Decolonial Work Outside the Technical Communication Classroom: A Personal Narrative of My Journey from Scholar to Technical Writer

Kristiana Perleberg

Kristiana Perleberg is a PhD student in Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and corgi aficionado. She considers herself an aspiring critical-creative scholar, meaning she wants to collaborate and write with folks largely outside of academia in nontraditional ways. While her background is in Technical and Professional Communication, her doctoral research has been focused on reproductive injustices and issues of access in Milwaukee. As the field of technical communication continues on this new wave of social justice and activism, she hopes to continue to be a part of this conversation that prioritizes historically marginalized and silenced voices and language practices.

Author's Note: This piece would not be what it is without the efforts of my reviewers, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. What started out as a book review of *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* by Gregory Younging has morphed into this personal narrative that attempts to articulate how one can enact decolonial practices outside the classroom. The comments from my reviewers helped me not only to create a richer manuscript but also to think specifically about decolonial methods—rather than remaining firmly under the comfort of the social justice umbrella. As the reviewers (and the authors I now cite in this piece based on those comments) showed me, this distinction is both important and necessary. I am appreciative of the work that has been done in this space and of the reviewers who pointed me towards these works in order to help me more fully realize the potential of this piece—and of the responsibilities of my work as a scholar in technical communication.

I want to start this by saying I always have a hard time knowing what to call myself. My degrees are in technical and professional writing, I work at a large tax and accounting firm doing technical writing, and I am currently a doctoral student starting my prelim work in public rhetorics and community engagement. Calling myself a technical writer still feels disingenuous, but I also don't feel I fit the mold of what I always thought a scholar looked like, let alone a rhetorician. Before landing my current job, my career trajectory took me from waitressing and bartending to office life, the majority of which has always had a heavy writing aspect. While I don't always have a clear sense of what I *do want* to do, I know what I *don't want* to do—and that is teach or remain in academia (AFTER this degree . . . which is the last one for real this time!). Most of my

Abstract

The field of technical and professional communication (TPC) has historically upheld white, patriarchal language practices without interrogation. While we are now in the time beyond what many scholars call the social justice turn in the field, which includes prioritizing oppressed voices and working from a decolonial framework, early-career scholars like myself are still left wondering how we go from the classroom to the field. As a TPC scholar and technical writer who often feels out of place in academia, I offer this narrative for future scholars and rhetoricians struggling to transition these ideas from the classroom to their professional industries. By describing my experiences as a technical writer in academia and beyond, I hope to inspire others (especially those newer to the field) to interrogate their own understanding of language and practices—and my own as a white, cisgender, able-bodied academic. It should not fall to oppressed voices to provide step-by-step guides for white folks to get it right, but the guides must especially be read and followed when they *are* written, and there is an ever-growing body of work from which we can draw. By relying on scholarship that calls out the need for both the expansion of the social justice turn in TPC and a deeper understanding of what it actually means to utilize decolonial methods, as well as describing my own sites of intervention at the professional services firm I work for, I hope to show readers how social justice-oriented academic practices can be incorporated into industry, even when that industry doesn't allow for a full overhaul of the status quo.

Keywords

decolonial methods; technical and professional communication; workplace writing; Indigenous style; narrative

experience in academia, especially in rhetoric and writing, is that course readings and work center academic voices. This piece is not necessarily a critique of that centering—after all, many people in graduate English programs do dream of going on to get tenure somewhere. In fact, I can count on one hand, one finger actually, how many other students in my MA program were seeking industry jobs over academia, so it is understandable that these courses are designed with that in mind. However, it does make the experience more isolating for those of us who are seeking nonacademic tracks postgraduation and can leave us questioning how we can put these ideas into practice in the workplace, rather than just the classroom. While I don't mean to minimize the fact that teaching has its own set of challenges, which are ever changing and restricting in many ways, I want to highlight how it can feel daunting to early-career technical communicators to find ways to incorporate these important concepts outside the classroom as well.

