

## Troubling the Boundaries: (De)Constructing WPA Identities at the Intersections of Race and Gender

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay forefronts how race and gender play implicative roles in navigating administrative work within the context of writing programs. We situate our understandings of race and gender within the context of our own personal experiences as African American graduate Research Assistants (RAs) while learning to become WPAs at a Land Grant Midwestern university. We call for a racialized and gendered understanding of writing programs. In other words, we look at the ways that both gender and race impact the work that we do as WPAs and provide recommendations for ways that CWPA can acknowledge race more directly in WPA scholarship and the organization.*

The role that the writing program administrator (WPA) plays has a tremendous impact on university culture. Much scholarship addresses the challenges for WPAs to transform the institutions that house them (Chiseri-Strater and Qualley; Charlton and Rose; Hesse). Such scholarship generates a forum in the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) to address issues of institutional change, and we acknowledge this forum for solving institutional matters pertaining to writing program administration. We do applaud venues like CWPA and *WPA: Writing Program Administration* for devoting space for WPAs to work together as we work toward institutional change. As an African American female WPA at a doctoral granting institution, and as an African American male helping to build a new writing program at a small, private liberal arts institution, we value any forum that seeks to improve the institutions where we work, institutions that often bring about conflicts pertaining to our races and genders. However, we also wonder what the relationship is between institutional agency, CWPA, and WPA men and women of color. As first

time attendees of one of the CWPA conferences, we noticed the limited representation of people of color, and we were left to wonder why. When and where do we enter this conversation and how might we be more visibly represented in CWPA?

This essay forefronts how looking at WPA work from both a gendered and racial perspective extends the implicative roles of identity politics in navigating administrative work within the context of university writing programs. Furthermore, because graduate students are given limited opportunities to train as WPAs (Enos, “Reflexive”; Dessner and Payne), we situate our understandings of race, gender, and WPA work within the context of our own personal experiences while African American male and female graduate research assistants (RAs) learning to become WPAs at a Land Grant Midwestern university. The purpose of this essay is not to blame CWPA or anyone else for the lack of representation among people of color. Instead, our purpose is to shed light on the obstacles that WPA men and women of color face in the institutions where we serve. Just as we were reminded of the extent that race and embodiment mattered at CWPA, racial corporeality continues to matter in the institutional contexts in which we exist. Our racial and gendered perspectives informed our opportunities as we trained as WPAs.

We foreground our experiences as research assistants by looking at race and gender as they apply first to institutional agency and then race and gender as they apply to CWPA. We argue that both are critical for understanding the contributions of WPA men and women of color who must confront the ways in which they are marginalized and offered few rewards by their departments and institutions, while at the same time, acknowledging the problems they face when entering disciplinary spaces where they are less visibly represented.

In the sections that follow, we first offer a theoretical framework for understanding identity politics as they pertain to race and gender. Based on such scholarship, we argue that experiences embodying both race and gender call attention to the complexities associated with WPA men and women of color. Next, we share personal experiences of the challenges associated with both racism and sexism both at the institutions where we serve and at a CWPA conference that we attended. We conclude this essay by offering recommendations for ways that CWPA as an organization can work to understand and confront the identity politics that often negatively affect minority scholar-administrators in the WPA position.

## A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RACE AND IDENTITY POLITICS

We align our experiences within a framework of critical race theory that positions race and gender as “intersecting paradigms” (Collins 42) rather than “mutually exclusive categories” (Crenshaw 139). Kimberle Crenshaw’s black feminist theory of intersectionality reveals how both racism and sexism are mutually informing constructs that shape the realities of black female oppression. She argues that we must “account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). While we recognize the necessity of intersectionality to crystallize the black female experiences with patriarchal violence and other forms of oppression—experiences that also reveal the privileges of black men—we also consider black male bodies as constructed within a matrix of interlocking significations that can be oppressive (Matua 22). We also recognize that black men are often the culprits of forms of oppression towards black women that reinforce patriarchal privilege. But this does not negate the reality that black men also experience forms of discrimination such as racial profiling that can be informed by preexisting stereotypes about black male criminality. We follow Athena Matua’s nuancing of intersectional theory that constructs the black male at the intersections of corporeality, race and gender in order to reveal how institutional/academic contexts inform how both black female and male bodies are read and treated.

