Karen Rowan

Review Essay

Transforming Literacy and Rhetorical Education from the Bottom Up

Writing against Racial Injury: The Politics of Asian American Student Rhetoric
Haivan V. Hoang

Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the U.S.-Mexican Border
Susan V. Meyers

Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College
Todd Ruecker

“Our students lack the kind of cultural capital that would help them succeed in college.” “Though our students are motivated to succeed, many of them lack models for college success.” “Sixty percent of students are not proficient in college math and/or writing when they are admitted to the university.” In recent months, I’ve heard or read all of these statements in campus meetings about our university’s graduation initiative, our campus’s
quarter-to-semester conversion process, and a summer bridge program for students who are admitted to the university but deemed not college ready by virtue of standardized tests. Such statements are routine, and not just at my campus. While I believe that these descriptions of our students are motivated by a well-intentioned desire to understand who our students are so that we can develop programs and policies that will best support their success, I am nevertheless struck by the deficit thinking that shapes and is conveyed by these descriptions. To be sure, the deficit discourse that foregrounds what our students lack are sometimes softened by nods to what Tara Yosso calls our students’ community cultural wealth—their educational aspirations, linguistic resources, or resistant capital that sustains them as they navigate institutions that were not designed for them (see Ruecker 159). But, all too often, deficit thinking is the unchallenged norm, and policies and programs are driven by the perceived need to remediate students’ deficiencies, not by a commitment to drawing on and extending students’ strengths.

In calling attention to such deficit discourse, I do not imagine that I am highlighting a pattern that my colleagues are unaware of; rather, I am calling attention to the stubborn persistence of deficit discourse in everyday practice on our campus in order to frame my reading of the three books reviewed here. Collectively, each of these researchers calls on us to better understand the lives and literacies of the students highlighted in these studies and sets examples for how to do so through historical and ethnographic research. These researchers also draw on the specific experiences of individuals and local communities to develop critical analyses of the institutions that shape students’ experiences and our work with them. Importantly, Haivan V. Hoang, Susan V. Meyers, and Todd Ruecker, each in their own way, argue that our institutions—not our students—are fundamentally lacking, in part because student voices and experiences have been so long suppressed, disregarded, and dismissed. Each of these monographs, then, explores the promise and peril of language and literacy education for our students and challenges the deficit models that shape attitudes about minority students. At the same time, these projects offer distinctly different contributions to the fields of composition and literacy studies in terms of

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their approaches to ethnographic research, their student participants and contexts, the depth and impact of their critical analyses, and the degrees to which they call on us to challenge the status quo.

Haivan V. Hoang’s *Writing against Racial Injury: The Politics of Asian American Student Rhetoric* centers on activists who have challenged the institutional and pervasive racism that has too often distorted the language and literacy education of Asian Americans. Hoang offers a series of historical and ethnographic studies of educational activism for and by Asian American students, studies that are woven together by Hoang’s incisive analysis of “the ways past racial injury has shaped common notions about who has the authority to speak and write as an American” (5). Thus, throughout her book, Hoang’s historical and ethnographic studies do double duty, working at one level to recover and honor Asian American activists’ rhetorical strategies and at another level to forward her analysis of the functions of racial injury, cultural memory, and performativity in Asian American rhetoric.

Hoang frames her project with an overview of the intertwined history of race, citizenship, and language and literacy education, an intertwining that evolved so as to exclude minorities from a conception of American citizenship. Though this history is familiar to many readers, Hoang deftly crafts her version to call attention to the racial injuries experienced by Asian Americans in education, beginning with the influx of Asian immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing through the civil rights era and beyond. In the process, she draws on Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s concept of “racial projects” as a critical lens for analyzing anti-Asian discrimination in legislative and legal contexts (e.g., court cases that denied naturalized citizenship to Asian immigrants on the basis of race [11–12]) and in educational contexts (e.g., standardized tests that were used to “objectively” confirm beliefs that Asian Americans were less intelligent than white Americans [14]). Turning to the civil rights era, Hoang introduces student activism for self-determination, previewing a theme that serves as a major focus in the second half of the book. Here, Hoang stresses the
importance of learning about and from student activists’ extracurricular writing and rhetoric, arguing that what we learn about how racial histories shape students’ speaking and writing positions can inform our writing and rhetorical theories and practices within and beyond formal curricula (17). Hoang’s historical introduction, though brief, underscores her observation that histories of literacy studies have largely overlooked the experiences of Asian Americans. “The silence about Asian Americans,” she writes, “might be explained by the unfailing construction of Asian immigrants and their American-born children as always foreign, always foil to an ideal American ethos. The question is not whether Asian Americans can write as good Americans so much as whether they can write as Americans at all” (9).