When I began my first degree in technical and professional communication (TPC) years ago, I did so because I was always just good at writing and editing. I got As in all my English courses, my instructors always praised my writing, and (forgive me) I was the annoying friend who pointed out grammatical errors in my friends' writings. I thought in those days that I was going to become a book editor, living out my days improving the grammar of manuscripts that crossed my desk (which seemed a lot more romantic at the time)—and I never once stopped to interrogate what it even meant to be a good writer in the US school system. However, the further I got in my studies, the more I started recognizing that there were problems. I can still remember my Survey of Modern English Grammar instructor asking us on the first day of class in the fall of 2014 to raise our hands if we were either self-proclaimed or described by those in our lives as "grammar Nazis"—which, as one reviewer of this publication aptly pointed out, has always been a somewhat flippant way of accurately encompassing the violent function of language. I honestly don't recall if my hand was raised sheepishly or with pride, but I do know that as we held our hands in the air, she told us our understanding of the rules of language was likely rooted in racism and classism, which set me on a new course of understanding what it means to study and do technical communication. I am lucky she was the first of many to raise these critiques of a set of rules and normative practices I had not previously considered or problematized.

As many scholars in the field have rightfully pointed out, TPC is in a new phase—one that addresses and refutes the once-held belief that TPC is a neutral field, sort of like me thinking that being skilled in White Mainstream English (something I had never considered until reading April Baker-Bell's 2020 masterpiece) somehow meant something other than that I was succeeding in a system that was built for me in many ways. Baker-Bell uses "the term White Mainstream English in place of standard English to emphasize how white ways of speaking become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norm" (p.4). Particularly, the field has shifted to address the problem that "our work, our classrooms, and our conferences are indeed problematic sites of injustice" (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019, p.1), and those sites have long upheld white, patriarchal language practices and ideas. It is important to call out here, though, that social justice and decolonization are not one and the same, an important distinction made by Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq and Breeanne Matheson (2021). They "argue that [dynamic decolonial frameworks] should have boundaries in order to assure that decolonial work retains a meaningful benefit to Indigenous people" so as not to "remarginalize Indigenous peoples" (p. 28)—whether intentionally or not. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) put it, "Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all" (p. 10). So while scholars and technical communicators continue to seek out ways to address the problems within the field, marginalized voices are rightfully being prioritized in a way that can help newcomers to TPC continue the trend of interrogating the long-held practices rooted in racism while actively working not to perpetuate harm.

In this spirit of interrogating White Mainstream English, I have been introduced to various marginalized voices in TPC, including the author of *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, Gregory Younging. In fact, this piece itself started in early drafts as a review of that book, which I found to provide useful, formulaic instructions for how technical editors can work with Indigenous writers. The book itself does the work the title sets out to—it is the first major work published that collects largely accepted principles of Indigenous writing for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and editors to follow. A member of the Opsakwayak Cree Nation and managing editor of Theytus Books, Younging had a desire to put this work together in order to help decolonialize language practices. However, as Itchuaqiyaq and Matheson caution, "Because there has been such a large and rapid uptick in TPC scholars using a decolonial frame, it is important to trouble the field's working definition of 'decolonial' as it relates to TPC research practices" (p. 20). The authors describe this as an important way to continue moving forward after the social justice turn in TPC in such a way that continues to be more inclusive and respectful within the field (p. 20).

As a working member of the TPC world and an ongoing scholar in rhetoric, I see firsthand how dominant language practices have prevailed and continue to prevail within the field. I think about what kinds of interventions I might make, even as someone with still relatively limited power in my organization. After all, as Natasha Jones, Kristen Moore, and Rebecca Walton (2016) assert, "[A] cross TPC, more effort can and should be made to address inequities—many members of the field can be doing more with their power and privilege from their positions within organizations and situations" (p. 135). I interpret this as, while I might not feel I hold a ton of power within my firm, I still have a duty to use the privilege I do have to call out and push back against the things I see as harmful. They go on to remind us that we must be continually and actively thinking about our 3Ps—positionality, privilege, and power—throughout the research and writing process, which can extend to storytelling and editing, among other practices.

