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R U Cooked or R U Cooking?: Revisiting Platonic Binaries in a Neoliberal Age

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Introduction

My son is an avid gamer, and like many kids his age, he often narrates his gameplay. His commentary is jargon filled: playing with newbs, one-shotting opponents, unlocking new skins, or backstabbing another player. What strikes me as almost Shakespearean, however, is his tendency to declare that he is either "cooked" or "cooking." There is rarely any language of moderation. He is either succeeding spectacularly or failing completely. There is no discourse for simply getting by or performing adequately because, in the virtual worlds he inhabits, there is only victory or defeat, life or death. There is no in-between.

Of course, this kind of binary rhetoric is hardly unique to gaming. Throughout our lives, we are confronted with choices and situations that seem to reduce the world to opposing categories: good or bad, success or failure, us or them, etc. When the call for the 25th anniversary issue of *Xchanges* invited authors to revisit an article from the journal's archives, I was immediately drawn to the idea of looking at the way people had written about rhetoric.

There was a lot to choose from. I knew, for example, that there would be a lot to say about Jason Tham's 2016 article "Rhetorical Web Design: Thinking Critically about Ready-Made Web Templates and the Problem of Ease" which argues that ready-made templates and code databases can hinder learning, voice, and creativity when it comes to web design. My first conclusion after reading Tham's article was that someone, somewhere working with AI coding agents and the new trend of "vibe coding" must have something to add to this conversation, but without any real coding / web design experience, I felt that I didn't have the technical knowledge to weigh in. I felt very similarly about McDonell's "The Ethics of Visual Rhetoric & Photo Manipulation" which is remarkably timely in this age of deepfakes and hyperrealism.

I also considered two articles close to my childhood: Martin's 2020 article, "The Shrine of Chino Mine: Extraction Rhetoric and Public Memory in Southern New Mexico" and Feng's 2021 article, "Bad Sex vs. No Sex: The Rhetoric of Heteronormative Temporality in Utah's Abstinence-Based Education". Having grown up in Utah next to a Kennecott Copper Mine, I loved the way these articles analyzed rhetoric I had lived with as a kid. While these articles deal with two very different communities, I think that their underlying messages share some commonalities: one being that omission (Feng's article) or destruction (Martin's article) of rhetorical texts marginalizes people. Even though I chose a different article to revisit, I highly recommend you read these articles if you have the time because they are excellent looks into how rhetoric affects the communities we live in.

The article I ultimately chose to revisit is Ross's 2009 article "Pedagogy Shaped by Ideology: Beneath or Beyond Plato" which appeared in issue 6.1. Ross was a plucky undergrad finishing up at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs when she published this article. I'd say that's pretty impressive considering that when I was a senior at Utah State, my attention was solely devoted to passing the final general education credits I had put off the last 5 years.

What really strikes me about Ross's article 17 years after *Xchanges* published it is just how damn smart it is. I've been teaching composition for 12 years now, and I'd like to think that I have a pretty good sense of what undergraduate writing is, but I would never have guessed this article was written by an undergraduate student if *Xchanges* hadn't of included a bio of Ross at the end. Her achievement here is incredible, a wonderful benchmark for anyone studying writing in their undergraduate careers and part of the incredible showcase *Xchanges* has achieved in the last 25 years as the premier champions of student research. With that spirit in mind, I have endeavored to showcase *Xchanges* authors as much as possible in this article, which I hope will show just how amazing they, and by extension, we are.

Ross vs. Plato: Death Match

Ross argues that Plato's belief in a single, absolute truth and his reliance on binary thinking deeply shapes how writing is taught. For those unfamiliar, in Platonic works like Phaedrus, Gorgias, The Republic and elsewhere, he essentially argues that there is an unchanging truth to reality which knowledge is based upon. In Plato's view, this reality can only be accessed via the mind, because the physical world around us is ever changing.

