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# Echo and Drag as Resistance: Coloniality, Queerness, and Practices of Reading Student Texts

Joshua Barszczewski and Florianne Jimenez

**Abstract:** *In this article, a postcolonial theorist and a queer studies scholar reconsider the role of student resistance in Writing Studies' social justice turn, arguing for a way of reading student texts that accounts for why students might choose to take up social justice or not in their own writing. Through examples from their ongoing research projects, the writers discuss how students' resistance surfaced not as visible and explicit signs of a changed epistemological framework or political perspective, but as a series of normative rhetorical choices that made space for more transgressive or subversive possibilities.*

In recent years, writing studies has been undergoing what Pritha Prasad and Louis M. Maraj describe as a “social justice turn” that centers marginalized writers, specifically their texts, theories, and rhetorical strategies as they experience and, in some cases, redress inequity and oppression (326). Similarly, a recent collection entitled *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and beyond the Trump Era* calls for an explicitly “political” turn, where teachers and scholars use Marxist theory and draw “insight and strength from historical struggles for social and economic justice in labor, civil rights, Black Power, women’s rights, and national liberation struggles” (Carter, Mutnick, Parks, and Pauszek 2). While the Trump presidency is one nexus around which the political or social justice turn has certainly become exigent, the desire for politically engaged teaching and scholarship that draws strength from activist movements can be found throughout the larger history of writing studies, including its long engagement with critical pedagogy and the broadly recognized “social turn” (Boyd; Bizzell). Indeed, the trajectory from a “social” paradigm to “social justice” or “political” one can be seen as less of a distinct turn and more so a series of overlapping, sometimes fuzzy, and often conflated circles of conversation that have been developing since at least the 1970s Open Admissions movement. As new social and political problems became obvious, the discipline’s approach to teaching and research shifted: from a focus on access to higher education, to teaching about social justice topics, then to developing systems of engagement between academic and nonacademic spaces, to more recently reconsidering how different forms, styles, and genres of writing can intervene in political affairs (Kinney, Girshin, and Bowlin; Rhodes and Alexander).

This article is not interested in critiquing the goal of these “turns” or pedagogical initiatives. Indeed, both authors agree that students need and deserve teachers attuned to social justice, given the realities of an increasingly militant right wing, a noted rise in anti-Black and anti-Asian violence, publicly visible displays of Nazi idolatry, nationwide movements for anti-immigrant and anti-trans legislation, and education policies in places like Florida that enact explicitly racist, homophobic, and transphobic curricula. What we do want to interrogate, however, is how social justice takes rhetorical form in students’ texts. Specifically, we worry about what we see as a rather pressing conflation

in the social justice turn: the extent to which agency has become equated with explicit and visible signs of students' resistance to oppressive power structures in their writing.

In *Writing Democracy*, for instance, contributors describe how business writing classes can be involved in community outreach (Clegg) and argue that teachers should "work with labor, social justice activists, and local publics to develop and/or join existing projects for freedom and democracy" (Mutnick 91). These examples engage students in what Ingo Winkler and Irma Rybnikova call "critical-emancipatory" resistance, or resistance that imagines and works toward changes in power relations beyond just the classroom walls (528). Other types of critical-emancipatory resistance in the classroom would include: writing critically about social issues in a way that reflects progressive viewpoints, pushing back against linguistic normativity and conventional academic discourse, engaging in critique of power structures, and emulating social and political activism from the public sphere. Students who can engage with writing in this way visibly demonstrate what teachers might hope are altered epistemological frameworks that can be harnessed as part of a move toward increased civic participation and activism more broadly (Liu and Tanacito; Harrington and Wheeler).

There is, then, an economy of visibility and legibility at play in social justice writing pedagogy. Critical-emancipatory resistance exists if we can see signs of it and when we can see students applying knowledge about the world's injustices to write about or intervene in them. However, can all students answer the call for resistance equally? What about marginalized students who have good reasons to distrust the pedagogical apparatuses of the classroom, and who thus decide that the classroom is not a worthwhile space to demonstrate their political beliefs, as doing so poses safety issues? Or perhaps they have reason to distrust that anything meaningful will result from critical inquiry or expression given the institutionalized context of the classroom. When and how should teachers know if their social justice pedagogy is working?