To that end, I understand I have a good amount of power and privilege ascribed to me simply because of my positionality. Let's face it: as an able-bodied, cisgender, white, college-educated woman, in both academia and my professional services industry job, I have significant access to resources and information that might not be accessible to folks who do not fall into these socially constructed and oppressive categories. I try to apply these 3Ps to everything I write so I can determine if I am the right person to tell the story, and I struggled with revising a seminar book review so it became this publishable personal narrative for a long time. Does the publishing world need more white voices highlighting the marginalized experience? As a PhD student, do I even have the expertise to be talking about this experience if my voice is the right one to tell the story? Rachel Shah (2020) perfectly puts into words how I was feeling about this. She writes,

> As someone who lives in the tension between a decade-long engagement with community-based work inspired by a spiritual commitment to social justice and the haunting suspicion that I am just another white do-gooder carrying the scent of imperialism, I turn to nondominant literatures to wrestle with this tension. . . . Acknowledging my whiteness and wanting to work in an antiracist white frame therefore draws me to work with literatures that emerge not just from the ivory-white tower, but from nondominant locations. (p. 11)

While I don't yet have Shah's experience with community-based work, that is the subject of my PhD, so I do hope to get there one day. I borrow words again here, this time from Aisha Shillingford, to put forth a sort of justification for my story here. Shillingford, quoted in adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*, writes, "[M]y core responsibility is to be a benefit to whatever I'm engaged in. I may not always know HOW that will happen but it has to be my aim. I want peoples' lives to have been better (even in very tiny ways) from having participated with me in this work" (p. 90). And, as Shawn Wilson (2008), Opaskwayak Cree and author of *Research Is Ceremony*, reminds us, "[R]elationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality" (p. 7). What I take from Shah, Shillingford, and Wilson is that we have a duty as technical communicators who are trained and skilled in rhetorical and language practices to do something different (read: better) in order to resist simply continuing the status quo, and we have the knowledge and the tools to do so.

Younging's piece is accessible and originally resonated with me because it is written in a way that allows (and, in fact, invites) non-Indigenous writers to incorporate his practices into various technical editing and writing applications. Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized voices are not to blame for the historical (and still ongoing) lack of diversity in technical communication. This is not some problem for BIPOC to address. It's an issue that must be attended to from the inside out, and non-Indigenous writers must be a large part of that conversation—not to override or silence Indigenous voices, not to "white knight" and save anyone from anything, but to lead by example, to fight alongside those voices who are, and have been, demanding change. While Younging writes the book in a way that calls into question writing and editing practices involving Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous writers and editors in Canada, the principles he sets forth are very easily applicable to the United States (and beyond, I am certain). At the time of publication in 2018, Younging described the pressing need for Indigenous Peoples to have a say in the documentation of their own history because they have long been misrepresented in text, film, and general perception by settler people. He called it timely then, and now only a few years later it feels just as timely to be discussing these practices.

Though recent global events—including worldwide Black Lives Matter protests, the horrific public discovery of reservation school deaths and subsequent cover-ups, and the backlash from Gabby Petito's case highlighting the disparity between how missing and murdered white women's stories are handled versus missing and murdered Indigenous women's stories—have brought BIPOC issues to light in new and more far-reaching ways, there is still uncertainty for technical editors about how to ethically share these stories. Younging expresses the need for further scholarship to be published surrounding the telling of Indigenous stories and welcomes the conversation to continue through this book. For non-Indigenous scholars, it is increasingly important to understand how colonizer language has shaped our understanding of storytelling. As Shah points out, "Because marginalized communities are seen as places of intellectual and material deficiency, inquiry into community engagement concepts or specific programs is often seen as the discovery of knowledge that doesn't exist until the academic finds it, rather than honoring the knowledges that already exist in communities" (p. 171). Wilson also writes on this subject, reminding us that "[i]nstead of diagnosing the person as having a problem and offering a treatment, this way of counselling would normalize what the person was going through" (p. 28)—that is, white folks do not somehow have more legitimate knowledge or research practices, but rather we should be listening to the marginalized voices who are telling us both what the issues are and how to best address them and then taking those actions—no matter how uncomfortable or unconventional they may seem.

We must actively resist this idea that we hold the key to solving problems for people and instead consider how we can work against these ingrained ideas and practices (Lane, 2010), even (and perhaps especially) if we are not intentionally misrepresenting stories or individuals. In his famous quote, anti-apartheid and human rights activist Desmond Tutu reminds us that "[i]f you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality" (quoted by Robert McAfee Brown in his 1984 book, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*). The same can be said for technical communication. Just because the norm of the field has historically been to use colonizer language without question, that does not make the language itself neutral; similarly, just because a writer doesn't intend to use harmful language to perpetuate stereotypes does not mean the outcome isn't harmful. One way for intent and action to align, though, is to continue to read and put into practice the ideas put forth by Indigenous Peoples, Black writers, and other oppressed voices. The resources are there, the timing is kairotic, and the field is open for the shift.