The rest of Hoang’s project seeks not only to begin to fill this gap in literacy studies but also to uncover and critique the ideologies that permitted the gap to form and persist.

To that end, the first half of Writing against Racial Injury focuses on Asian American language and literacy activism in the 1970s, starting with a critical history of the Lau v. Nichols case, in which Chinese American parents fought for “self-determination over their children’s language education” (20). Hoang outlines the historical, legal, and cultural context for the case, shaped by Brown v. Board of Education’s legacy and an emerging Asian American movement for Yellow Power, grounded in a race-conscious identity. Hoang explicates how conflicting understandings of Asian Americans as a racial versus ethnic group complicated and constrained activists’ arguments for equitable language instruction that held educational institutions accountable rather than allowing school administrators and courts to construct language minority students as deficient. Hoang then turns to a study of the activist rhetoric of a radical student magazine, Gidra: A Monthly for Asians in America, published during the years that the Lau case was making its way through the courts. To set the scene for her analysis of Gidra, Hoang highlights the erasure of student activists in composition scholarship, a “stubborn slippage . . . by which radical minority student activists are alluded to in the ‘protests of that decade’ but then quickly fade into the backdrop” (62). Significantly,
Hoang’s history recenters student activists to challenge the entrenched narratives of minority students as struggling writers, pedagogical unknowns, forever lost in the gap between home and academic discourses. Instead, she honors these students as activists who demanded to be seen and heard, who insisted that institutions need to reconcile the gaps between universities and the communities they serve, and who, in the process, sponsored their own rhetorical education (63).

Following critical legal scholar Mari Matsuda, Hoang consciously focuses her work on “the actual experience, history, culture, and intellectual tradition of people of color in America” (Matsuda qtd. in Hoang 47), an approach that shapes her analysis in these two chapters. In both cases, Hoang’s goal is not simply to recover important moments in Asian American activist history (though it is that, in part) but also to consider the legacies these activists left for the racial minority students who followed them. Those legacies are mixed, to be sure. On one hand, her studies of Lau and Gidra highlight the ways Asian American activists were “looking to the bottom” to develop and forward their own race-conscious approaches to challenging racial injury, setting a model for future activists. On the other hand, she also interrogates the ways that political and cultural shifts toward a color-blind ideology decreased tolerance for racial remedies, and how strategic appeasements of activists’ demands undermined the successes of Lau, blunted Gidra’s radical call for change, and limited the extent to which future activists could replicate their predecessors’ strategies.

Indeed, the impact of those political and cultural shifts are evident in the next three chapters of Writing against Racial Injury, which center on Hoang’s 2002 ethnographic study of the activism and rhetoric enacted by members of the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC) at a southern California university. Hoang begins with a history of VAC and its efforts to uphold its founding commitment to both “celebrate ethnic heritage” and “adopt an activist stance” (81) and then describes VAC’s attempts to create alliances with other cross-cultural student groups to challenge the student government’s decision to defund one of VAC’s community outreach programs and, more broadly, the board’s inequitable decision-making process (101). Hoang’s account skillfully highlights the nuanced, self-sponsored rhetorical education in which VAC activists engaged, and in the process, her analysis interrogates the way the rhetoric of racial injury, rooted in “the logic of individualism” (107), both enabled and limited VAC’s activism in
this case. In the next chapter, Hoang explicates how VAC members drew on cultural memory to challenge John McCain’s use of the epithet “gooks” during his presidential campaign. She explores not only the centrality of cultural memory to Asian American rhetoric, but also how the principal organizer adroitly crafted an argument that was geared to engage McCain’s Vietnamese supporters more so than McCain himself. Finally, the section’s last chapter explores the always-shifting relationship between performativity and race in three sites: a Vietnamese American history curriculum developed for local schools, a play written and performed for a campus cultural festival, and student-produced performance and textual art. In each of these contexts, Hoang finds that “race consciousness is not rigid and something already acquired but must be repeatedly performed” (132).