In this article, we argue that critical-emancipatory resistance begins with an analysis of power, including the layers of power inherent to students' rhetorical context. Thus, rather than visibly and clearly answering their teacher's call for/to social injustice, students might use their critical skills to instead adopt other rhetorical strategies meant to occlude their teachers. Our contention is that some students are already engaging in this work, with or without our guidance, and that any teacher invested in social justice pedagogy needs to imagine that they might be part of the oppression a student wishes to resist.

To make this argument, we will describe examples from our research projects where we saw students enacting resistance through deployment of conventionality and normativity that could seem acquiescent, but which is instead imbued with a critical analysis of academic context, one allowing them to push back against power relations both in and beyond their immediate rhetorical situation. Florianne's ongoing research project, *Echoing + Resistant Imagining: Filipino Student Writing Under American Colonial Rule*, focuses on the colonized Philippines (1898-1946) and explores how oppressive conditions—legal, social, political, and discursive—shaped the discourse students produced in the writing classroom. The project uses postcolonial theory to analyze the power relations between colonizer and colonized as they manifest in the material conditions and, more crucially, the material risks involved in expressing resistant views as marginalized

subjects. She asks, *Under oppressive conditions, and in the colonizer's tongue, how do the colonized write?* Joshua's ongoing research considers the emphasis on anti-normativity in queer composition theory by focusing on the material complexities of LGBTQ+ students' lives. Anti-normativity, in the form of resistance to political conservatism, cisheteronormativity, and even the logics of academic writing itself, is a mainstay of Queer Composition (Banks; Waite; Alexander and Rhodes; Palmeri). Yet, he worries that this emphasis avoids engaging with the material complexities of LGBTQ students' lives, especially trans students who have solid reason to doubt their safety and students of color whose experiences of gender and sexual norms might not fit into white, cisgender narratives of the anti-normative. In both of our research projects, we see multiple examples of students resisting oppression, but not necessarily in ways their teachers would recognize. In fact, in many cases, avoiding detection by their teacher is a *goal*. The social justice turn, thus, should develop ways of reading student texts that enable us to recognize the political potentiality of student writing in new ways and better account for the factor of individual agency in assessments of criticality.

### **“Resistance” and Students in the Writing Classroom**

Although “resistance” to oppression has become understood as a student need under the social justice turn, the larger scholarly trajectory about resistant students has been less certain, especially in scholarship around critical pedagogy. At times, resistant students were understood as obstacles to a teachers' attempts to foster critical thinking. In other words, students pushed back against their teachers' social-justice pedagogies and thus became subjects in need of management/correction. Gwen Gorzelsky, for example, points to a need for teachers to foster students' “ownership of their developing ideas and texts” to avoid students' outright resistance, which is understood as disengagement with or rejection of critical pedagogy (66). The possibility of students resisting and thus rejecting critical pedagogy has also been discussed by Richard Miller, for example, who pointed out that despite his attempts at using Freirean pedagogy, many of his students “resisted the ‘politicization’ of the classroom” and that “those who didn't seemed overly eager to ventriloquize sentiments they didn't believe or understand” (11). Other scholars have discussed the danger of students resisting their teachers' identities, embodiment, and politics: Karen Kopelson's advocacy of performing neutrality in the classroom came out of a critique of critical pedagogy for its “inattention to differences among classroom rhetorical contexts and among teacher subject positions within those contexts” which made it unable to “meet the challenges posed by today's specific formations of student resistance” (117)<sup>1</sup>. These depictions suggest that students' resistance to a teacher's attempts to educate them are a resistance to the larger good a teacher can do for them.

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1. Kopelson, interestingly, returned to the idea of performing objectivity in 2020 as a means of “rehabilitating reality” in the Trump years. Unlike her 2003 article, where she worried that students expected academic neutrality and would resist anything that veered from it, she now points out that students expect academics to perform progressivism. The performance of objectivity or neutrality is still, then, a way to forestall student resistance, albeit for different reasons.