This influence of truth / untruth, Ross argues, encourages the writing teachers of today to treat writing as something that can be judged as "right" or "wrong," pushing students toward a single correct way of writing rather than allowing for multiple, context-dependent meanings. Ross also loosely ties this binary of correctness to the way that Standard English is privileged over other English dialects, accents and languages. Ross writes:

> "However, recognition that Plato's influence is one of the primary factors that encourage teachers to push students toward a "correct answer" can provide insight about the deeply imbedded tendency for writing to be judged as "right" or "wrong." Subscribing to Plato's fixed, transcendent truth enables one to make simple judgments of writing as 'right' or 'wrong' because all writing is for the singular purpose of nearing Platonic truth. Critics who are influenced by Platonic models may contend that they are not judging writing by labeling it "right" or "wrong" but, rather, are teaching students to communicate in standard modern English" (np).

The binary of right / wrong writing and its relationship to standard English is certainly still problematic. Hamilton's 2025 article in *Xchanges* issue 19.2, "Empowering Voices: A Graduate Student Instructor's Introduction to Linguistic Justice" gives us a modern history of how Standard Academic English (SAE) marginalized writing students from

diverse linguistic backgrounds, and how the field responded to it over time. Hamilton, like Ross, discusses writing studies resistance to SAE by discussing process pedagogy and social-epistemic rhetoric and pedagogy. However, Hamilton fills in some important gaps by also charting important developments such as code meshing, translingualism, and multimodal literacy.

Although Hamilton doesn't discuss Plato, the binary of good / bad persists in classrooms and the world in many ways. I've mentioned Feng's *Xchanges* article, "Bad Sex vs No Sex" already, but Feng has an example that illustrates this point. There, Feng is writing about Utah's abstinence program as it appears in three sexual educational texts. Feng finds that these abstinence-based education texts present heteronormativity as morally "good" while marginalizing other groups. They write:

> "The main binary of "future versus sex" erases identities that exist outside its margins, but because the emphasis is on the morally respectable nature of heteronormative timelines, the identities that exist within the category of "sex" are also marginalized. This binary model denigrates teen parents, queer people, adolescents, rape victims, pornography users and anyone engaging in premarital sex" (np).

It will likely come as no surprise to those studying the homogenization of language that the dominance of Standard American English (SAE) (also referred to as Dominant American English (DAE) or White Mainstream English (WME) reflects the kind of binary rhetoric Ross and Feng describe. A contemporary example of exclusion can be seen in the linguistic bias large language models (LLMs) and AI systems show. Since it's widespread adoption in 2022, there have been copious authors who have covered how ChatGPT and other models prefer / enforce / empower SAE, WME, or DME. Thompson & Pokhrel in "GenAI: The Impetus for Linguistic Justice Once and For All" for example discovered that, even when expressly told not to do so, ChatGPT reflects western, male-dominated, white, middle-class understandings and expectations about language ideologies. These findings corroborate work from Lester, Hsu, and others.

Though the following authors aren't focused on linguistic bias, Fang, et. al reported that seven different LLMs exhibit notable discrimination against females and individuals of the Black race. Shieh et al. across 500,000 generated outputs reported that LLMs are more likely to omit characters with minoritized race, gender, and/or sexual orientation identities or relegate them to subordinated roles as opposed to dominant ones. They also discovered that stereotyping across language model–generated outputs disproportionately affected minorities. Finally, Locke et al. illustrated that gender bias was prominent when generating images of professionals in CanvaAI, OpenArt, and Midjourney. Bias in examples such as this is deeply problematic, particularly when, according to a new Gallup poll, more than half of college students are using AI weekly (Gallup).

In Plato's allegory of the cave, prisoners are chained down so that they can only face a wall, where they watch shadows cast by objects behind them. Over time, they come to believe that those shadows are reality itself. Plato uses this allegory to claim that truth

(the objects casting shadows behind the people) is something that cannot be directly accessed via our senses.

There's a lot of parallels that could be made about the shadows, the prisoners and truth in Plato's allegory. Here's one: if the output of LLMs are the shadows, students are the ones casting these shadows and writing instructors are the prisoners forced to watch them, does that make Plato's "forms" or "truth" the White Mainstream English LLMs are trained on?

Hell no.

