visual, auditory, and other components of multimodal composing; and participation in peer reviews and class discussions. This approach to feedback is open—it's a discussion. How are things going in groups? Is there anything we can do to make the classroom community stronger to encourage discussion? How is your writing and research process going—is there anything I can do to help?

This focus de-emphasizes the power of "assessment" by the instructor and instead focuses on what will best serve the student in their learning goals. Melzer, Quinn, Sperber, Lisa, and Faye show that removing the stressors of grading helps students to move away from concerns about what the instructor thinks and toward deeper engagement with the material. I argue that the stress of "good grades" could be further reduced if a student refuses to translate their language for the instructor.

Traditional forms of assessment create power dynamics. Refusals, when students practice

them (intentionally or not), are a direct resistance to these power dynamics, which privilege “the advantages White students receive, particularly the ability to be assessed in school for using the same language and performing the same philosophical values as they use and perform at home” (Santos 166). Students who resist these systems are developing critical thinking and self-advocacy skills.

What I’ve found important as an instructor is that students acquire the tools to critique standardized English and institutionalized monolingualism as racially and socioeconomically loaded, especially in relation to colonization. It’s important for students to learn how to support their arguments for refusing to participate in any monolingual project. Grading contracts can support this refusal through experimental writing assignments and other creative genres (vlogging, podcasts, storytelling). These kinds of assignments are particularly well suited for refusing translation, as well as for critiquing the dominance of “correct” English, because students can represent their ideas in multiple ways and choose their audiences. Instructor feedback is also less likely to promote assimilation when instructors accept student work in languages they do not know (and sit in contemplation of their own ignorance). Students get to experience and celebrate their own languages and ways of knowing when they are valued in their writing courses, and refusal of translation prepares them to transfer this practice to other courses in petition of assimilatory instruction.

CONCLUSION

Refusing translation expands on current methods that promote linguistic diversity in the writing classroom. Refusal of translation has a particularly promising impact of decolonizing, unsettling, and Indigenizing student learning opportunities. The English language continues to be privileged as the medium of communicating ideas in universities in the United States, and student assignments are typically already expected to be written in English for most fields (with some obvious exceptions, such as where papers may be written in the target language the student is learning). This privileging of English as the medium of knowledge creation and dissemination not only creates barriers for multilingual and/or Indigenous students, it also sends the signal that English, and particular dialects of English, are *better* or *right*, or the sole means of succeeding in education or becoming “educated.” In response, refusing translation resists and denies English as the only language capable of demonstrating an “educated” voice; further, when *Indigenous* languages are promoted as mediums of communicating knowledge, it *unsettles* colonized spaces by making Indigenous presence known, and refuses the colonization of Indigenous knowledge.

The expectation that students will submit assignments in English reveals it as structurally privileged in universities in the United States. If the prospect of a student submitting a paper in a language other than English *unsettles* the instructor—good. Discomfort is part of this process. Expecting that assignments be submitted in standard academic English reveals how entitlement is situated within the privilege of the institution—an entitlement to know what students are speaking, thinking, or writing. This works alongside the implied expectation that the institution and the instructor should be able to subsequently *assess*, suggest, enforce change to, and therefore restrain students’ thinking and writing to dominant (white, English) institutional standards.

My position rests on three premises. **One**, requiring some students to translate their languages results in inequitable labor and forces students' epistemologies into the constructs and confinements of the English language. This results in a privileging of all that is associated with the English language, including its ontologies and epistemologies, thereby potentially upholding white supremacy, ableism, and settler colonialism. **Two**, the expectation that students will submit assignments which are legible to English-speaking audiences (e.g., through translation) promotes the goals of settler colonialism by oppressing Indigenous languages. This works in contrast to a more liberatory vision, where the classroom could actually be a place of continuing language reclamation work and activism that the student might already be engaged with and continue outside of the classroom. And **three**, students who refuse translation force the institution to find ways to *unsettle* itself by refusing to feed the colonial hunger to *know*, as well as the colonial entitlement and presumption that one has the right to know anything and everything, including what a student is learning or thinking.

Students should have the right to say “no” to an instructor—including refusing to conform to the structural issues within assignments an instructor creates—without being penalized or intimidated with the prospect of a poor grade. When students can refuse translation, it interrupts a primary method of colonizing student ways of knowing, and it protects the knowledge which students have labored to create. Refusal of translation can happen in all subject areas—biology, chemistry, sociology, business, computer science, media studies, music, physics—because we can and do speak our languages according to our experiences and our need to talk about the world. Through refusal of translation, the ontologies we have access to in our own languages create an entry point into our knowledge development. Refusals of translation also resist assessment or feedback which might belittle and dismiss that knowledge. The ramifications of refusing translation could be disastrous for settler schooling.

And that's a good thing.

NOTES

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