However, this is not the only valence such seemingly conforming texts may register. In her influential essay, Mary Louise Pratt has proposed a category of “literate arts of the contact zone” (37)—writing that pushes back against the dominant order through “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique” (39). In particular, Pratt’s notion of the “autoethnographic text,” where writers engage in “selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror” (35), also restores agency to students by viewing textual acquiescence or compliance with the dominant structure as a possibility for resistance. We also imagine, following Mary Reda, the possibility of “genuine, positive student resistance” as that which can be justified as a “kind of political action” to change their own possibly unbearable or unreasonable pedagogical environments (46). Reda’s act of critical imagining forces us to contend with the possibility that our own classrooms are a space where students’ resistance is potentially justified and potentially even productive. Reda’s insights are also echoed in Cheryl Glenn’s work on silence, which has long argued against the prioritization of spoken (and thus apparent or explicit) language as an indicator of resistance, pointing out that silence can be a “strategic choice” and not just an “enforced position” (13). More recently, J. Logan Smilges’s work on “queer silence,” which they define as “the surprising potentialities of silence to generate meaning from absence and the ways people on the margins of society tap into these potentialities in order to build community, navigate hostile spaces, and resist forms of institutional and state-sponsored violence,” opens up conceptual pathways for understanding silence not just as an intentional rhetorical choice that one can employ, but as a way of being, existing, and making meaning. In doing so, Smilges highlights the problematic economy of legibility undergirding rhetorical theory’s prioritization of speaking and instead calls for scholars to shift “away from what people are saying to what they aren’t, away from who is speaking to who is remaining silent, and away from speech entirely toward the way silence has been signifying all along” (9).

In the vein of Glenn, Smilges, and Reda, alongside Winkler and Rybnikova, we imagine possibilities for critical-emancipatory resistance that may not rest on an economy of legibility and visibility; instead, we embrace a view of student resistance that makes space for how students’ words may echo the very discourses that oppress them, or a view of student resistance that makes space for how students’ engagement of normative discourses may not be an act of compliance, but one of drag. Both theoretical concepts, echo and drag, coming to us from postcolonial and queer perspectives, respectively, nonetheless share the foundational understanding that texts are not transparent indicators but strategic *techné* at work within a broad framework of student literate activity and agential positioning.

### **Florianne: Echoing + Resistant Imagining**

My ongoing project examines archival documents written by students at an American-style public school in the Philippines during the early 1900s. After defeating Spain in the Spanish American War, the United States took possession of Spain’s colonies: Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines. In the Philippines, the U.S. positioned itself

as a “benevolent” and “liberating” colonizer<sup>2</sup> compared to Spain, which had ruled the Philippines for 400 years through feudalism and Catholic doctrine. As part of American benevolence via enlightenment, U.S. politicians built an American-style public school system, run entirely by U.S. administrators and teachers. The schools were explicitly designed to indoctrinate students into American language, ways of being, and cultural norms.

In the archives, I saw multiple moments where Filipino students’ writings reflected the voices and perspectives of American colonialism. For example, one student, Victor Obleñas, wrote an essay entitled “Civilization of the Philippines” that adheres to the discourses of the oppressor. The essay narrates the Philippines’ transition from Spanish colonial rule to American colonial rule, with both colonizers described in glowing terms. To describe Spanish colonization, Victor writes: “My tongue can hardly utter a word when I think of our obligation to Spanish Civilization, for they lightened our dark minds and showed us how to face the real world which God created...” (53). In this description, the student creates a subservient relationship between Filipinos and Spain: the arrival of the Spanish colonizers provided wisdom and truth to ignorant Filipinos. According to Victor, prior to Spanish colonization, the Filipinos were “a warlike people and the powerful chiefs or datus [sic] conquered the weaker ones” (53). Filipino civilization was a state of brutal disorganization, with the transition of power negotiated by force rather than rationality. Because of other progressive aspects of Spanish colonization such as agriculture and the establishment of schools, Spain was “the first that laid the foundation of our knowledge; the first who opened our minds from ignorance and inspired us with hopes of civilization” (54). When the United States enters the picture, the colonizer/colonized relationship is described in even more effusively positive terms. Victor writes, “My heart is now filled with gratitude, for the United States is constantly holding us in the path of usefulness while she teaches us anxiously with her heart full of love” (57). Victor repeats the relationship of obligation to colonial rule that he expresses towards Spain: he positions the United States as a wholly benevolent nation that “loves” the Philippines.

