

Relocating Authority

An Interview with Mira Shimabukuro by Charlyne Sarmiento

A transcript of the full interview that accompanies Charlyne Sarmiento's *enculturation* book review entitled "Uncovering Community Literacy, Agency, and Political Resistance through Cultural and Community Specific Methodologies: A Review of Mira Shimabukuro's *Relocating Authority*" (Summer 2018)

Charlyne: Mira, thanks again for having this conversation with me. I really appreciate it. It's really special to be able to talk to you after reviewing your book and reading through and just understanding your process and methodology.

Mira: Thank you.

Charlyne: And so could you just give us a brief introduction or overview of your book?

Mira: Sure. So my book is called *Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration*. And it examines the ways that Japanese Americans have continually used writing to respond to the circumstances of their community's mass imprisonment during World War II. So throughout the book I rely a lot on Japanese American cultural frameworks and community specific history for my methodological inspiration, I guess you could say, and guidance. And I look at literacy practices such as diary entries, note taking, manifestos, and

multiple drafts of single documents, and so as I do, I'm trying to show how writing was used both privately and publicly to individually survive and collectively resist the conditions of incarceration.

Charlyne: Great, I wanted to ask: What are some insights you discovered from sharing your work to both academic and activist or community audiences? Have these experiences shifted how you see the field of Writing and Rhetorical Studies engaged with the public? And if so, how?

Mira: It's actually been awhile since I've presented this work to academic communities, so I'll talk about community audiences mainly. In many ways, folks in these spaces have been less concerned about writing, per se, and more excited about the stories I shine light on and the arguments I make about resistance during the incarceration period. I've had several folks be particularly interested in my rereading of the concept of *gaman*, for example, and others are very interested in all of the *Issei* or immigrant generations' activity that I discuss. I have had others be excited about concepts like "resistance capital," which I discuss in my final chapter from critical race education scholar Tara Yosso. And many folks are very excited about all the stories of women's activism that you could see throughout my book, since women's' resistance has been very underexamined and studied. I think all of this stems from being fed the notion for so long that no one resisted during exclusion and incarceration. I mean, we've essentially internalized a master narrative of passivity about ourselves. And yet, I think many have wondered how true that idea actually is or was. And so the contemporary takes on the model minority myth do push

us to believe that story of passivity, so getting a stronger sense of the ways we did not fit into that stereotype is really meaningful for people.

I've always had critiques about the relationship between academic disciplines or fields of knowledge and the communities they, or we, write about. So I don't think there has been so much of a change for me. But I should say that my thoughts are not about writing or rhetorical studies per se, but about academia in general. For me, the question is always, "Who and what are we writing for?" And I don't mean this just in terms of audience, though that's important too, but rather, "Who is the knowledge building for? And [to] "Who's service do we research or write?" And so for me, community responses have just helped me feel like what I was doing has been worth it and that it was important, and each public talk I give feels like another stage of a dissertation defense. I'm treated like an authority, but I still feel the importance of receiving approval in these spaces. And if activists and scholars from the community sanction the work, then I know I've done good.

Charlyne: Great, thank you so much. I mean, I think that is something that I really admire of your work, and just its, writing for the community, and having them, kind of, to engage with them.

And the second questions is kind of similar to this, and more specifically for emerging scholars and grad students as myself. So, like, for emerging scholars and grad students who are pursuing projects that engage with the literacy practices of communities, what advice would you give them to retain their agency in their methodological choices while still anchoring them in the

language and values that are understood in our field? But I guess that question is also couched in “writing for our field,” so you could shift that too as well, if that is something that’s not the goal.

Mira: No, that’s fine. Yeah I think this is a really great question. You know, I think some of it, of course, depends on the receptiveness of your advisors and your specific department of course, right? What kinds of arguments can you make to them that you need to make these choices. How is it necessary to the work you are doing? I was lucky in that I had this support. I didn’t have that much pushback once I laid it out the way that I did. But I was very conscious about explaining it in ways I thought my committee would understand.

Charlyne: I see.

Mira: But I think it’s as much about being clear with yourself about what you’re doing and why—like really feeling that conviction to your bones.

So I wrote my dissertation from afar. I actually wasn’t in regular conversation with my advisors or my colleague grad students, and I should say that the book is based on my dissertation. But I think that really helped me actually. I was immersed in the archival documents I was reading. I was immersed in Asian American history and theory informing my work. I was in regular conversation with the folks who ran the Japanese American National Museum and the Densho online. And I was also having a lot of conversations with long time redress activists and archival recovery workers. So I was writing from that headspace and these locations. So I think that

helped, you know, being my primary conversations on the day-to-day were with these folks and they were not necessarily with other graduate students or my advisors.

Charlyne: I see.

Mira: But again, you know, I think it still goes back to that question, “Who are you writing for and why”?

Charlyne: Right.

If you’ve been immersed in the field of writing and rhetoric studies, as any of us should be by the time we’re ABD, then the language and the values of the field will be there. You’ll be in conversation with them whether you’re conscious of it or not.

Charlyne: Right.

You’re going to be talking to them or talking back to them, or thinking about how they interact with what you’re thinking about. From there, it’s just an issue of making areas of knowledge talk to one another.