Having traced activists’ efforts to challenge racial injury from the earliest waves of Asian immigration to contemporary performance art, Hoang concludes her project with a brief afterword. Rather than offer recommendations for the field, she frames her project as “memory work” (159), invoking again her argument that cultural memory is at the heart of Asian American rhetoric. “Writing against racial injury,” she argues, “has entailed copiously remembering of racial legacies and performing/re-performing new ways of understanding their roles as speakers and writers, new perspectives on language, literacy, and rhetoric” (162). Hoang calls on the field to follow the lead of the activists and students in her study to learn how “to not only write against racial injury but also to write against the discourses of racial injury” (163) by challenging ourselves as researchers and teachers to investigate the persistent linkages between racial formation and language, literacy, and rhetorical education and to hold ourselves and our institutions accountable for those racial legacies. In this way, Hoang charges us with the responsibility of “looking to the bottom” in our own contexts to apply and extend the implications of her project.

Though not focused on American higher education, Susan V. Meyers’s Del Otro Lado: Literacy and Migration across the U.S.-Mexico Border nevertheless offers an insightful critical explication of how individuals and communities engage with literacy as they work in, with, and against institutions. Like Writing against Racial Injury, Del Otro Lado works on multiple levels, illuminating the educational and literacy experiences of participants in her year-long ethnographic study of literacy and education in a rural
Mexican village, while using emerging insights to interrogate and advance our theoretical constructs of literacy as a transnational practice. Meyers’s central question—“how do local communities determine how to position themselves with respect to powerful institutions?”—leads her to attend not only to the local experiences of her participants, and not only to the dominant global institutions and ideologies that shape their experiences, but also to the ways that community members “react to, incorporate, resist, and/or adapt to the dominant forces of literacy” (11).

To that end, Del Otro Lado’s first three chapters trace the histories, respectively, of the functions of literacy in the United States and Mexico; of Villachuato, the Michoacána village where Meyers conducted her study; and of the Mexican educational system. Each chapter traverses roughly the same chronological periods, developing a recursively layered, increasingly nuanced understanding of the historical, institutional, and ideological forces shaping literacy and education in Villachuato. For example, Meyers recounts Villachuato’s founding as a foreign-owned hacienda, its post-Revolution transition to an *ejido*, and its more recent transformations prompted by NAFTA and transnationalism. This history informs Meyers’s portrait of contemporary life in Villachuato, where residents welcome improvements even as they try to maintain their long-standing traditions and where they rely on and are failed by external influences and institutions, including the Mexican educational system. Woven through this history is Meyers’s analysis of “literacy as a cultural construct” (21) and the “literacy contract,” a key concept that extends earlier scholarship on the literacy myth (Graff) and the function of literacy sponsors (Brandt). Meyers argues that “literacy has come to function as a contract”: dominant institutions such as governments and schools agree to provide access to literacy and public education, and students and families, in exchange, are expected to adhere to the values and practices of those institutions (35). To be sure, these contractual obligations are often not met, as Meyers insightfully illustrates her analysis of how the Mexican educational system has consistently promised much and provided
little to rural communities. While formal education has long been held out as a pathway to professional success, the lack of secondary schools in rural communities has meant that students, if they commit to their part of the literacy contract, must “relinquish the values that hold the community together and make the local economy . . . work” (83). As Meyers notes, many parents and students resist “the full ideology of schools” (83), a resistance that underscores the false promise of the literacy contract for rural Mexican communities.

