ABSTRACT: Although the assessment of writing abilities is common practice in the US, the relationship between cultural stereotypes about racial identity and genres of writing testing has not been well-theorized. Using data from a research of study of more than 1,000 students, I show how racial stereotypes about academic ability are “taken up” in writing assessment contexts. Using a theory of genre as social action, we can move away from decontextualized research on writing assessment to a view of writing assessment that is rhetorically-based, culturally-situated, and cognizant of the socio-cultural power relationships that surround testing scenes.

KEYWORDS: genre; testing; race; writing.

1. Introduction

Assessment of writing abilities is standard practice throughout the US educational system. From state level tests for primary school children to “rising junior” portfolio exams for upper level college students and even job testing, the US is a country written through – start to finish – with literacy testing. Although standardized, multiple-choice tests still comprise a major component of US testing, writing assessment has come to carry renewed importance in the US educational system. Many universities now use writing tests for university admissions and placement For example, the SAT Writing Test is taken by more than 1 million students annually (Mattern et al, 2007). More than 80% of US universities also use some form of placement testing to track students into writing classes in their first year of university study (Huot, 1994).

The most common genre of writing assessment in the US is the timed, impromptu examination. In such tests, students are expected to read a passage and then write a final draft essay with no major revisions in 30-60 minutes. Although timed, impromptu writing tests have been used for more than 30 years, research on such tests has been limited primarily to examinations of task design, topic selection, and scoring methods (Huot, 2002; White, 1994; Murphy & Leo, 1988). Because test scenes are treated as “decontextualized contexts,” social factors such race and socio-economic factors are theoretically equalized in the scene. This view has meant that test-designers have largely ignored the cultural context in which US testing occurs. However, testing genres are not decontextualized or neutral spaces; they are ideological spaces that tacitly suggest identity positions for test-takers precisely because they are 'written through' with cultural discourses about 'good' and 'poor' student identities.

Because testing occurs in a context of culture, to use Halliday’s term, we cannot “bracket off” testing from the culture around it. Instead, the genre of the test is influenced not only by the context of situation (i.e., the test situation itself) but also by the cultural context in which the test situation occurs. While we can take any number of different theories to investigate this relationship between identity, culture, and writing assessment, I want to suggest that a North American genre approach, which theorizes genres as forms of social action, can open new possibilities into writing assessment research (Miller, 1994; Devitt, 2004; Freedman and Medway, 1994; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Russell, 1997). Recent research on the performance of self in genres suggests that genres encourage us to take up certain identity positions as much as we bring identity with us to writing scenes (Bazerman, 2002; Bawarshi, 2003).
In this paper, I link North American genre theory to theories of racial stereotyping. This linking of genre theory with recent social psychology research allows us to better understand the cultural discourses that surround the test scene. These cultural discourses ultimately “seep” into students’ identity “uptakes” in writing test scenes. Following a brief history of race and testing in the US, I provide a theoretical overview of genre and identity, and then present results from a research study in which I attempted to capture that “uptake” of racial stereotypes in a particular writing test scene. My main interest in pursuing this work is to understand how cultural stereotypes about racial identity and academic performance are “taken up” by students and shape their expectations of testing situations.

2. A Brief History of Race and Testing in the US

The history of modern writing assessment cannot be divorced from race. Some of the first contemporary writing assessments, such as those at Harvard, were conducted during the height of the US eugenics movement. Many of the US’s leading testing pioneers such as Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman, and Carl Campbell Brigham were proponents of the eugenics movement. Their belief in racial hierarchy as well their zeal for the budding field of psychology would lead to some of the most deeply-entrenched educational testing policies that remain with us today in the US.

The eugenics movement, a pseudo-scientific social movement that spanned from roughly 1883 to 1930, purported “human improvement through programs of controlled breeding” (SELDEN, 2000, p. xiii). Proponents of eugenics argued that intelligence could be genetically passed from parent to child, therefore selective “breeding” should be monitored to produce “fitter families.” Eugenics proponents argued that certain social classes and races were genetically inferior to whites and lobbied for social policies that would ban, sterilize, or even eliminate such populations from the US.