When I first saw moments like this during my analysis, I was so thoroughly disturbed by how closely they echoed American aims that I almost abandoned the project altogether. These expressions of support and love for two colonial powers were baffling. I felt troubled by the idea that this project’s conclusion could be in direct contradiction to my own political and ethical stances. As a Filipino scholar committed to decoloniality, I felt the need for a lens that would open rather than foreclose the range of readings available for these students’ texts.

Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry is one such lens. Mimicry, a theory of discursive production under colonial rule, accounts for the power dynamic between colonizer and colonized. Bhabha defines mimicry as: “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes

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2. Despite this messaging, the United States did commit mass atrocities in the Philippines. See Paul Kramer’s *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines*, Nerissa Balce’s *Body Parts of Empire* and Dylan Rodriguez’ *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition*.

power” (126). Colonial difference—the distinction between colonized and colonizer upon which imperial power rests—can never be fully effaced. In Bhabha’s terms, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (126). I find Bhabha’s mimicry illuminating for considering how asymmetrical contexts of power encourage writing that operates within normativity and assimilation, but at the same time is not — and cannot be — swallowed up by the normative order. While Deepika Bahri has discussed how mimicry may have theoretical utility in Writing Studies “for those studying the rhetoric of public discourse, the politics of basic writing classrooms, the production of educated or institutionalized subjectivity, or the production of discourse in any of several situations where power conjoins with the production of knowledge but remains ambiguated by its own contradictions” (72), I would also caution against too quickly using Bhabha’s ideas across all scenes of classroom writing. Bhabha’s concept refers to a particular sociohistorical configuration: the taking over of one country and its people by an empire through military, political, and ideological force, primarily for resource extraction. But postcolonial studies recognizes that the effects of colonization are long-lasting: as Victor Villanueva puts it, “There is nothing *post* about the postcolonial in America” (186). As such, Bhabha’s notion of mimicry can be taken up by writing studies to consider writing contexts where colonization is a pedagogical drive. Informed by Bhabha’s mimicry, I formulated “echoing + resistant imagining” as a writing and rhetorical studies-informed perspective on how the same notes of colonial discourse can appear in writing and discourse across time, media, and space. Unlike mimicry, “echoing + resistant imagining” allows us to *trace* lines of power and influence between and among individuals and institutions.

Being familiar with the depth of colonial damage and trauma, as well as the vibrant history of resistance on the part of Filipinos, “echoing + resistant imagining” allows me to read Victor and other students’ texts with more complexity beyond concluding that they believed in empire. Rather, this stance was only one among multiple possibilities available to students at that particular historical moment. Deeper immersion into the material and discursive conditions that surrounded the schools reminded me that this echoing was almost inevitable. These schools were operating at a time of local and global geopolitical tension: as such, Filipino native opposition to American rule was held with suspicion. Laws were eventually enacted that punished Filipino resistance in any form. In November 1901, for instance, the Philippine Commission—an administrative body comprising American bureaucrats who ran the colonies—enacted the Sedition Law, which included advocacy for Filipino independence as an act against the state (Kramer 138). These oppressive conditions surrounded the colonial schools and, I imagine, shaped what students could and couldn’t say and write in the classroom without risking material consequences. Displaying open defiance could mean facing disciplinary action at school, marginalization, or, at very worst, legal repercussions.

Global and national geopolitical contextualization matter because a recognition of the conditions under which students write—what they have to gain and lose from writing—allows us to see, as scholars and teachers, negotiating power as an inherent facet of students’ writing lives. In other writing that argues for “echoing + resistant imagining,” I demonstrated that in colonial situations, there can be a rhetorical function in replicating or mirroring discourses that seem oppressive: “even while it may sound like

colonized writers are replicating discourses that support colonial domination, or championing frameworks that position the colonized as savage, backward, or antiquated, [a reading framework of] echoing + resistant imagining calls attention to what else the colonized may be saying beyond questions of acquiescence or subversion” (44-45). For example, when we read an instance of student writing as synecdoche of a student’s actual ideological position, we as teachers can miss less obvious strategies of resistance the text is performing. Capitulation to oppressive discourse is certainly a possibility, but I argue that reading for what the *function* of writing could be, rather than reading for what such writing is saying about student political identity, yields a more generous and open stance towards such writing. To return to the case of Victor’s essay, for example: we can concede that his view of the colonization of the Philippines by Spain and the US is in overwhelmingly positive terms. However, closer examination of the frame with which he describes US colonialism demonstrates an epistemology of the colonial project as a process suffused with feeling and affect. To be colonized is to be made to feel a certain way, to colonize a country is to be motivated by certain other feelings. This epistemology pushes up against the framing of US colonization as reasoned, logical, and intellectually progressive—and a subtle interruption to other American notions and discourses surrounding the US’s relationship to the Philippines at the time.