While the first half of Del Otro Lado emphasizes historical narratives and the second half emphasizes the experiences of Meyers’s study participants, these two elements of her project are never entirely distinct. For example, Meyers’s history of Villachuato draws not only on official accounts and archival records but also on the stories and memories of its current residents, a move that allows Meyers to subtly but expertly illustrate the tensions between official and unofficial accounts, between institutions and communities, and between global and local forces. Further, both the historical and ethnographic elements of Meyers’s project are informed by her use of reflexive critical ethnography, which required her, as researcher, “to repeatedly consider [her] own assumptions and actions” (14). Thus, Meyers often shares details about her own experiences living and working in Villachuato, accounts that depict how Meyers was and was not able to participate in community life and thus explain some of her methodological choices. For example, an anecdote about the gendered fear Meyers experienced in her early days in Villachuato illustrates how gendered oppression continues to shape the lives of Villachuato’s residents (42–45). Later, Meyers notes that the sharp gender divisions in Villachuato’s social spheres meant that she was readily welcomed by women and taken into their social circles but had very little contact with men and their social spheres (89–90). This observation does more than just describe the gendered social lives of Villachuato residents; it also helps explain why Meyers’s study centers on women’s experiences at the intersections of gender, power, and literacy and makes transparent how Meyers’s experiences and relationships within the community shaped her study and analysis.
Rather than compromising her study, Meyers’s focus on women’s experiences allows her to develop a nuanced analysis of how women both use and resist literacy and education in Villachuato. To that end, Meyers devotes a chapter to a series of narrative case studies of how women drew on literacy and their social connections to “avoid violence, forced marriage, domestic isolation, and depression” (92) across several generations. In the process, she illuminates why and how these women use literacy to their own ends, even as they continue to “value their social connections more highly than school resources” (17). The next two chapters concentrate on community members’ experiences with educational institutions, both in Mexico and the United States. The first builds on and extends the earlier history of education in Mexico, looking more specifically at how the tensions between the values of teachers and educational institutions and the realities of local communities play out in Villachuato. For example, while teachers typically view migration as a barrier to education, many Villachuato families experience it as a precondition for their children’s education. The final chapter, which draws on Meyers’s research in the small Iowa town to which many Villachuato families have migrated, sheds light on the educational experiences of Villachuato’s children in the United States and on the gaps between families and US teachers. Meyers finds that US teachers’ expectations for Villachuato students are often shaped by a deficit mindset about students’ abilities and commitment to education and an equally strong faith in what they take to be the inherent good of literacy and education. Families, for their part, view the literacy contract more warily: while they recognize the quality of US schools, they are nevertheless reluctant to relinquish control over their children’s familial and cultural affiliations (144). Many students, in turn, find themselves navigating the push/pull dynamics between home and school and, too often, “internalize self-hatred, both for assimilating and for failing to assimilate” (149).

Meyers’s conclusion, like Hoang’s, offers a synthesis of the key findings emerging from her study. She challenges the deficit mindset that shapes many educators’ views of Mexican students, arguing that they and their families do not value education and literacy less, but rather differently (151). Building on that point, Meyers finds that participants in her study

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often reconfigure the literacy contract; for example, whereas teachers promote literacy and education as a means for financial success, Meyers's participants often view education as "the result of a family’s financial success, not its source" (153). In articulating these and other findings, Meyers calls on readers to reframe our understanding of education, literacy, and the literacy contract by extending the scope of our inquiry to include the transnational experiences of Mexican students and families. Ultimately, Meyers contends “that we cannot make good policy …without understanding more about key demographics of people for whom these policies are created” (160). Though it is not within the scope of Meyers’s project to advocate for specific policies, Del Otro Lado challenges and inspires us to do this work by deepening our conceptual and theoretical understanding of the dynamic nature of literacy and literacy education in our increasing transnational world.