Eugenics movement pioneers used literacy as an indicator of mental ability and used statistics of American illiteracy to propose immigration restrictions as well as ban interracial marriages. Acts such as the 1917 Immigration Restriction Law, which was vetoed by Woodrow Wilson, proposed selective screening of immigrant “inferior stocks” via literacy testing as a way to keep out “dangerous and undesirable immigrants” (VECOLI, 1996, p. 14). At state fairs, Eugenics and health exhibits provided literacy statistics to “educate” the public about the danger posed by illiterate “foreign-born” immigrants and “Negroes” (SELDEN, 2000, p. 241).

The work of early testing pioneers found a mass application in sorting and ranking the large number of military recruits during World War I. During World War I, test developers such as Goddard and Terman, devoted their energy to developing more efficient objective assessments. The new “objective” assessments, like the literacy rates they previously used, merely confirmed eugenics ideology, namely “ironclad laws” that IQ was racially ordered (LEMANN, 1999, p. 30). Racial disparities in test results—disparities that were actually the result of test design and long-standing social inequalities in the US—only confirmed the test’s validity (BRANDT, 2004, p. 491).

The “objective” testing methods developed during World War I were refined by Carl Brigham, and by 1926 Brigham had developed the now infamous SAT. The SAT—a standardized, multiple choice test originally purported to measure student ability—would become the most widely used test for American university admissions. And with the development and proliferation of the SAT came the racially-ordered expectations that were embedded in early forms of American testing via the eugenics movement.
Although writing assessment fell out of favor with the advent of “objective,” standardized testing in the US, a series of legal challenges and social changes would come to influence US writing testing today. The most important legal challenge in US education was the 1954 landmark case, *Oliver L. Brown et.al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka (KS)*, which declared that the “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Known in the US as *Brown v. Board of Education*, the case was not the first legal challenge to segregated schools in the US, but *Brown v. Board of Education* was the most effective challenge to the separate but equal doctrine in the US, and the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn the separate but equal doctrine brought sweeping changes to US racial segregation in its school systems. In writing the Supreme Court’s decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote:

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially[ly] integrated school system... We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal (1954, p. 495).

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was not only important for segregating US schools and helping to launch the Civil Rights Movement in the US, the decision also ushered in federally-mandated research on the educational performance of under-represented minorities in the US. In 1966 the US Office of Education commissioned a survey to study the progress of school desegregation (LEMANN, 1999, p. 158). In a survey of 600,000 students in more than 4,000 schools, researchers found that educational achievement levels between black and white students did not correlate strongly with school funding, i.e., how much money schools spend on each student. Instead, researchers concluded that a student’s academic performance was more a result of the racial demographics of the school and the student’s family background, including family income (COLEMAN ET AL, 1966). While the Coleman Report results were disputed because flaws in its data analysis, the Coleman Report, along with subsequent government studies that tracked test performance by race, had a lasting impact on American educational policy.

When US schools were desegregated after *Brown v. Board of Education* and the government began to study the academic performance of African American students in US school systems, a discourse began to emerge about the “gap” in academic performance between whites and non-whites. That “gap” became cemented in American public discourse as the “achievement gap.” Today, American media accounts of testing are littered with references to the achievement gap, and tracking student performance by race is common practice in most educational testing research.

The most important outcome of this deployment of the achievement gap discourse is that it has normalized how Americans think about racial identity and educational test performance. The discourse of the “achievement gap” has merged with older racial stereotypes about intelligence, motivation, and family backgrounds, such that the term is reproduced in any number of ways to represent the supposed inability of various groups to attain educational success in the US.

Just one example of how powerful the discourse of the achievement gap has become in American culture is the enactment in 2002 of the federal policy called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). When George Bush signed NCLB into policy, he touted that the policy would make American school systems more “accountable” for the success or failure of their students.
the name of the law suggests, no child was to be left behind, meaning that even disadvantaged children would be ensured success in the US educational system. Part of the NCLB law states:

The purpose of this [law] is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (USA, 2001, 15)

The document goes on to articulate 12 ways that this goal can be accomplished, ranging from allocation of resources and giving students more choices in the schools that they may attend. Notably inserted into this list of 12 ways that the goals of NCLB can be met, however, are two statements about race. NCLB should:

(2) [meet] the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation’s highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance;
(3) [close] the achievement gap between high- and low performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers (USA, 2001, 16)