The theory of echoing + resistant imagining thus asks more of us as we read: we must reckon with how capitulation can be a rhetorically savvy and materially rewarding choice for students. Moreover, to include capitulation to and support for coloniality as an agentic move on students’ part recognizes the totalizing nature of coloniality: there is no world where students were or are not aware of the political tensions surrounding coloniality at school, as well as the real stakes involved in success or failure of navigating these tensions.

### **Joshua: Academic Drag and LGBTQ+ Resistance**

My research focuses on the experience of students writing specifically about their identities in classroom settings. Committed to queer pedagogy and social justice teaching, I have been inspired by moments when students in their writing connect their own experiences of gender and sexuality to analysis of broader structures of power that frame those experiences. My hope was to come up with a set of frameworks through which socially-just teachers could encourage students to explore through writing their experiences and identities, and I wanted to follow students’ lead on this development. I interviewed 18 self-identified LGBTQ+ students, then did case studies of select students who supplied me with writing samples from their classes. I chose for case studies those students who claimed in the interview that they wanted to or saw the importance of using academic writing to explore their identities.

However, very little of the work students submitted to me seemed to do so. Only a handful of samples, across hundreds of documents, included explicit references to students’ personal experiences at all, let alone their experiences of gender and sexuality. Rather, I saw essay after essay where students used dispassionate, seemingly disinterested and neutral voices.

Some students' samples even used voices or perspectives in opposition to the writer's own identity or political perspective, such as Jude, a trans student who wrote fawningly about Antonin Scalia's legal philosophy in their legal studies class, despite being a left-wing activist off-campus, a rhetorical gesture they attribute to simply being bored with the course curriculum.<sup>3</sup> In an interview, I asked how they felt about opportunities teachers provided to explore personal identity in writing, as opposed to more straightforward, impersonal arguments that are often associated with academic writing; Jude responded by describing their sense of both the promise and putative pointlessness of doing so:

I came to school and I guess I realized that there were at least some professors who were very supportive and even encouraging of my subverting of the rules. And that was very freeing in a lot of ways. And then once I could really wrap my head around that and start putting it in practice, I realize the limits of doing that. First, it's like, yeah, I can subvert the rules of writing; it's so great. So much freedom. But then I guess once I kind of got over that initial excitement, I was like, but academia still sucks...and people are still dying. It's not enough. Nothing I can do in this school can be enough.

Not all of my participants shared in Jude's nihilistic perspective, but a number of others questioned what the role of academic writing—or any writing done on a college campus—means for larger political goals. One of these participants, Garrett, is someone who committed large chunks of his undergraduate years to activism and queer performance, notably subversive drag performances as part of an artistic collective he founded. Yet, in his numerous courses on gender and sexuality, he occasionally lapsed into normative frameworks of analysis, such as an essay for his queer performance class on the concept of “mopping” in ballroom and drag queen culture. Mopping, a practice of stealing garments and dresses—often from department stores or designers—to wear to balls and pageants was a way for economically disadvantaged performers to keep up the illusion of wealth and glamor so idolized in ballroom and drag culture. Garrett's initial essay, which disapproved of the practice for its illegality (he described it as “essentially shoplifting”) struck me, for the legalistic framework that declares such a practice deviant seemed at odds with other, more critical lenses he might have taken. In our interview several years after he wrote it, I asked him to reflect on how he defined mopping in legalistic terms, and he indicated that his earlier writing came from not having the intellectual resources to analyze the cultural practice from a more systemic perspective. He said:

Now when I say, “Well, it is ‘essentially shoplifting,’” I don't think so. I would now say, “Shoplifting is framed as such by a certain society.” Right? I don't think that I would necessarily say this is ‘essentially shoplifting’ because I think the stakes are higher. When you think about how wealth and capital works, I don't think I had that knowledge then.