Charlyne: Right. Thanks. Thanks, Mira. And so my last question has to do, kind of, with the way the writing in the book, which I found just.... I enjoyed reading. There are parts of it where I would just like to read it aloud, and I could imagine you in the archives, which I thought was

really engaging. So, throughout your book, you integrate various textual artifacts--poetry, annotated lists of events, and places and memories, and what I viewed that as a making explicit the lineage of your project. Could you comment on how *Relocating Authority* is a form of writing-to-redress, and also how instructors could introduce this rhetorical lens for students in their courses we teach and the writing activities we assign in composition and rhetoric? So this is kind of going back to teaching within the field and how that may be something that we can do with our own teaching of writing.

Mira: You know, one of the things that I like about writing studies is it is an interdisciplinary field—it calls upon all of these areas, and for me that was very inviting. Before I identified as a rhet/comp scholar or as a literacy person, I identified as a poet. My master's is actually an MFA in poetry, and my pre-PhD life was focused on writing poems. So, you know, but like a lot of creative writers, I needed to pay the bills. And so I sought out the teaching of writing to do that. I always enjoyed working with other people on the craft of words, and so that worked out well for me. But without going too far down the path of what eventually led me to doing the PhD, I'll just say that my committed relationship with writing begins there in expressive forms. Writing is a way to process life, and I very much identified with the thrust of Harrington and Curtis' study, for example, *Persons in Process*. For me, though, processing and writing is going to come in whatever form it comes and had I grown up now or come to writing a little bit later in the history of literacy, I'd probably be a multi-modal person. But I'm a lot older than people think I am [laughs]. I was really taken with the broad ways writing was seen in rhet/comp and in literacy studies and in many ways, it was a much more open approach than even in my MFA program, and that's one of the things that pulled me toward the field. But I was also really dismayed that

so little had been integrated from Ethnic Studies, from Asian American Studies. If a more thorough integration had already taken place, I probably would have followed a different path—probably on politics of language and identity. And I might have landed in the conceptual areas of translingualism and code meshing. But when I got to grad school the only book manuscript available was Morris Young's *Minor Revisions* and it was so important. Then LuMing Mao's book came out during my third year as a PhD student, so I was fully aware and felt fully obligated to help redress this "absent presence" as Cathy Prendergast calls it.

But I still came at my writing, even my academic writing, as a way to process life, so and there was a lot more to redress than just narrow curriculums—a lot more to reckon with. As you know, there is a lot about my own identity in the book, which many people are surprised to learn, is not one of being a descendent of camp survivors. My biological family was not incarcerated enmasse because they lived in Hawaii. My grandfather was part of the initial rounding up the week after Pearl Harbor, but I think they let him go because as a working class leftist Okinawan, he was a pretty vocal critic of Japanese imperialism. But if you grow up in the west coast as Japanese American, whether you know it or not, you live with the legacy of this time period. And it impacts your embodied experiences, and I knew it was impacting the ways I saw my research, and I had no reason to hide this and every reason to name it and integrate it with my approach.

In terms of classes, I think a lot depends on the level of courses you mean. I've played around with designing my first-year composition classes around the idea, but I don't use my own work in these classes. So instead, I do things like take Ralph Cintron's line of how do we use language to "create respect in the face of little to no respect." Then, I use work by bell hooks and Cheryl

Glenn because I remain interested in the tension between talking back and the rhetorics of silence. I do a lot of work on sort of being bilingual or multilingual since most of my students are. And, then, I usually use work by Cintron himself, along with others who look at more performative forms of rhetoric. But I'm also trying to work out a more upper division or master's level course around what I currently think of as the rhetorics of redress. This takes some of the same ideas I play with in the first-year composition class, but it's focused on varying theories and approaches that have emerged from cultural rhetorics and writing studies, and I think there is a lot to explore here. I like to privilege the historical because the college students I work with have very little sense of historical legacies, but I also like to bring it forward. I think it's important, for example, to consider more contemporary rhetorics of redress like controversies over call-out culture or the open letter genre, or the deep need for self-care and sort of how we talk to ourselves to help us get through difficult times. And, you know, I'm excited to see what kinds of connections students might make with that. So the issue of how we redress injustice, both privately and publicly, is one that I think is really worth exploring in any level of class.

Charlyne: Do you foresee using "rhetorical attendance" as a method to teach students, I guess maybe more advanced students? Because it seems like it pushes the researcher to kind of look in and kind of understand: "Where are these inquiries coming from? What's the relationship to myself and the community I'm writing about and the larger historical context?"

Mira: Yeah, I think that would be fabulous. I mean, I think it's been a very long time since I taught a master's level class, so I'm not sure I would do it unless I was at the master's level. I don't work with PhD students, but certainly if I did, you know, I would consider doing that. But

yes. I think that could go really nicely, for example, with looking at auto-ethnographies, for example, and that would be a real nice pairing. But yeah, and if anyone wants to do it, I would love to see what they do.

Charlyne: Yeah, that would be great. Well, that's my last question, Mira. Thank you. I was so looking forward to listening to your responses. Again, this was amazing to hear your thoughts beyond me just reading your book, but again, thank you for taking the time to have this conversation with me.

Mira: Thank you, Charlyne.