The language of the NCLB policy links “low” and “high” achieving with conceptions of racial identity, i.e., “minority” and “nonminority.” The terms “minority” and “nonminority” in the US are coded terms to mean African-American, Latino, and Native American students as “minority” populations and White students as a “nonminority” population. The status of Asian in the US is more ambiguous as Asian Americans are, at times, considered “minority” populations and, at other times, considered “nonminority” populations. While this discursive coding of race and academic performance in US federal policy may not seem initially problematic, the actions derived from the NCLB suggest differently. For example, the federal government reports test scores by race (as well as language proficiency and socio-economic status). There are two problems with reporting test data by race: (1) race is not a stable identity marker in the US. US law has changed many times in the last 100 years to redefine racial groups (LOPEZ 1996), (2) various criteria are often not correlated on federal reports, for example, race and socio-economic status, so race group performance appears monolithic. Likewise, the US federal government ignores many other factors in analyzing test data, for example type of school that students attend and migratory status.

The repeated focus on race in educational testing has also created a climate in the US educational system in which under-represented racial groups are left to feel “threatened.” Stanford Professor of Psychology Claude Steele’s work has tapped into the effect of such perceptions of threat. Steele has shown in experimental research that test performance may be predicated, in part, on the perception of “threat,” the social psychological threat that arises when an individual is performing a task for which a negative stereotype about one’s group exists (STEELE, 1997). For example, in one experiment Steele and his colleague Joshua Aronson gave the same test to three different groups of Stanford undergraduates. Each group included white and black students. For the first group, the researchers told the students that the test was a “diagnostic of intellectual ability, making the racial stereotype about intellectual ability relevant to the performance of black participants and establishing the threat that they might be seen stereotypically, or might fulfill that stereotype” (STEELE & ARONSON, 1998, p. 405). For the second group, they described the test as a “laboratory problem solving task, not intended as diagnostic of ability” (STEELE & ARONSON 1998, p. 405). For the third group, the researchers encouraged the students to see the test as a “challenge.”
Although each group of students was given exactly the same test, black students in the first group—i.e., the group who was told that the test measured their intelligence—performed worse than white students. On the other hand, the performance of black students improved dramatically and matched the performance of white students in the second and third groups when the students were told that the test was a problem solving task or a challenge (STEELE & ARONSON, 1998, p. 408).

Steele’s research has been valuable because it has challenged theories that students of color students exhibit “self-defeating behavior,” or that they are cognitively unable to be educationally successful. Steele writes that stereotype threat is “social mistrust” (STEELE, 1999). The power of stereotype threat is most dangerous for overachieving students who hold onto the “faith that discrimination and disadvantage can be overcome with hard work and persistence” (STEELE, 1999).

Another important feature of Steele’s work is that is has shown that stereotypes operate in certain domains and are linked to identity representations in those domains—for example, African American or Latino students in testing situations. In my research, I take this one step further to understand how certain genres are representative of those domains—and how by looking at identity through genres, we can link racial identity, genre, and stereotyping.

### 3. Genre, Uptake, and Writing Assessments

Unlike traditional studies of genre that focused on textual patterns in form and content, newer approaches to genre study have focused on how genres operate within systems of human activity (BAZERMAN, 1994; MILLER, 1984; 1994; RUSSELL, 1997). In particular, the North American approach to genre has focused on linking text and context in a way shows how genres both shape contexts and respond to contexts (FREEDMAN and MEDWAY, 1994). Rob Oliver notes that this shift in genre study has led to major reconceptions in theories about genre:

> What has emerged from much of this research is a view of genre as dynamic, participatory, situated social action as opposed to static, abstract, decontextualized rhetorical form. Learning a genre, learning to inhabit its conventions and make use of them in the processes of making meaning, is not solely a matter of acquisition and instantiation of form. It is more a matter of engagement with established communities of discourse, of acculturation into conventions, and (crucially) negotiations with them and transformations of them in practice (2005).

Carolyn Miller in her essay “Genre as Social Action” also describes genres as “recurrent rhetorical situations” (1984, p. 28). She writes: “recurrence is implied by our understanding of situations as somehow ‘comparable,’ ‘similar,’ or ‘analogous’ to other situations (1984, p. 29). Genres are thus typified rhetorical situations that are followed by patterned practices of writing. Our knowledge of a genre convention “works” because we recognize the rhetorical situation in which certain forms of communication reoccur.