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3. In fact, Jude initially described their writing as an attempt to be contrarian, but in a later interview changed their description of this assignment as a result of trying to keep themselves interested while being “checked out” and “just doing the work to do the work.” I describe Jude in greater depth in my article “A Queer Rhetorics Framework for Discourse-Based Interviews,” *Composition Forum*, vol. 49, 2022.

After this reflection, he got even more candid and said, "Honestly, I do remember writing this and I was close to the deadline and trying to fill space." It's this latter comment that I find especially fascinating: while it's true that he had likely grown more nuanced in his views between writing the essay and our interview years later, able to analyze mopping as a subversive survival mechanism by economically disadvantaged and marginalized people against wealthy stores and designers, he draws our attention to how in the first place he was writing to complete an assignment for a teacher and needed to fill space with words; whether he agreed with them or not was beside the point.

In that vein, what he said in the first place shouldn't really be understood as indicative of how he thought even at the time. This suggests a type of academic drag, a concept initially coined by Charles E. Morris III (34) but later expanded on by Alyssa A. Samek and Theresa A. Donofrio to describe a containment of "the radical politics associated with queer rhetorical projects" under the guise of professionalism (32-33). In Garrett's case, academic drag is a performance of discursive normativity that gives the illusion of academic coherence and, almost like an intellectual costume, might be different from and perhaps even contrary to how he thinks.

Using the concept of academic drag to understand Garrett and Jude's writing allows us to see spaces in their academic career when students use normative or even conservative language for potentially resistant purposes. For Jude, academic drag highlights the inefficiency of academic writing for effecting real-world change. Whether Jude is right about this is, ultimately, another conversation, and we might entertain the possibility that Jude lapses into a compliance with their own marginalization by producing writing that supports conservative legal philosophy. Instead of compliance, however, Garrett uses his forms of academic drag to save his energy for other types of discourse for which he sees opportunity for political resistance: his artistic performances. By the time he started participating in my study, he had built a reputation for himself on campus as a queer artist and activist, staging in the Fine Arts Building a subversive and explicitly political drag show that commented on environmentalism, toxic masculinity, and gender fluidity. In one memorable sequence, bloody dildos representing Brett Kavanaugh and R. Kelly's severed penises were carried on a silver platter; in another sequence, a dancer was stabbed to death with a spoke from a Shell Oil logo.

To get the funding for this project, Garret wrote a narrowly conceived, highly formulaic grant application to the university's Honors College, situating the performance as a research project on audience behavior. He downplayed how provocative the performance would be (not saying that he planned to use grant money to purchase dildos, for example) but instead described the philosophical and theoretical importance of drag to contemporary theater practitioners, using concepts from Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Stephen Farrier, and others. He promised to poll his audience on their experiences as "data" he could then analyze:

...one of my research questions explores what experiences and emotions arise for creators and audience members of ensemble-based narrative drag and queer performances. In order to gauge the responses from the creative team and the audiences, I plan to have discussions after the conclusion of the performance runs with these two groups. With the creative team, I will have one-on-one meetings to discuss their respective intended goals with the project and subse-

quent experiences; I will structure a set of conversational points to collect this anecdotal data. With audiences, I plan to send an online survey to their emails, as gathered through their registration for the event, to gauge their responses to the production.

Polling an audience seems like a logical conclusion to a project, but based on what Garrett said in his interview, I am inclined to read it as an example of academic drag where he wrote himself into a discourse to get something in return: money. To get that money, he needed to make his project “seem academic.” In the interview, he said:

Even in theater-based practice, when you’re dealing with academic things, we have to somehow make it seem academic when it isn’t always. I mean, it’s the basic motions. I’m not going to do this, but I remember talking about the methodology and I’m like ‘I’m going to do audience responses,’ but that doesn’t do shit to be quite honest. I might ask a couple. I might do that, but I think a survey’s useless...I think I had to tweak my voice in order to accommodate getting money...if I want to get funding for my work, then this is what I have to do.

Later, as we were discussing the topic of agency, Garrett returned to the grant proposal, saying that even though it wasn’t his voice, “I still feel like there was agency in that writing.” The agency might be in how academic drag can be a resource for resistance insofar as it depends on metaknowledge of academic normativity and demonstrates a rhetorical savvy that highlights an intimate awareness of context with an ability to manipulate discourses at one’s disposal. For Garrett, normative academic discourses were an obstacle to overcome to allow his more subversive artistic work to thrive, and it was through his donning of them—his attempts to “seem academic” despite feeling he was just going through the “basic motions”—that he was able to do work that was politically resistant in more visible and obvious ways.