Ross writes that "Plato's fixed, universal, transcendent truth is a pedagogy that values grammatical correctness, vocabulary, and the presence of analysis over the development of thought and the quality of content." Fixed, grammatical correctness AI excels at. It can also perform, to a limited a degree, literary and textual analysis as Mozaffari et al. indicate. What are we left with when grammar and analysis have been usurped by a machine? AI does not think, feel, nor understand human beings. It cannot do these things because it's not sentient. What Ross tells us to focus on, though she doesn't frame it this way, is human; "Multiple-truth epistemologies" where discovery, critical thought, creation of knowledge, and distinct opinions are fostered in an environment rife with experimentation and equality. The path Ross charts for these outcomes are paths that are well trod: writing classrooms with theory, practice, and action which take the form of both in-class, and out of class reading, writing, discussion and assessment practices like, though not named, labor-based grading.

I have a lot of thoughts about writing pedagogy I'd like to add to Ross here, but first I'd like to show you one example of how deeply embedded binary rhetoric is in western capitalism. Though I've given you a taste of it above, in the following section, I will discuss the testing industry and why a platonic view of rhetoric is a lucrative philosophy for the neoliberal world inside and beyond academia.

Making $$$$$ The Plato Way

Before we begin, I'd like to define what I mean by neoliberal. Neoliberalism according to Gallagher is "…a form of cultural politics and a set of economic principles, policies, and practices devoted to handing over as much of social life as possible to private interests." (*Being There: (Re)Making the Assessment Scene,* 453). In short, neoliberalism seeks to privatize public services (such as public universities) and the rights and authority of those who work in the public sector.

Concrete examples of neoliberalism are copious, but rather than attempting to catalogue them all, I would instead like to focus on one that is particularly important to college writing: the assessment scene. I do so for two reasons. First, assessment is one of the primary ways the world translates educational value into measurable outcomes, making it an ideal site for examining neoliberal assumptions about productivity, accountability, and the cost of education. Second, assessment is something that every writing instructor and every student encounters. Whether through grades, rubrics, standardized outcomes, or portfolio evaluations, assessment shapes not only how writing is judged but also how it is taught, produced, and understood.

If neoliberalism has fundamentally altered higher education, then its influence should be especially visible in the ways we evaluate students. Broad examples in the United States are government acts and reports like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002), Common, Core, Standards (2010), and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). These acts and reports led to outsourced, standardized testing in the United States for most K-12 students and are certainly companions to acts such as The Spellings Report (2006), and Academically Adrift (2011) which have called for collegial reform and greater accountability for college and universities. Neoliberalism's interest in standardized testing is complicated, and I turn to Gallagher again, whom I quote at length, to explain:

> "Assessment, particularly standardized testing, is useful to the neoliberal agenda for several reasons: it provides fodder for continuous, manufactured education crises; it functions as a surveillance apparatus; it promotes self-regulation within the system; it serves as a lever for score keeping and competition; it (supposedly) requires technical knowledge that only private vendors can provide; it promotes standardization and therefore (purportedly) efficiency. At the K-12 level, neoliberal reform has outsourced assessment to the testing and test prep industry, which enjoys an unregulated marketplace and government subsidization through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Curriculum is largely packaged by textbook companies, instruction is often scripted by off-the-shelf programs, and "supplemental instruction" is increasingly provided by private vendors. Commercial providers supply an array of "supplemental services"—sometimes the full range of operations—to "failing" schools and districts." (*Being There: (Re)Making the Assessment Scene,* 454).

We don't have time to dive deeply into every one of Gallagher's claims here but lets look at one: education crises. A literacy education crisis is the belief that students can't read/write as well as they should. While not all literacy crises are manufactured through assessment, many are; even though privatized, mass testing of literacy is deeply flawed, and most often does not reflect the critical thinking skills and outcomes that all good writing courses endeavor to teach. Perelman can explain for us why that is:

> "With mass market tests, such as the ones I have been discussing, that are given to hundreds of thousands a students per year, the cost of grading essays constitutes a substantial part of the test's overall cost. Test providers, then, whether they are for-profit companies or large non-profit entities such as the Educational Testing Service, seek essay prompts that will minimize the time needed by a reader to score the essay while simultaneously ensuring inter-reader reliability that can be used as a self-referential indicator of validity. Evaluating different paraphrases of a source, for example, is much more difficult and time consuming, and has more potential for disagreement than the mechanical counting of quotations. Indeed, in general, quantitative features, such as the frequency of infrequently used words like plethora, can be graded much more quickly and reliably by human readers than qualitative features, such as creativity in accurately rephrasing an idea." (138).