While Meyers’s Del Otro Lado project offers a glimpse at the educational futures of Mexican immigrant children in the United States., Todd Ruecker’s Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College provides a sustained exploration of Latino/a students as they move from high school to college in the transborder context of El Paso, Texas, and Cuidad Juárez, Mexico. Like Hoang’s book, Ruecker’s study “looks to the bottom,” prompted by his recognition that we need to know more about our students and to know them differently. Indeed, Transiciones is prompted in part by the recognition that college writing instructors often know little about our students’ high school writing experiences and thus are poorly prepared to help them make the transition to college. Ruecker’s study aims to close the gaps in our understandings of students’ experiences in and between educational institutions and calls on us to change the institutional practices that alienate and undermine the very students they are meant to support and serve. In this way, Ruecker’s project challenges the deficit mindset that pervades educational discourse, a discourse that allows educators at all levels to abdicate responsibility for students’ experiences and cultivates in language-minority (LM) students “a sense of frustration.
and a sense of inferiority” (159). Those students, in turn, “are often pushed away from institutions that are designed for the majority when they serve the minority” (159).

To accomplish these goals, *Transiciones* centers on a series of longitudinal ethnographic case studies that follow seven high school students from their last semester of high school English through their first year of college. These students’ transitions are multifaceted: not only are students writing in new ways, but as LM students coming from a low-income, predominantly Latina/o high school, they find that they are no longer considered star students but, instead, are seen as “slackers” by college professors (2). Further complicating those shifts in academic practices and identities are the cultural, financial, linguistic, and personal transitions that are shaped by the transborder relationship between El Paso and Cuidad Juárez.

Grounding Ruecker’s analysis of these transitions is Tara Yosso’s theory of community wealth. Yosso’s theory draws on Critical Race Theory to reinterpret Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, capital, and field, a reinterpretation that highlights the multiple sources capital—aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant—that minority communities cultivate and draw on (19–20). In this way, Yosso challenges the narrow focus on cultural capital, in which students are often perceived as lacking in deficit models, and articulates a vision of multifaceted community cultural wealth, a framework that foregrounds students’ assets. Ruecker, in turn, uses Yosso’s model to inform his case study analyses, adapting it to allow him to account for the real challenges that students face, but in ways that foreground their strengths and assets and resist the too-common assumption that LM students lack “the habitus and capital necessary to succeed in schools” (19). Yosso’s model, and Ruecker’s use of it, demonstrate how we might move beyond decrying the deficit mindset to more fully recognize, value, and extend the assets students bring with them.

Before turning to the case studies at the heart of *Transiciones*, Ruecker sets the scene, describing students’ motivations for attending college and their dramatically different experiences with writing instruction at the three institutions in his study. Those experiences were fundamentally shaped by the culture of testing and teacher surveillance at the high school level (31), by an outdated curriculum taught by overworked and underpaid faculty at the community college level (35), and by a better-resourced and more current curriculum at the university level (39). The next four chapters
are devoted to Ruecker’s case studies, each of which describes students’ personal and educational backgrounds, experiences with high school and college-level writing, and experiences making the transition from high school to college. The case studies also include graphics depicting students’ sources of capital, informed by Yosso’s framework, and challenges (e.g., familial, financial, or academic).

Ruecker then returns to his theoretical framework to analyze the patterns that emerged across his participants’ experiences, within and beyond their writing classrooms. While all students were similarly disadvantaged by their high school writing experiences, Ruecker’s analysis highlights how their different assets and habitus shaped their transitions to and experiences in college. Notably, the students with the smoothest transitions began cultivating a college-ready habitus during high school, while others who struggled initially were able to rebound by finding sponsors after arriving at college. Those who lacked both a college-oriented habitus and a strong network of support did not successfully navigate the transition to college (143–44). Ruecker also points to the “unpredictable” case of a student who cultivated a college-oriented habitus but nevertheless left college after her first year to underscore the limits of the explanatory power of any one theory.

Throughout Transiciones, Ruecker challenges deficit discourses by highlighting the student successes that traditional perspectives would overlook and by arguing that we need to examine how our institutions and practices fail to support students instead of blaming students for not seamlessly transitioning between radically different institutional and pedagogical contexts (145). As we work to reimagine the ways that we conceive of transitions, Ruecker argues, we must attend to institutional failures at local, state, and national levels (148). Accordingly, Ruecker’s final chapter makes recommendations for transforming writing programs within and across institutions and communities, including calling on us to better learn who our students are, reimagine first-year writing curricula, and hire and train faculty who can better support LM students. At first glance, these recommendations seem both familiar and broad. Some readers might be tempted to downplay or dismiss the recommendations: of course we should know our students; of course we should adapt our curricula; of course we should hire well-prepared faculty. We know this.