## Students as Analysts of their Own Rhetorical Context

In the examples we’ve discussed, we see students exercising an agency that constitutes resistance, although such resistance may not announce itself in clear and obvious ways. In a postcolonial context, students can and do echo back the language of their oppressors *in their writing* – but as historical researchers, this does not mean we can conclude that students *as political beings* supported the colonial project. Examining student writing with a wider lens – one that takes into account the pressures on students to assimilate into normativity, as well as *other* discourses that structured the teaching of writing in English, allows us to see other radical potentials in student writing while still speaking truth to power in quieter, smaller ways. The more recent examples show students engaging with normative discourses as a strategic choice to enable other types of political, artistic, or social resistance to flourish. To understand these examples as types of resistance—and thus to reclaim their rhetorical possibility under the framework of social justice—requires ways of reading that center student’s contextual needs and embraces students as agential analysts of their own rhetorical contexts

In Florianne's case, this means a triangulated approach to how she read student work: the close qualitative and rhetorical analysis of student writing needed to be placed into historical context through archival research. This triangulated approach was conscious of differences in power and agency between teachers and students, the colonizer and the colonized, and how these differences played out in the archives themselves. The absence of student voices and representations in the archives demonstrates the multiple levels of marginalization of her research subjects. To remedy this, Florianne deployed an archival method intended to reveal, on a macro scale (speeches, state reports, articles in national newspapers, political cartoons) and on a meso scale (administrative records, educational manuals, textbooks), the machinations of American colonial education. In her qualitative method, on the other hand, she analyzed Filipino student writing at an intensely micro level and examined dimensions of the texts such as teacher feedback and student revision, nationhood, and class and racial inequality. The process of reading widely in the archives, and then closely in the student writing, helped her understand student writing as shaped by and also shaping the discourses that happen outside of it. But to do this, she had to first immerse herself in the material conditions that Filipino students at the time were facing, and also be guided by the needs *they* articulated about writing, such as English language acquisition and socioeconomic mobility, and about colonial education. Methodologically, this requires centering student need by paying attention to the frames of knowing and understanding we apply to student writing as qualitative data.

In Joshua's case, in order to understand students' active analysis of their own rhetorical contexts, he needed to set aside his own desire to see students embrace anti-normative gestures and instead see rhetorical normativity as a strategic choice dependent on classroom context and larger student goals. One research participant, James, a senior Spanish and linguistics major, described how his feelings about what he wanted to write or talk about related to his sense of the classroom dynamic:

I think unless you're writing in a setting where it's predominately or mostly queer people there's going to be a little bit of a moment of "Eww, I have to talk about this to straight people." In certain classes when we talk about queer issues the discussion is more like "Look, there, these people exist." And this sort of "they" conversation, almost as if there would never be any queer people in the room. Like, there are queer people in the room. I wouldn't say that I'm like horribly uncomfortable...it's just more the fact that if I'm going to talk about something queer, I'm going to have to say "we" where no one else is saying "we."

This act of risk assessment impacts how writers engage with the writing process—for example, whether writing would be peer reviewed by potentially hostile classmates was a particularly dominating factor in whether my research participants would choose to write about gender and/or sexuality, even when given the opportunity to do so by the teacher. As Blair, a trans student, put it, "Unless I trust my classmates to have Trans 101 knowledge, I will not write about gender." For Blair, protecting oneself from the potential harm from ignorant classmates—microaggressions in the classroom, or perhaps even macroaggressions that could affect them outside of it—was a more valuable strategic choice than educating them. On the other hand, someone like Garrett does want

to resist gender and sexual norms and wants college to be a space for him to do this work. However, according to what he conveyed in his interview, he calculated that his college-level writing wasn't the place where that could effectively happen. Instead, he had to entangle with an audience that expected him to discuss his work in normatively academic ways, thus leading him to position his artistic project as a research process, downplaying the subversive, provocative nature of the piece.