By illuminating how race and gender work together as rhetoric in WPA work, we assert that institutional structures in the academy have particular investitures around identity that align relations of power to representation. Following Patricia Williams in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*, we challenge these institutional “structures of power” that construct “racism [and sexism] as status quo,” (49) by factoring our racial and gendered bodies into our ways of knowing and doing WPA work. We do this by “deidentifying” with oppressive discourses that “fix” minority identities as subversive, deviant, or marginal (Munoz 95, 97). In other words, we fully embody the identity of writing program administrators while living in bodies that have historically signified as contested sites of meaning. By situating our narratives in critical race theory, we politicize black bodies and black intersecting identities as sites that challenge the status quo of representation in writing program administration and within the academy at large.

Situating intersectionality in WPA scholarship builds on existing conversations that acknowledge how WPAs learn how to navigate and negotiate their multiple identities for institutional agency and program building

(Adler-Kassner; Rose and Weiser; George). However, intersectionality adds another dimension by revealing how identities “intertwine” in ways that provoke both subtle and blatant forms of discrimination that *other* minorities holding positions as writing program administrators (Knudsen). More broadly within the field of composition and rhetoric, identity politics as a trope has been central when charting the terrain of discourse on power relations between dominant and minority representations. Keith Gilyard’s call for a transcultural democracy to challenge asymmetrical power relations suggests that we need a language that effectively allows us to have “cross-cultural conversations” about difference in our field (266-7). Jacqueline Jones Royster states that these dialogues give agency to individual subject positions to interpret “context, ways of knowing, language abilities, and experience” in order to “enrich our interpretive views” and give voice to our own realities (29). Similarly, Nancy Barron reveals “cultural frameworks” in our field and the broader institution that reward folks of color for assimilating “Anglo mainstream” ideologies of how they should see the world (21). Her interrogation of “dual constructions of identity” that Mexican teachers and students experience speaks to a rhetoric of *othering* that maps the margins of Mexican identity in academic discourse. Our narratives extend existing conversations in WPA scholarship and more broadly composition and rhetoric by exploring how gendered and racial identities construct an identity politic within the field and the broader institution.

We also acknowledge that the theme of intersectionality in relationship to WPA narrative-based scholarship is not new. For example, in “Demystifying the Asian-American WPA: Locations in Writing, Teaching, and Program Administration,” Joseph Eng addresses the intersections between being Asian American and being in a position of authority. He states that many narratives of Asian scholars in the field “seem to suggest broadly discipline-based and admittedly awkward moments” (154). In relationship to his experiences as a WPA at two different institutions, Eng recounts the following:

Having been a writing program administrator at two different institutions, I sometimes wonder how issues regarding my communication, authority, and career choice in general might be shaped by my ethnic identity or identities perceived. For instance, some colleagues or graduate students seem to scrutinize every memo I send out—even under informal circumstances—for usage or idiomatic perfection. To many new acquaintances, why and how I have become an English faculty member are their only greeting lines. (155)

Like Eng, we can relate to particular moments of awkwardness. We can also relate to the scrutiny we experienced in the following stories we tell. Eng's narrative further resonates with us because it offers an example of the challenges that WPA men of color face in the administrative roles they assume. From his narrative we learn that CWPA represents all of us, and that we each have significant contributions to make as we work to transform the status of administrators in the profession.

#### OUR STORIES: INTERSECTING RACE, GENDER, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Before sharing our stories, we wish to first provide a bit of institutional context relating to our experiences. Our positions as RAs took place at a large Midwestern research extensive university with one of the largest first-year writing programs in the region. In comparison to many first-year writing programs that are traditionally housed in English Departments, our writing program is unique because it is housed separately from the English Department. Its "disciplinary orientation was not rhetoric and composition, or English studies; instead, [it] was historically taught as a history-focused course on Western civilization" (Perryman-Clark 116). We provide an institutional context here because we acknowledge the relationship between independent writing programs and institutional challenges. Like Peggy O'Neil also acknowledges in the book, *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies*, we add to stories of institutional challenges faced by independent writing programs by sharing our own experiences. Prior to our role as RAs, our institution did not have a contractually hired WPA and any research assistant WPA positions, so as the first RAs to the WPA a lot was at stake, and we felt the pressures of having a lot to prove. We build on previous WPA scholarship by addressing how we might view divisions of labor, marginalization, racism and sexism through different lenses. From these stories, hopefully WPAs—as well as those instructors who teach writing—may begin to consider the ways that WPAs become racially and sexually marked in their WPA positions and in the academy at large with greater agency.