In rhetorical situations, however, we don’t speak or write in isolation. Genres are responses to other verbal or textual invitations. Aviva Freedman calls this process by which we respond “uptake.” Uptake, a term that Freedman borrows from speech act theory, signifies when an illocutionary act is taken up as a perlocutionary act (FREEDMAN, 2002). According to Freedman, “Returns, and readings, work within certain clearly marked conventions, and with the material at hand. They are both enabled, and constrained, by the formal-material determinants of the signs they read and the signs they will write” (1994, p. 44-45).
This process of recognition and reoccurrence is what happens when students sit down to take a writing assessment. They are performing an act an act of reproduction called a writing test. Drawing upon their knowledge of antecedent genres (DEVITT, 2004), i.e., academic essay forms that they learned in secondary school, students “take up” the exam prompt to reproduce a genred form—the academic essay—under the guise of a new subject. For example, a sample SAT Writing Prompt is as follows:

Do memories hinder or help people in their effort to learn from the past and succeed in the present? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations (COLLEGE BOARD, 2006)

When students answer this question, they are neither expected nor rewarded to provide a narrative, a list, or other genre form. Instead, an assessment of a student’s “writing ability” is based on the student’s ability to recognize this test situation like previous test situations and to reproduce a form of “essayist” literacy that responds to the test prompt (FARR, 1996). In this manner, a student’s ability to receive a desirable score on the writing test is not based merely on his or her ability to use grammar properly or write a certain number of words but rather whether the student can “uptake” the exam prompt to reproduce a text that “returns” the genre of the academic essay back to exam graders.

However, the question for genre research on writing test scenes is not just about the relationship of “uptakes” but also how identity roles play out in that uptake. Again, Carolyn Miller writes:

The rules and resources of a genre provide reproducible speaker and addressee roles, social typifications of recurrent social needs or exigencies, topical structures..., and ways of indexing an event to material conditions, turning them into constraints or resources (1994, p. 71).

When we reproduce genres, we “perform and develop identities appropriate to the places and spaces we want to occupy” (KILL, 2006, p. 217). Enacting a successful identity role is part of the successful uptake process in producing genres. In test situations, identity positions are highly scripted with the test-taker offered a limited range of possible identity positions that might actually result in a high mark on the test. It is inappropriate for the test-taker to address the reader, for example, or to write in a prose style other than a controlled academic voice.

But the identity roles afforded in test situations are even more complex than this initial analysis suggests. As Freedman points out, uptakes have memories, and when students take up identities within test situations to produce their written exams, they are taking up an entire educational and cultural history of memories associated with educational testing (FREEDMAN, 2002). This process is not merely about a test-taker’s background knowledge of testing but the relationship between cultural contexts and the immediate test situation. Because test situations are “blind,” i.e., the test-taker does not know the exact identity of the grader, students may select from multiple memory representations of readers to form their response. This process of selection and representation suggests that although certain identity uptakes may seem inevitable in genred spaced, the process of selection and representation are what “open it up to intention and design” (KILL, 221, p. 218). As a result, it is not uncommon to see students “searching” in writing exams for identity positions that will be rewarded with higher scores. In hedging or moving across various pronimal uses, students are selecting slight variations in the highly scripted space of a test to address possible variations in graders’ identities.
One aspect missing from this analysis of identity uptakes in a test scene, however, is the role of cultural histories in shaping the kinds of uptakes that students choose. Because writing tests do not operate in isolation from culture, writing assessments are shaped by cultural expectations about academic performance. As I explained in the previous section, cultural histories “write” these expectations for us over and over across time. These influences outside the genre shape how students and graders come to writing tasks and how they construct the rhetorical situation.

4. Uptake of Racial stereotypes in writing assessments

In the following study, I wanted to understand how, if at all, cultural stereotypes about racial identity and academic performance are “taken up” by students, shape their expectations of the genres of testing situations, and ultimately shape the texts that they produce in response to a test prompt. Based on Claude Steele’s research on stereotype threat, I hypothesized that cultural stereotypes about racial identity would be found in writing assessment situations, but it was unclear to me how such stereotypes might change the rhetorical situation of the exam scene. If racial stereotypes about academic ability were present, and I could locate evidence of those stereotypes through empirical data, then we might have a clearer basis on which to base claims about uptakes and memory in genres.