The "mechanical counting of quotations" and "the frequency of infrequently used words like plethora" Perelman lists here as being optimal ways of scoring mass tests is

reminiscent of Ross's idea that platonic rhetoric prefers "grammatical correctness, vocabulary, and the presence of analysis over the development of thought and the quality of content." The testing industry prefers the binary of Platonic rhetoric because it is easily quantifiable, and thus easily assessed which in turn increases profitability, control, etc.

Furthermore, Perelman's identification of practices that are more difficult to assess, and thus more time consuming and not as profitable, such as the "creativity in accurately rephrasing an idea" are likely impossible for LLMs and other assessment machines- Can AI accurately judge something as creative if itself is not creative? An LLM can search a database and tell you (with varying degrees of accuracy) that something has never been written about, but is scarcity the only measure of creativity?

There are many assessment practices that reject binary / platonic rhetoric. Ross mentions one when they write that, "An alternative for instructors who want to resist the binary framework that is rooted in the Platonic tradition is assessing student writing by examining the progress of individual writers' work over the span of multiple drafts." This is simplistic but remember that Ross had likely never taught a college level course before at this time in their career. So, let's fill in the gaps.

When it comes to in-class assessment practices, there are actually a lot of methods we can choose from. There is, for example, mastery grading (students demonstrate full understanding of a skill before earning credit), competency-based grading (grades are based on what students can do, rather than the time spent on assignments), and contract grading, which I will dive into more deeply because contract grading has received more attention in writing classrooms than the aforementioned strategies.

Contract grading is an assessment practice where the instructor and students agree in advance on a set of specific assignments and expectations, and a student's final grade is determined by whether they fulfill the terms of that contract. Contract grading is a bit of a broad term that covers a wide range of assessment practices that may still include some traditional assessment practices. Labor-based grading is one form of contract grading. In this approach, students earn grades based on the amount, consistency, and completion of their work, such as drafts, revisions, and participation, rather than the instructor's judgment of the final product's quality. Because labor-based grading depends on the measure of labor rather than standards or correctness, it has the possibility to disrupt language supremacy- a primary reason it's used in writing classrooms. Inoue covers this extensively in his open-source book, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*.

In that book, Inoue doesn't mince words about the binary of good/bad writing. Though he doesn't discuss it in the way Ross does, he writes, "standards for good writing are deeply informed by a white racial habitus, which makes grading by such standards white supremacist. I am not saying that you (the teacher) are a bad person, but grading by a standard does make your grading methods and your grading ecology in your classroom racist, and white supremacist." (9).

While labor-based contract grading enjoys a healthy interest and acceptable use at many institutions, contract / labor-based grading is not a universally accepted practice. Inoue gamely endeavors to answer critics question in chapter 6 of the book I mentioned above, but graduate students still face pressure to use more traditional systems. For example, in "Brooke's narrative" of D'Orazio, Monthe, Bolin, and Evans, "The TPC Contact Zone: Preparing Graduate Student Instructors for Students' Writing Realities" Bolin writes: "However, after spending two semesters using engagement-based contract grades, I was told that this grading scheme was a threat to the standardization required by other schools within the college and was asked to no longer use contract grading when teaching these courses. I felt incredibly frustrated, not least by the fact that I had been teaching this way for a year before anybody noticed, and I was provided no additional assistance for how to shift my syllabus for future teaching semesters."

Ryan, in "Teaching Boldly, Teaching Queerly: Embracing Radical (Un)Growth and Possibilities as a Graduate Instructor in First-Year Writing" had similar experiences, "This decision [to use an alternative grading contract], to my surprise, received some significant pushback. This pushback came not from my students (nor have I ever since received negative feedback about my grading method from students: in fact, many have noted it as a highlight of their experience) but from other voices, one of which escalated to a major conflict with someone in a position of authority in my first semester of teaching. I was in a position of deference to this voice, and the situation was severe enough I began having panic attacks and a multitude of bureaucratic consequences. This was a further moment of loss of innocence… I cared so deeply about my teaching, and my students' experiences, that to see this decision fall under such severe scrutiny was distressing in multiple ways."

