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“Standard English” is a Colonial Fort

In “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” bell hooks asked us: “Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination – a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you. Language is also a place of struggle. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance.”¹ Her words moved me in December after I spent a couple of weeks assessing final exams and final essays—always a “place of struggle” –institutional requirements in my first-year composition courses. She reminds us that language is not neutral, and there are some forms of it that wield power over other forms. While grading at the end of the semester, I have only limited control over how language wields its power over my students. When assessing final papers, I have more control, and following models encouraged by educators I respect, I have eschewed individually grading essays in favor of assigning portfolios that students evaluate themselves. But for all my efforts to avoid conventional grading, I still can’t escape assessment restrictions imposed by common final exams that explicitly make a call for “standard English” in their instructions and whose rubrics assess “the student’s ability to write clearly and coherently using standard English.”

Consider for a moment that there is no standard English. There is no official language in the United States. There’s no equivalent to the *academie française*, for instance, a French institution since 1635 that sets explicit rules about lexical and grammatical matters. Second of all, there is little discussion about what “standard” means anyway. And I’m sure that if there were a discussion, what we mean by “standard” would mask itself in discussions about verb conjugations and using the first person pronoun in essays. We don’t say what we mean, which, as Professor Inoue explained in his remarkable March 2019 speech at CCCC, is “white language.”² In short, our vague rubric is implicitly asking us to make sure that our students sound “white” enough.

My students’ words are not, in hooks’s words above, “without meaning,” but our assessment practices—including how we design assignments in the first place—predetermine poor outcomes for most of their writing. It’s gravely ironic and deeply troubling that we are not very far along in our assessment practices when so many scholars have set forth better examples for us. The roots of this problem, one which I believe rankles particularly at the community college level, are so deep and intractable because they are entangled with our own unresolved colonial history and are designed to maintain white supremacy. In a 2016 public conversation with Robin Kelly on the subject of “Do Black Lives Really Matter?,” Fred Moten said that “Settlers always think they’re defending themselves. That’s why they build forts on other people’s land. And then they freak out over the fact that they are surrounded.”³ Writing from colonized Lenni Lenape land to you over on Duwamish land, I see value in acknowledging the centuries of violence embedded in something so seemingly innocuous as the assessment of “standard” English in our student writing from a settler-colonial perspective. Our assessment of “standard English” is like a fort some of us have built here on other people’s land – but we haven’t even had the decency to be explicit

¹ hooks, bell. “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 15–23. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44111660.

²Inoue, Asao. “How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, Or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Annual Convention Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 14 March 2019. <http://tinyurl.com/y374x2r6>.

³ <https://mhpbooks.familiar.studio/blog/132892-2>

about it (unlike the French), we “freak out” when people don’t know the unwritten rules, and then we fail them and use their failure as evidence of inferiority. Although I cannot be present for today’s discussion at the MLA, I am eagerly awaiting what comes out of this panel because I think the stakes are extremely high. The title of Inoue’s talk reminded us how high those stakes are: people are killing each other.