4.1 Methods

This study was conducted in 2003 at a large US university in the state of Massachusetts. The University enrolls approximately 17,000 undergraduates each year with an entering class in 2003 of approximately 4,000 students. Approximately 83% of undergraduates are white, non-hispanic and are 18-22 years old. The subjects of this study were incoming first year students who took the Writing Program Placement Exam in Summer 2003 (Figure 1). Students were given the writing test before the beginning of the semester. The results of the test determined if students would be required to take additional writing classes at the University.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>569</td>
<td>626</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1021</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n=1,196) 38% return rate

Fig. 1- Participant Demographics
At the exam, students were given a reading from Emma Goldman’s “Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty,” published in 1917:

Indeed, conceit, arrogance, and egotism are the essentials of patriotism. Let me illustrate. Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular lot, considered themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore the duty of everyone living in that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others...

We Americans claims to be a peace-loving people. We hate bloodshed; we are opposed to violence. Yet we go into spasm of joy over the possibility of projecting dynamite bombs from flying machines upon helpless citizens. We are ready to hang, electrocute, or lynch someone, who, from economic necessity, will risk his own life in the attempt upon that of some industrial magnate. Yet our hearts swell with pride at the thought that America is becoming the most powerful nation on earth, and that it will eventually plant her iron foot on the necks of all other nations.

Such is the logic of patriotism.

Following the reading passage, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Write an essay in which you make an argument about what patriotism is and how it can affect human behavior. Remember that your essay should be organized around a specific thesis, and that thesis should be well supported with details and examples. Make sure to quote from Goldman’s work in your essay, but you may also reply on your own personal experiences and knowledge. For instance, you may describe, and then analyze, a patriotic moment from your own life; you may compare that idea of patriotism between cultures and countries; or you may consider how personal ideas about patriotism compare with public definitions.

Students had one hour to write their response. They were given no additional assistance from exam proctors other than the information provided on the exam directions:

At first reading of the exam reading, prompt, and directions, there seem to be little in the way of racialized identity roles. There is, however, a clear indication of genred expectations. Students are told to write an “essay,” and they are given some process-writing
advice on how to produce their essay. Students are also instructed to correct grammar and spelling errors before submitting their essays.

Given that such exam prompts often say little explicitly about racial identity and expectations, I gave students a short survey after they completed their exam. The survey asked students (1) demographic information about themselves, (2) questions about expected audience, and (3) eight questions about racial stereotypes. Students were asked to respond to the stereotype questions, using a 1-5 Likert scale with “1” being “strongly disagree” and “5” being “strongly agree.”

Using the results of the survey data, I then developed a corpus of discourse-based interview questions. At follow-up interviews (n=28), students were asked to explain their answers to the stereotype questions from the survey. Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically.

4.2 Results

While there appeared to be little in the way of racialized identity roles in the test prompt, student responses to the survey questions illustrated how racialized social roles circulate in testing spaces, even when not obvious. For example, students overwhelmingly constructed the exam grader as Caucasian, even though there was no evidence of this identity stated in the exam prompt or suggested in the immediate exam situation (Figure 2).

![Figure 2 - Students’ Expectations of Exam Graders’ Identities.](image)

In follow-up interviews, I asked students to explain more how they constructed their image of exam readers. Students based their answers on a combination of past educational experiences, racial demographics, and educational stereotypes. For example, one student observed:

“I’m sorry to say but I believe the only reason I answered that the reader would be a white, female professor is because all growing up I have only had white female teachers. It was really the only thing that came to my mind as I was writing (Peter K., white student)

Another student observed:

I believed the audience would be male Caucasians because they are the typical college professors. College professors are shown on television and other such national exposure as older male Caucasians. Also, chances are my guess would in the most part be correct, because they are the majority as well (Domingo, Latino student).
In taking up the exam prompt, students like Peter are not only drawing upon their knowledge of textual qualities of academic essay writing but they are also drawing upon their memory of writing situations. In Peter’s case, this memory includes the gendered, raced identities of Peter’s former teachers. As Peter’s comment suggests, “uptake” is not just an interactional feature but a condition of sociality.

The relationship between memory and uptake, however, is not monolithic across student test-takers. Students like Domingo, for example, did not draw upon memories of former teachers. Instead, students like Domingo took up culturally raced representations of academic authority. Responses such as Domingo’s suggest that when we orient ourselves to a social space, we may also draw upon broader cultural memories—in this instance, media depictions of professors—as well as our own individual memories of social spaces. Domingo’s response also suggests a route through which dominant ideologies, in this case media representations of academic authority, travel into genres.