If Inoue is correct and traditional assessment practices reinforce binary standards of good/bad writing and are reflective of white mainstream English, and thus language homogenization, white supremacy, etc., it is perhaps pertinent to also remind readers that, as Hamilton pointed out earlier, Standard Academic English was deeply influenced by those privileged enough to enjoy academic life (white men) as it historically developed. Consequently, Bolin and Ryan are fighting an academic infrastructure built on platonic binaries Ross has pointed out that empower white mainstream English and thus assessment practices of good / bad writing.

Furthermore, the institutional barriers they encountered are deeply rooted in neoliberal, traditional, institutional structure and broader national legislation far beyond their immediate classrooms. For example, outcomes for first year writing are assessment elements monitored and influenced both by university administration and state legislature because these outcomes play important roles in general education credit transfer, and institutional accreditation which, in turn, is tied to institutional funding among other things. When graduate students disrupt this process by utilizing alternate grading practices, some administrators may think that they are inadvertently endangering the delicate processes mentioned above. Most of this structure is likely ambient to the graduate students mentioned, and perhaps, to the authoritative voices that put a stop to their labor-based assessment practices.

I write this not to discourage graduate students from using labor based grading or alternate grading practices. Though I don't believe that labor-based grading is perfect, I do believe labor-based grading can disrupt the good / bad writing binary, and language homogenization. I simply mean to say that administration cannot be solely blamed for problems that exist at a cultural level. It's more lucrative to standardize white mainstream English than a multitude of lingual identities because it's easier to assess. This neoliberal push isn't coming from one source, but rather a society. Consequently, reform must come from society itself, and the writing community has long been a champion of that reform.

Broad Outcomes for Broad Paths

Ross argues that modern composition theories like process pedagogy and social epistemic rhetoric challenged the platonic model of writing pedagogy by treating writing as a dynamic, evolving process that creates meaning rather than simply reflecting fixed truth. In other words, a framework that values context, multiple truths, and flexibility would allow writing to function as a tool for discovery, creativity, and knowledge-making. To some degree, labor-based grading is attempting this feat, but as I began this article discussing platonic rhetoric, I would like to end it by discussing modern theories of rhetoric that reveal neoliberal agenda and the platonic binaries that support it.

It likely goes without saying that there isn't some secret cabal of Platonic cultists dead set on enforcing white mainstream English in the classroom. No one (or at least very few people) sit down with *Phaedrus* in their arms when they start building their writing courses for the coming semester. The influence of Plato and binary rhetoric is really more of a ghost in the system which has been built brick by brick on the backs of 2500 years of western pedagogy that we're not always conscious of.

This is an important way of looking back at Ross's assertion that many writing pedagogies are influenced by binary / platonic rhetoric. The implicit rhetoric of our lives, historically dictating to us what is good / bad writing is a difficult anchor to drop. However, that's not to say that writing teachers haven't tried. Ross covered process theory and social epistemic rhetoric, but what are some more specific examples of pedagogies that avoid binary rhetorics of good / bad?

Well, in *Xchanges*, there are a lot of ways people are doing this; Lonelodge and Rieger in, "Student Perceptions of Writing Instruction: Twitter as a Tool for Pedagogical Growth" offer a pedagogical path based on student tweets and feedback on how to develop an empathetic pedagogy that fits with a rhetoric of creativity and exploration. Jennings, in "Chat(GPT)-ing about the Affordances Generative AI Tools Offer for ADHD Writers" explains how the writing process is different for everyone, especially neurodivergent writers, and how new tools like ChatGPT can positively impact those processes reflecting Ross's multiple truth epistemologies. Tucker, Hawkins, Mansure, and Minnillo in their article "Supporting Students' Own Languages in the Writing Classroom: Adaptable Writing Assignments for Enacting Linguistic Justice in Local Contexts" shared assignments that let students use their full linguistic repertoires and enact linguistic justice in ways that challenges the binary of the Platonic rhetoric Ross describes.