#### A SISTA SPEAKS: CONFRONTING RACISM AND SEXISM AS A FUTURE WPA

WPA work first began to interest me when I took a course with my institution's director of first-year writing. My professor asked me to assist her in doing a leadership workshop at another Research 1 university for graduate students interested in doing administrative work. I'd previously done administrative work with a local chapter of the National Writing Project (NWP) at the institution where I received my M.A. and wanted to con-

tinue doing additional work at my PhD institution. I honestly liked the ways that I had to balance intellectual, delegatory, and even laborious types of work required of the administrative position. And, while I understand the critiques associated with WPA work as menial labor (Micciche; Brown, Enos, and Chaput), I'm less bothered by work that requires a hands-on approach, as long as my intellectual contributions to the position are still valued, an idea that I admit certainly has come into question in the story I wish to tell concerning racism and sexism.

The experience that I wish to tell momentarily similarly reflects my role as anything but intellectual. Instead, it focuses more on sexuality and physical perceptions of attractiveness than the work that women do in the academy, and the fact that race intersects with this role complicates this narrative. This experience occurred quite early on as a RA for my WPA. I was just appointed to the position, and recently finished my first TA orientation as I assisted the WPA in training new first-year writing TAs. During orientation I was assigned various tasks such as checking TA syllabi, and verifying that TAs addressed all of the institutional and department required policies and procedures. I also conducted orientation workshops on addressing issues of race, class, and gender in class discussions, course readings, and course assignments. By the time classes started, I became the peer advisor whom TAs would consult in the event that they encountered any classroom problems. By assuming these responsibilities, TAs and other faculty members in the department attached the role, "the go-to girl" to my WPA identity.

A week after classes started, I was approached by a full professor who helped supervise first-year writing TAs in previous years, yet his expertise fell outside the areas of composition theory and pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> Our conversation went something like this:

"So, what exactly do you do for [the Director of First-Year Writing]?" he asked.

"I'm the RA, and I'm here to assist [the Director] in running pedagogical workshops and conducting weekly TA mentor meetings," I replied.

"Can we step out of the sun and into some shade to talk?"

"Sure."

"Hey, Listen. I've got this African TA whom I've worked with in previous years that I'm really having difficulty with. Perhaps you could talk to him. He might take constructive criticism better from a pretty woman like you than an old white guy like me."

"I'll definitely have to talk this over with my supervisor and see what she says."

The problem with how African American women's bodies are represented extends historically beyond the academy, however. bell hooks writes that this is certainly the challenge facing black women, who must confront the old painful representations of our sexuality as a burden we must suffer, representations still haunting the present. We must make the oppositional spaces where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound or trapped (132). In "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Market Place," hooks addresses representations of sexuality in relationship to the media and consumerism. As my own experience demonstrates, though, such allusions to black sexuality are also prevalent in the academy, a space where—at least in my own experiences—any visual reference to sexuality was not welcomed. Limiting a woman's skills and abilities to visual representations when doing intellectual work clarifies how female identity is often fixed by a patriarchal gaze that renders black female bodies primarily as objects for consumption. From my own experience, the professor assumed that the African TA would "need" my race and sexuality to resolve his teaching problems, further undermining men of African descent and their ability to engage their intellect as opposed to sexual desire or attractiveness. The professor assumed that the only way the African TA would be persuaded to adopt different pedagogical practices would be to listen to an attractive woman. As I reflect on this experience, most notable are the power dynamics indicative of the professor's behavior. His physical stature of six plus feet and three hundred plus pounds was nothing to compare to my five foot one frame. In addition, I was a young graduate student RA, and he was a full professor with a reputable career who had been in our program for over a decade. Along with apprehensions about causing a stir with a harassment dispute that bore no witness, I had little faith that the university would handle my concerns adequately.

With this experience, one may further find implications for the division of labor with WPA work. Because I was female, and because I was African American, I was thought better fit by a senior faculty member to confront an African TA. Here we see a diffusion of responsibility and labor that WPAs and faculty of color are often confronted with when it comes to race. The senior faculty member assumed an "it's-not-my-problem" attitude, similarly to the "I-can't-teach-these-people" attitudes adopted by white teachers who are conflicted when dealing with ESL and ESD speakers<sup>2</sup>. His dealings imply that only blacks are equipped to deal with blacks, regardless of nationality, and regardless of the cultural differences between African Americans and Africans. Assuming that all people of African descent share the same ideologies and perspectives (regardless of nationality) undermines

the diversity of African and African American cultural experiences, especially when such diversity associated with European Americans' cultural experiences is often acknowledged.