In my experience reading these stories, Indigenous writing practices seem to prioritize truthfulness, collaboration, and intentionality in writing and editing. This feels especially relevant given all the examples Younging and other scholars provide of completely erroneous Indigenous stereotypes prevalent in mainstream language. Further scholarship exists that calls out these "everyday phrases" actively harmful to Indigenous Peoples (Kapitan, 2021), which makes clear that the conversation Younging's book attempts to cultivate is both possible and necessary. For technical editors who believe equity in storytelling is important (and it is), it can feel overwhelming to know where to start for fear of perpetuating greater harm. This is also a critique of social justice in TPC—Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) point out that "[o]nce we understand the gravity of oppression in an intersectional way, scholars are often paralyzed at the thought of getting it wrong" (p. 5). The problems are massive, the situation is grave, and the solution is not linear or neat. However, that is not a viable excuse for not trying to make the changes, have the uncomfortable conversations, or understand where our biases come from. It should not fall to oppressed voices to provide step-by-step guides for white folks to get it right, but the guides must especially be read and followed when they are written. By offering these guiding principles for Indigenous style practices, Younging (and others) help alleviate some of those fears. Rather than providing some prescriptive how-to guide for exactly how to utilize Indigenous style practices, he instead suggests ideas for how to move forth in what is likely to be unfamiliar terrain for non-Indigenous editors. He achieves this by presenting multiple case studies from varying viewpoints in the writer/editor conversation. By showing real-life examples of the guiding principles, he makes this guide extremely accessible for even the most novice technical editor.

As I read Younging, Wilson, Itchuaqiyaq, Tuck and Yang, and other works by so many impressive scholars in the field and have impassioned discussions with my colleagues, and as I think about how I am going to incorporate this type of work into my dissertation project, I am still sometimes left wondering where I stand professionally. As mentioned earlier, I am currently a technical writer. At the professional services firm I have worked at since receiving my MA in professional and technical communication, I do the kind of work I thought I might in this field. I write proposals for potential clients, write and edit content, and utilize techniques and best practices I learned in document design, technical editing, and other professional writing classes. However, the turn to social justice in TPC moves slowly in academia and even slower in industry. I continually ask myself how I can bring these practices into my work and know I am privileged to have a team that listens to and supports my ideas and questioning of our practices, even though the tax and accounting industry is not adopting anything outside White Mainstream English anytime soon.

Recent scholarship seems to advocate for change, regardless of how seemingly small it may be on the scales of justice. It feels like the professional services field as a whole is becoming more transparent with DEI efforts, especially when it comes to leadership of these firms, but there is still an incredibly long way to go to reach any kind of equitable staff makeup. I was ecstatic when I was asked to be a part of our team's accessibility overhaul of our template material, and I was asked to be a part of it because of how outspoken I am on these issues with my whole team. I now get to put into practice some of what I am learning about, including writing for inclusion across the spectrum. Unfortunately, a lot of industry folks still view inclusive editing as just writing for those with visual impairments, rather than as incorporating an expanded definition of disability in the lens of accessibility, including cognitive issues, physical issues, emotional issues, and age (Pass, 2013, p. 117). And, as Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) assert, "[T]he world is designed for the able-bodied person. Ableism centers the experiences of able-bodied individuals, leaving those with disabilities at the margins. So, in design terms, we might ask, 'Who is this space, place, program, technology designed for? And who simply must make do?'" (p. 137). Being able to bring this expanded definition into our best practices will allow me to have a measurable site of intervention in my position in TPC, which lets me integrate my identities as both a scholar and a writer.

Itchuaqiyaq and Matheson (2020) provide more tips for communication designers, such as recognizing "the potentially competing interests (such as the underlying capitalistic demands of colonial organizations) at play in your project" (p. 28), which absolutely comes up in conversation at work. As an academic, I am able to bring best practices to leadership in terms of content writing, editing, and design, and I know how to back up the claims I make with solid evidence—that is, I can cite (BIPOC) sources and present the information in a well-organized and easy-to-follow document. In this way, I can bring in these TPC practices focused on social justice and decolonial work into my field without having to try to advocate for that specific terminology. Again, as we know the power of language and how the personal is political, scholars of both rhetoric and TPC can toe this line well if we try. In doing so, I am able to balance both my own understanding of the decolonial work in the field and my deep knowledge of my firm and industry, so I am able to combine the two with little pushback because I am still working within the confines of my position.