An important development since Ross wrote her article in 2009 is the development of ambient rhetoric by Thomas Rickert and the publication of his 2013 book, “Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunement of Rhetorical Being.” Among other things, ambient rhetoric argues that much of the rhetoric that influences who we are (and thus what we teach and how we teach it is) is ambient, unseen or undetected. This theory asserts that rhetoric can be found everywhere; not just in human beings, but in nonhuman rhetors such as machines (algorithms, content moderation, AI, etc.), animals and the natural world. In this view, the digital spaces we inhabit, the animals we interact with, and the environments we live in persuade us to feel, think, and act in unique ways.

Viewing all things as rhetorical disrupts platonic binaries by encouraging people to analyze rhetoric beyond the institutional structures they live in. It can connect human beings, and their actions, to unseen histories and the natural world, in complex, dynamic ways. It also has the potential to disrupt the dominance of western rhetoric as it asks us to see rhetoric as a universal trait, rather than a Grecian invention.

Teaching ambient rhetoric, however, can be a difficult task because there is little framework for it in the classroom. It’s difficult to conceptualize and is a difficult form of analysis, particularly for students. How, for example, do you apply traditional rhetorical concepts like ethos, pathos, logos, kairos, to an algorithm when it does not feel, think, or reason and is largely invisible?

Loe offers an example of applying ambient rhetoric in research. In “What it is exactly that circulates”: Affective value, re/production, and rhetorical exchange” she rhetorically analyzed the communications of adults in a fantasy football league through an ambient lens. Among her complex findings, which unravel neoliberal systems at work in the fantasy league and the lives of her participants, she writes “Just because some rhetorical activity may fade into the background of daily life, becoming ambient behavior to us, doesn’t mean it isn’t extraordinarily useful to those in power” (Loe, 13).

Loe’s work demonstrates the value of ambient rhetoric because it reveals how rhetorical forces operate through their invisibility (much in the same way it operated for Bolin and Ryan). The rhetorical technology the fantasy league used to communicate was exploited through data harvesting that was ultimately monetized in various ways, including boosting the engagement and ad revenue of the app itself. This, in turn, subtly altered the way the fantasy league communicated. Reducing human interaction to as fine a point as possible in order to monetize it is certainly reflective of platonic rhetoric and neoliberalism. Thus, Loe’s scholarship therefore offers scholars a framework for identifying neoliberal agenda and rhetorical activity that exists beyond traditional communicative technologies and for recognizing how seemingly neutral systems can participate in larger structures of power.

Another example would be Goodwin, Miller and Chaput’s, “Accountable to whom? The rhetorical circulation of neoliberal discourse and its ambient effects on higher education.” In their article, they conclude that the faculty in the CSU and SUNY systems lost local authority and power over assessment, standardization, and the purpose of education in their classrooms to big data assessment and neoliberal

agendas because they failed to understand the ambient environment of educational reform present in their states.

This analysis is particularly useful because it demonstrates how assessment technologies can exert rhetorical influence without operating as direct, traditional rhetorical agents. The compounded rhetorical effect of years of legislation, even though they are flawed, can result in a rhetorical environment which fosters neoliberal practices, or in this instance, the wresting of authority from academic experts. Like Loe's analysis of fantasy football, Goodwin, Miller, and Chaput show how rhetorical forces can fade into the background while still producing powerful effects. Their proposed response (community action) also recognizes that resisting these forces requires collective awareness of the ambient environment in which they exist and participation within the larger world because oftentimes, the rhetorical environments which platonic rhetoric produces are simply too large to be solved by one single person or entity.

I'd like to offer two more quick examples, one pedagogical and one cultural. Rule asked her students to draw and analyze the material environments of the rooms in which they write, showing how the material objects within them are interconnected with students' writing practices. Rule writes, "I see writing's rooms and these multimodal methods as especially useful for writers in our classrooms. And I raise them to argue for something ultimately quite simple: it is good for writers to see *writing* happen in its infinite variety, modes, and locations." (428).