What these examples from both Florianne and Joshua's research—from different time periods, different rhetorical contexts—show is a way of considering the normative (in the form of echoing, or in the form of academic drag) as one way marginalized students can deploy silence and normativity as rhetorical forms of resistance that, although perhaps not "critical-emancipatory," can nevertheless be imbued with a politics aimed toward justice and, at the very least, personal survival strategies. We see in these examples the calculated efforts of students who examine their rhetorical context and decide it's not safe or worth it to participate in academic discourses that might put them at harm or detract from their larger goals. In so doing, we encourage ways of reading students' texts that understand students might resist their teachers' good intentions through non-performance and deploy normative rhetorics for potentially subversive ends, conduits that students must engage with as they negotiate their own subjectivities, material circumstances, goals, and needs.

## Conclusion

Both of us are compelled by many aspects of the social justice turn in the field. Our work, both as researchers and teachers, engages with marginalized student populations. We see our own narratives and experiences reflected in our students, and we also have individual political and personal investment in this turn. We think the social justice turn in the field is deeply necessary: Students need and deserve a better world, and we want to do our part, through our academic labor, to help create that world. However, we are also suspicious of the ways this academic labor has taken form. We want, both ourselves and the larger discipline, to proceed thoughtfully: How can we enact social justice for a better world, but not pre-determine what the better world is for our students? Can we step back and allow them to direct us there?

Our respective projects position students as acutely aware of these contexts, specifically the constraints, stakes, and implications of resistance and capitulation. This pushes against the fear-baiting discourse of *politicization* that is especially popular in conservative circles. The right wing sees college campuses as political battlegrounds, and college students as minds that must be cleared of "critical race theory." In this view, students become political *objects*. We instead choose to see students as political *actors* who are always-already political, even before we have encountered them in our classrooms. This is especially true for students whose identities, backgrounds, and personal contexts marginalize them.

However, we see the tendency of treating students as political objects in Writing Studies too, despite its seeming progressivism. Positioning teachers as the vanguard of the social justice turn denies the possibility that students could—in many ways do already—lead the way. That is to say, teacher-scholars might not be the people best

equipped to teach resistance. In fact, our position in the student-teacher relationship needs to be interrogated, especially as we consider our research methods and pedagogy. As Kristofer Lotier bluntly pointed out in appraisal of critical pedagogy, “if instructors actually knew how to fix or overcome the complex problems of neoliberalism, no one would need to educate students to resist it; we would already be living in another world” (162-63).

The call to check ourselves and recenter students has emerged in some areas of the discipline. We are inspired by Sherri Craig’s strident critique of contract grading practices: “Contract grading might make my colleagues feel good and ease the guilty burden of using practices with deep white supremacist origins in other areas of their courses, but it felt like a trap to me.” In other words, when contract grading practices ask BIPOC students, who have been socialized for at least 12 years of traditional writing assessment to shift their views of the writing process, grading, and value, we re-center the teacher’s view of how writing should be taught and valued to play savior. Similarly, we are drawn to Timothy Oleksiak’s push against the unquestioned “improvement imperative” of peer review in the classroom. The grounding assumption behind this pedagogical commonplace is that students’ texts aren’t good enough as they are. This perspective, when deployed by teachers in a top-down fashion, is “shaped by an instructor’s values regarding what counts as good writing” (309). In reframing how teacher-scholars notice and value resistance in our students, we build on these and other similar calls that ask for teacher-scholars to recognize and reimagine the power that they hold over students and student writing: no matter how much we believe in collaboration, dialogue, and equity with them, our students have been socialized in the normative, and potentially see us as part of normative structures. Arguably, they are correct in doing so since we do indeed work largely within the bounds of institutional contexts.

Writing Studies will continue to grow and change as the political realities shift. As part of that growth, we should consider what it means for students to engage in the work of social justice and our assumptions about what that looks like. As we strive to meet our ethical obligations to educate for social change, we may need to temper our pedagogy in light of emerging conceptions of what constitutes the counterhegemonic subject. While silence or conformity may indeed sometimes signal acceptance of a status quo, a writing economy of visibility and legibility, with “success” at social justice pedagogy being pre-prescribed, can be problematic and not attuned to the particularities of where students are writing from, in which contexts, and the role of academic discourse in those contexts. And in engaging with particularity, we should recognize the significance of understanding need from the student upward, not the instructor down. Perhaps that is the new work of social justice composition after all: to better listen to, and to find new ways to know, what students, in their various and specific contexts, are already telling us.

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