I turn now once more to my original iteration of this piece, the book review of Younging's work. In chapter 6, "Terminology," he writes, "This chapter and the next are about the words on the page" (p. 50), and he provides a laundry list of offensive and inappropriate terminology, as well as a long list of appropriate terms and the reasoning behind them. It doesn't take a (seemingly lifelong) scholar of rhetoric to know words matter, language choice matters, and the decisions behind those choices matter. Chapter 6 gives many specific examples of words to both avoid and use, while chapter 7, "Specific Editorial Issues," provides more nuanced editorial choices one might face. He provides lists of words that should be capitalized, italicized, and otherwise defined, though he also laments the list of Indigenous words that have been appropriated. He writes:

> I regret that English has swallowed these words. These words bear witness to the history of Indigenous Peoples in contact with Europeans. They often represent technologies and foods that Indigenous Peoples introduced to Europeans. Their presentation as "English" terms fails to acknowledge the contributions Indigenous Peoples have made to mainstream culture and the English language, and fails to educate readers who may not be aware of these contributions. (p. 87)

This passage leads into the heart of what this guide is about: respect. It is about respect on the page as much as it is about respect of the experience and the individual. If readers take nothing else from my writing, my hope is that respect sticks out as a guiding practice for everyone in the field of technical communication, whatever their job may be. Itchuaqiyaq (2020) provides a decolonial framework in her open-access undergrad course, where she points out that "[d]ecoloniality is a practice not a prescription. Decolonial methods require a change in perspective that is incredibly hard to do, something hardly achievable in one semester," so I do not wish to attempt in vain to take up how to put those practices into play here, especially since Itchuaqiyaq and Matheson specifically warn against the misuse or oversimplification of decolonial work in TPC. In fact, Itchuaqiyaq and Matheson (2121) offer specific practices for doing decolonial work and design, which specifically calls for collaboration with Indigenous communities in the work and for respect, as Younging also stresses. It is important to call out the scholarship on decolonial work in TPC in order to allow for further engagement and commitment to the work—both from myself and hopefully from at least some readers.

White supremacy is insidious: it does not always present itself in flagrantly obvious ways. It is "a system or social order that keeps power and resources consolidated among white elites, using an ideology (or way of understanding the world) that upholds whiteness—including white people, white cultural values, and white institutions—as being best or most 'normal'" (Kapitan, 2017). Seemingly nonviolent acts are perpetuated through language use and misuse in ways that cause lasting harm and misinformation, as has historically been the case with Indigenous storytelling. It is for this reason that scholarship surrounding how to appropriately and respectfully write for, and more importantly with, Indigenous Peoples remains important. As Younging reminds us, "Just because it's in a book—or especially if it's in an academic book from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—doesn't mean the content was appropriate to publish in the first place, or that it has been published with consent, or that it has been published accurately" (p. 40). This argument is even more relevant today as we see many states trying to ban what they erroneously believe to be critical race theory—just because something is or is not published, academically or otherwise, doesn't mean it did or did not happen. It's important to know what is inappropriate or disrespectful when it comes to writing and editing practices, but it's perhaps more important to dig into why they are. While it is true that some people who use offensive language don't mean harm by it, intent does not mean as much as outcome, especially when lives are at stake. For example, using past tense to describe Indigenous Peoples can work to erase their current existence in the world. For technical writers and editors, understanding that even these seemingly small grammatical choices have huge implications for those whose stories we are sharing is of the utmost importance, especially for those who are non-Indigenous. Writing presented as neutral is sometimes the most harmful, and both learning about and incorporating the elements of style presented by Younging and others will allow for a more equitable body of scholarship to be published. While Indigenous stories have always been told and will always be told, ensuring they are being represented in an honest manner, especially when they are told by non-Indigenous writers, must be the goal of the technical editor.

When reading this narrative, you might ask yourself how you previously thought of the neutrality (or nonneutrality) of words, phrasing, capitalization, verb tense, and the like. Where are the sites you can intervene in order to put social justice academic ideologies into practice? What is your responsibility to the field? To your community? To yourself? By continuing to interrogate our own 3Ps and bringing decolonial practices from academia into industry as much as we are able, my hope is that future TPC scholars will continue to turn the social justice wheel even quicker in the field as a whole, and not just in the classroom.

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