But how do such identity constructions tell us about social actions within genres? Charles Bazerman writes that in communicative social space, we become “the kind of person [we] can become there” (2002, p. 13). But the kind of person we can become within a communicative social space may not always be the same. Because of our racial identities, for example, we may be offered different scripts in a genred space. More importantly, the kind of person we can become in a genred space may not be a tidy fit; genres may offer us contested positions, positions that invalidate our identities, or positions that afford us little agency. But how are we to understand where we are “written into” genres? How do we know if those positions are ones that afford us agency?

Students’ responses to the stereotype questions on the survey reflect how communicative social spaces may offer us different roles with very different kinds of agency (Figure 3). The results also suggest how our performances within spaces will be taken-up more broadly in culture, so that they are reframed within existing ideologies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m nervous about this test because people of my race/ethnicity usually do poorly on writing.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared to someone of another race/ethnicity, I’m expected to do well on this exam.</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m afraid that, if I do poorly on this exam, people might attribute my performance to my race.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I may graded differently on this test if the reader knows my race/ethnicity</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have someone of my own race/ethnicity grade my exam</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 - Student Responses to Stereotype Questions
(See Figure 1 for population sizes)

What is most interesting from a genre point of view in Figure 3 is that we see “uptake” of raced stereotypes from educational testing more generally. Only a subset of the stereotype questions asked about writing stereotypes; the other questions were questions about general testing abilities. For the students, the writing exam situation was linked to other kinds of social spaces that negated their performance because of their racial identity. This transfer
across spaces is what Claude Steele points to in his research when he says that stereotype threat is “in the air.”

In interviews students talked more about the uptake and circulation of stereotypes about academic performance, writing, and race. For example, Sharoda said:

I think in school it’s always been like the Indian kids are smarter, but I have a lot of friends [whose Indian parents] always pushed them to be studying. But just because they are always studying doesn’t mean that they are smarter... It seems that that stereotype has been set and so it’s just like, technically, because I’m an Indian child I should do well because they always expect it (Sharoda, asian student)

Sharoda points to how stereotypes are embedded not only in writing test but also in schooling systems more broadly. She also points to the way that racial stereotypes re-occur in various contexts so that they ultimately become “facts” that can circulate throughout various academic situations, including writing tests.

For Asian students like Sharoda such racial stereotypes can be beneficial, however, for students like Anthony racial stereotypes are more complex:

Just like affirmative action. Schools give minority students a benefit over the white students because they feel the minority student can’t compete with the white student, for this reason white professors will look at the test of a minority student and if they sound the least bit intelligent, the professors are surprised and hype up their grade a few notches. So I feel that the grading professor will grade me on the fact that I’m a black male (Anthony, black student).

What both Anthony’s quote also illustrates is not just that stereotypes reoccur but also that the reoccurrence is not simple repetition. Instead, reoccurrences are always partial, multi-faceted iterations that move and change across time. When Anthony describes expectations about test graders, he notes racial stereotypes that include 18th century stereotypes about African Americans’ intelligence and motivation as well as more recent stereotypes about African American’s language abilities and affirmative action. Ultimately, Anthony’s response suggests that recurrent features and uptakes are not necessarily proof of standardization but may, in fact, hint at underlying contradictions and to asymmetry in systems.

4.3 Case Study of a Student Essay

But how might we weave this information together to say something about the texts that students produce during the exam? Following is a case study of an essay written by Deane, an African American/Cape Verderan student. On her survey Denae indicated that she spoke English as her first language, her mother had some college, her father was a college graduate, and that she attended a public, suburban high school. She also indicated that doing well on the exam was important for her and that she felt nervous about taking the exam.

I chose Denae’s essay because she indicated high awareness of stereotypes on her survey. As shown in Figure 4, Denae was not worried that a poor performance on the writing test may be attributed to her race, but she was concerned that she would be graded differently on the test if the reader knew her racial identity. She also strongly disagreed with the statement that, as an African American, she was expected to do well on this exam. She felt more ambivalent when asked if race/ethnicity had anything to do with test performance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m afraid that, if I do poorly on this exam, people might attribute my performance to my race/ethnicity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared to someone of another race/ethnicity, I’m expected to do well on this exam.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I may be graded differently on this test if the reader knows my race/ethnicity.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m nervous about this test because people of my race/ethnicity usually do poorly on writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It makes me nervous to think that my score may reflect poorly on other people of my race/ethnicity.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I do well on this exam, I will probably rank higher than others of my race/ethnicity.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s silly to think that my race/ethnicity has anything to do with my performance.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4 - Denae’s Answers to the Stereotype Questions**

Answers were based on a 1-5 Likert scale, with “1” being strongly disagree and “5” being strongly agree.