By asking students to attend to the spaces and material environments that surround their writing, Rule helps them recognize rhetorical influences that often disappear into the background of everyday composing. This approach is particularly relevant for teaching students about digital and algorithmic environments. Just as a desk, computer, notebook, or physical workspace shapes how writers compose, digital infrastructures such as platforms, interfaces, algorithms, and artificial intelligence systems also participate in shaping writing practices. In doing so, students move beyond understanding rhetoric as something produced only through intentional human communication and toward a more expansive understanding of rhetoric as something that emerges through interactions among humans, materials, and environments. While Rule doesn't discuss neoliberalism, this approach is multitudinal, rather than binary, in the sense that it invites students to analyze rhetorical influences that are beyond human beings.

Grant, like the others I've mentioned, also takes a unique approach by utilizing ambient and material rhetoric to rhetorically analyze the *chanupa*, a sacred ceremonial pipe of the Lakota and other sovereign nations. In so doing he concludes that, "Looking at the *chanupa* as a rhetorical object extends the notion of indigenous rhetoric and rhetorical sovereignty to the nonhuman, complexly material, and ontological. The *chanupa*, as the Lakota understand it, is a key instrument of maintaining relations and responsibilities so that the Lakota may exist. It is an object of real consequence in maintaining, modulating and constellating their individual and collective being. It is writing *wakan*, both powerful and mysterious." (84).

Grant's analysis demonstrates the broader value of ambient and material rhetoric: these approaches allow scholars to recognize rhetorical activity as ontological and existing outside dominant Western frameworks of communication and persuasion. In doing so, they create opportunities to examine rhetorical environments that are often overlooked or dismissed because they do not fit traditional definitions of rhetoric.

"Goodnight, Pink Birthday Star Band-Aid Puppy"

As I close out this paper, I'd like to share with you one more thing my kids say that seems pertinent to this article. My daughter, who is three, has a lengthy, routine heavy bedtime which involves brushing teeth, using the potty, reading some books, and singing some songs. At the end of all this, when it's time say goodnight, my wife will ask her what she wants to be called. For my daughter, who is 3 years old, that combination of things is an amalgamation of all the things that she seems to love best in the world. A multitudinal expression of her identity and the things she sees in her rhetorical environment. The current iteration of this is Pink Birthday Star Band-Aid Puppy. That, to me, is a perfect explanation of the many possibilities ambient rhetoric can afford us.

Ross concludes her essay by writing that "Writers, teachers, and rhetoricians who want to inhabit an environment where writing is meaningful and genuine have a choice. They can continue to work inside a Platonic framework which generates abundant problems, or they can intentionally leave Plato, his philosophies, his pedagogy, and his epistemologies behind by choosing to ground the teaching of writing in rhetoric instead of philosophy."

As *Xchanges* celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary, it is worth reflecting on how rhetorical conversations like this have continued to evolve. *Xchanges,* like all scholarly environments, are continuously transforming through the complex relationship among authors, readers, ideas, and disciplinary communities. Ambient rhetoric offers one possible framework for understanding these complex environments and the ways meaning emerges through them.

Although a pedagogical framework for ambient rhetoric is still being developed, the scholars discussed above provide important lessons for how writing teachers can help students move beyond binary understandings of rhetoric and toward a more relational understanding of how meaning is created. In the classroom, this means creating opportunities for students to recognize the infinite rhetorical environments that surround them and the often-invisible forces that influence their lives. Specifically, educators can:

- Ask students to consider how the communication platforms they use direct, affect, and influence their personalities, identities, and broader environments.
- Ask students to consider how their own authority and agency are shaped by the institutions and environments they inhabit, while also exploring how they might reclaim rhetorical power within those systems.
- Ask students to consider the material spaces they exist within and how those spaces shape, transform, and participate in the development of their identities.
- Ask students to consider how the histories of their homes, places, communities, and families function rhetorically to define and influence who they become.

By crafting assignments that encourage students to examine these relationships, writing teachers can help students move beyond binaries and recognize the larger rhetorical environments in which they participate. Such approaches allow students to identify the neoliberal agendas embedded within many of the systems they encounter while also recognizing their own ability to respond, reshape, and participate within those environments.

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