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course we should adapt our curricula; of course we should hire well-prepared faculty. We know this. On further reflection, the fact that Ruecker’s findings lead him to issue these calls yet again should give us pause; we have not realized these goals, and we have much work to do to account for how educational institutions have failed to uphold their end of the literacy contract, to draw on Meyers’s concept. To that end, Ruecker’s analysis of his participants’ experiences, grounded in an asset-oriented mindset, offers us more robust and nuanced articulations of both habitus and transition. If we are to carry Ruecker’s work forward, we can and should draw on these articulations to develop pedagogical and institutional transformations that extend Ruecker’s more general recommendations by adapting them to our local contexts. Ultimately then, Ruecker’s attention to the lived experiences of students is an important contribution to the field, as is his insistence that we must stop placing the full burden of students’ experiences on them and instead hold institutions accountable for their role in supporting, or failing to support, students in transition.

The call to “know our students” is a familiar one in composition studies, and, to be sure, Writing against Racial Injury, Del Otro Lado, and Transiciones respond to that imperative in their own ways. But embedded in these studies, collectively and individually, is an implicit counter-call: not only must we “know our students,” but we must know them differently. To be sure, the statements I quote at the start of this essay reflect my colleagues’ desire to know who our students are so that we might better support them. But such efforts are inherently limited if we focus primarily on what students lack. Further, we are also obligated to “know our institutions.” The call to “know our institutions” builds on the kind of institutional ethnography modeled by Christopher Schroeder’s Diverse by Design but extends the scope of investigation to include the broader network of educational, legal, and cultural institutions and systems that inevitably shape our on-campus policies, programs, cultures, and experiences. We must use what we learn about our students and institutions for dynamic transformation, resisting the temptation to allow institutional norms and practices to stand unquestioned. The purpose of knowing our students and institutions...
is not to devise better, more efficient, more effective ways of helping students mold themselves to the status quo so as to ensure their success. Rather, we must critically examine the way our policies, programs, and practices are designed to exclude rather than include, and following Hoang, we must "look to the bottom" to learn from and with our students about how we might transform our institutions to be more equitable and just.

As I write, I recognize that a call to transform our institutions to be more equitable and just, always a daunting call, has become an even more challenging vision. That is because, as I write, our students are waiting to learn the fate of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), tracking the impact of President Trump's immigration and refugee executive order, watching to see if Secretary of Education nominee Betsy DeVos will be confirmed, and more. Everywhere we turn, the status quo has been and is being upended. So, my call to challenge the status quo at our institutions sounds, even to me, vexing in a way that it would not have seemed even six months ago. Amid so much upheaval, our priorities are in flux, our attention is divided more than ever before, and the urgency of this particular challenge begins to pale in comparison to the chaos around us. In this context, maintaining our programs and institutions as they are begins to seem like a victory rather than a failure.

Even so, I argue, as much to myself as anyone else, that it is more important than ever for us to continue the transformative work that Hoang, Meyers, and Ruecker call for. If decisions on DACA, immigration, DeVos, and more are as damaging as many of us fear they might be, we need our institutions, more than ever before, to be designed for our students, not in spite of them. Collectively, then, these projects ask us to recognize what it is that we don't know about our students, to question how our ignorance informs our practices, and to draw on the conceptual lenses that they offer to inform our own locally situated actions. How might we renegotiate the terms of the literacy contract to more honestly reflect what it is we have to offer—for we do have much to offer—while recognizing the agency and interests of our students, their families, and their communities? In this moment of political and civic activism, what might we learn from our own students' linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural savvy and how might we support their efforts to write against racial injury and so much more, within and beyond the academy? How might we transform our institutions so that we may better teach our students and so that our students might bet-
ter transform the world? To be sure, these are challenging questions, and Hoang’s, Meyers’s, and Ruecker’s contributions cannot possibly offer us clear-cut strategies or answers. Even so, their work serves to remind us of the importance of working for our students and for transformative change.

**Works Cited**


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