Denae’s essay, which follows, received a middle-range passing mark on the test. Most students on holistically-scored exams receive middle-range passing marks.

Patriotism is the love for one’s country or land and what they will do to protect it from enemies, i.e., terrorists. Many people are of different opinions about patriotism and how it affects them personally. Mostly, it depends on what your background is and how you were raised.

In Emma Goldman’s passage called “Patriotism,” she writes: “Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in to impose his superiority upon all the others.” Most African-American feel as though there were brought to the U.S. forcefully with no choice and rights. That is why many now don’t feel the way Emma Goldman wrote in the last quote written. Human behavior can also trigger many emotions in others. For example, the burning of the American flag. Many feel that this is wrong since that is their own countries’ flag. Others feel as though they have been violated some way and that they need to express their anger by shouting it openly. During the 1970s hippies and Black Panthers openly expressed their anger for what was happening in their country and the Vietnam War. They also had demonstrations, marches, and speeches. Some of these caused riots and some even lead to death. This is a frightening thing, since most of the actions all lead back to whether the person supported their country or not: patriotism. When September 11 happened, many people felt as though they needed to unite as one to overcome their grief. They hung American flags everywhere, saying “God Bless the USA.” Others felt as though they didn’t need to do such things, like many minorities. Their nation hurt terribly after 9/11, but it did unite somewhat. Before 9/11 many didn’t really pay patriotism attention. Now, they feel as Emma Goldman wrote, “Our hearts swell with pride at the thought that American is becoming the most powerful nation on earth...” Our target on terrorism is much more alert now than it ever has been. Because of what? Patriotism.

Patriotism is the love of one’s country and what they will do to protect it at all costs. Many feel a surge of strong patriotism, others have their reasons as they don’t. Mainly, patriotism is a very wary and difficult subject to discuss because of all the different opinions. Love for one’s country can go far, but far enough to die or even
more, kill? No one has the correct answer for that question, only their own opinion. But the opinions of people can make a nation change its behavior towards it. The right to express feelings for their country can lead to different situations. It can break apart or even unite a nation. As Emma Goldman write: “Such is the logic of patriotism.”

Denae’s essay conforms to most of the structural expectations for an academic essay. She takes a position—“[patriotism] depends on what your background is and how you were raised”—and offers evidence to support her claims. There is an introduction that includes her thesis, a body that supports her thesis with pro and con evidence, and a conclusion that echoes her thesis. She cites the reading from Emma Goldman, which was a requirement of the test, and her tone is suitably detached, as expected in US-style academic writing.

Aside from these textual features, however, we see something very different if we look at the identity position that Denae takes in this essay. In the first paragraph, Denae argues that one’s views of patriotism are influenced by his or her background and “how you were raised.” Denae’s use of the second person pronoun “you” closes the distance between reader and writer, ostensibly including the reader in Denae’s description. She then uses the Goldman quote antithetically to argue that “Most African-Americans feel as though there were brought to the U.S. forcefully with no choice and rights. That is why many now don’t feel the way Emma Goldman wrote in the last quote written.” Although Denae does not identify here as African American, she acknowledges the point of view of African Americans. Most notably, in making her argument, Denae chooses to a rhetorical middle-ground in which she balances pro and con views without personally identifying her own racial identity.

While Denae does not openly self-identify in her essay, there are clues in her essay that she notices identity positions and the power associated with various positions. She links hippies and Black Panthers and explains the attitudes of African Americans towards patriotism. In her essay, Denae also positions herself as someone who understands the psychology of African Americans or “minorities” as well as “many people,” i.e., American dominant white culture. She traces why different groups, such as African Americans, do not share the same patriotic views as “many people”—because African Americans were brought to the US “with no choice or rights.”

Through such analysis, we can see how Denae moves between a discourse that speaks for “othered” identity groups such as African Americans and hippies and a more general discourse about “many Americans.” Although Denae’s essay ends with her conclusion that “[patriotism] can break apart or even unite a nation,” she moves outside the genre of the essay to continue her argument. She adds an epigraph to her essay:

Since this subject interests me, I would write more about it in a much more detailed way. To me, as an African-American, I don’t feel really connected to the US like most Caucasian Americans do. After 9/11, I hung up American flags, grieving for all the deceased people, believing that my uncle who works at the Pentagon could have been one of them. But then I realize that many minorities have been treated unfairly since they were brought here tied in the lower deck of a slave ship. I have mixed emotions about patriotism. I love my country, just not enough to kill or die for it.

In this epigraph, Denae takes a different tone than in her essay and begins by stating her interest in the topic of patriotism as well as her desire to write more on the topic. She explains to the readers, perhaps those unreliable readers that she noted on her survey, the sense of ambivalence that African Americans feel towards patriotism. She speaks directly to her audience —“To me, as an African-American”—to explain her mixed emotions about patriotism and September 11th. She draws on two images in explaining those emotions: her uncle who works in the Pentagon and the image of Africans “tied in the lower deck of a slave
ship.” Such images link historical and current identities for African Americans. She concludes by both affirming her “love” of her country and qualifying that statement, “just not enough to kill or die for it.”

The epigraph is also an uptake of the essay itself. The epigraph “depends” on the essay. While students had the option to write an epigraph to their exam, the test designers encouraged test-takers to use the epigraph to explain their writing process. Denae has taken this possibility, however, to “open” or expand the test genre to create a dialog with the test grader. Perhaps because the epigraph is not the genre of the exam, it can open new rhetorical possibilities for Denae. The epigraph can usher in or sanction a different kind of uptake, one that perhaps gives her more flexibility in closing the distance between reader and writer. For example, the sense of audience Denae conveys in this epigraph is not the objective grader of the exam essay, rather a reader who shares a common humanity, regardless of their racial identity.

In Denae’s uptake of the exam prompt, she must balance the narrow role that she is ascribed as a test-taker in a testing situation with the role that she is ascribed as an African-American in US culture. Evidence of this tension is found in the two “voices” in Denae’s responses; the essayist voice says one thing, the epigraphic voice says another. The essayist response is her answering the ‘normative pressure’ of the genre in the test scene. On the other hand, the epigraph is not bounded by the same limitations as the exam, so Denae “responds to her response” by taking the position of the African-American speaker in the epigraph—a place where such an identity may speak with greater agency (and not effect her test score). Such tensions suggest that culture shapes genres as sites for social action, but it also controls social action through genres, especially ones like testing genres which appear to be so neutral or decontextualized.

In the end, Denae’s responses show that although a genre may offer certain identity positions for its players, those positions may not work fluently for every player. In some instances such as test situations, the normative pressure of a particular identity scripted in that test situation may not correlate very well with the writer’s sociological identity and the historical memory tied to that “lived-in” identity.

5. Conclusion

Because genres are cultural artifacts and, thus, sites of action, the analysis of genres and their relationship to other cultural discursive forms can tell us about the representation and reproduction of racial identity in US educational testing. By analyzing identity ‘uptakes’ in essays and linking those ‘uptakes’ to other cultural frames, we can better understand how racially-ordered discourses mediate the texts that writers produce in testing situations. In the process of taking up an identity within a writing test essay, for example, students must negotiate/resist/accept the normative pressures exerted in the communicative social space along with other cultural narratives about their identities.

The findings of this study are consistent with social psychology research that test performance may be influenced by stereotypes: test sites are not impervious to cultural stereotypes. Such findings may enrich scholarly research on test genres because it shows how even testing genres are forms of cultural representation, not simply objective performance measures. Such research may also prove fruitful in adding dimensions of power and agency to genre research, especially related to reoccurrence. Reoccurrence is not simple repetition; it is related to selection, representation, and power structures and is therefore a site for contention.

Twenty years ago Carolyn Miller wrote: “…what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have…” (1994, p. 38). However, in light of Denae’s essay and
student responses about stereotypes, this quote seems more problematic. What are the ends that we “may” have? Are those ends ones that we are permitted to have, ones that we have hypothetically, or ones that we can imagine to change the limits of identity in the genred space?

References


OLIVER, R. Genre and teaching of writing. 2005. Available in:


USA. 347 U.S. 483, May 17, 1954. *Oliver L. Brown et.al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka (KS)*.