Instead of taking the responsibility and handling the problem himself, the professor attempted to pass the hard work onto someone else, with that someone else being a woman of color. I wonder, though, why the professor felt unequipped to confront the TA previously, especially considering the fact that he had more experience in the classroom than I did. Perhaps the situation may have played out differently had he asked for advice on how to deal with the TA himself, such that the power dynamics would have been different, since doing so would have required more authority and expertise of me. Thus, the division of labor reflects this professor's unwillingness and inability to confront cultural differences himself; it also reflects his unwillingness to consult advice on how to handle cultural confrontations and difference. Furthermore, the professor's comments undermine the intellectual and rhetorical capabilities of both men and women in the academy by suggesting that the only way that men may be persuaded by men is by evoking gender and sexuality. Perhaps the professor relied on me to talk to the TA because women are often expected to nurture men (in a maternal way) while also possessing the ability to lure them into do the right thing (in a seductive way). Whatever the case, comments such as these reduce men to objectifying, and women to seducing, neither of which acknowledges the role that intellect plays in pedagogical guidance or decision making.

I optimistically believed that the professor's intent was not to be blatantly racist or sexist, although his comments reflect racial and gender insensitivity. The question now becomes how we move beyond intentionality (or lack thereof) to accountability. Regardless of whether or not the professor's comments were unintentional or not, he needed to be held accountable for making racist and sexist assumptions and remarks about women of color in the academy. Such accountability, then, requires that he understand why these comments offend in relationship to the historical implications associated with African American women's bodies being put on display for public control and objectification, where those in positions of power take ownership over the validation of black beauty. When faculties understand the historical implications surrounding racist and sexist comments, they can no longer use ignorance as an excuse.

The professor's comments reflect an often excused social incompetence about diversity on a larger institutional scale. His comments also reflect an ongoing trend by white males in positions of power who speak as they wish without any accountability and responsibility. In fact, racist and sexist remarks that demean black women are becoming more a part of our public

discourse. From Don Imus's denigration of black female athletes as "nappy headed hoes" to the demonization of Michelle Obama as militant by political right wing politicians, white males in central positions of power are too easily let off the hook for racist and sexist rhetoric that subordinates black female identity. Patriarchal privilege or their dominant racial ethos precludes these men from receiving disciplinary action in the U.S. labor force.

Experiences such as these represent more than faux pas or gaffs. We need to move beyond the notion of unintentional racist or sexist mishaps and hold those who do make racist or sexist comments—whether misinformed or not—accountable for their actions. Suppose the professor was attempting to issue a complement. It is still necessary to have explicit conversations about appropriateness in relationship to race and gender. Such a conversation, then, requires that we ask critical questions of kairos. When we issue remarks that have racial and/or gendered implications, we need to determine the appropriate occasions for our comments and whom and how they might offend. In professional spaces—especially those that involve graduate students—we need to understand why pedagogical training sites are not appropriate occasions for remarking on women's visual appearances. With regard to race, we also need to understand why it's not appropriate to assume that an African American will automatically relate to an African. When we consider appropriateness and occasions for appropriateness, we can begin to rethink accountability as opposed to readily dismissing and attributing offensive speech or actions to ignorance.

In reading this narrative, I urge readers to understand how the race, gender, and power dynamics that played out through my experiences similarly parallel societal roles in relationship to power. I also urge readers to consider how such power dynamics determine who gets to say and do what to whom in our institutional and disciplinary spaces, without being held accountable and responsible for what is said. As we think more about CWPA, we can ask similar questions concerning who gets to do, say, act, speak, and lead the organization. How are women of color represented in CWPA? What tasks does CWPA assign them, and what might these tasks suggest about divisions of labor? When do women of color get to speak, and what do they get to say? How does CWPA hold people accountable and responsible for what is said in relationship to people of color? Posing these questions does not suggest that CWPA marginalizes women of color. Instead, what I am suggesting is that we use women of color's personal experiences in institutional spaces to think more critically and carefully about how representation and power dynamics impact the way that women of color are represented in disciplinary and organizational spaces.

“BLACK MAYBE”: NAVIGATING IDENTITY POLITICS  
IN WPA WORK AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN

I became interested in WPA work because I believed that a writing program was more than just a place that housed required first-year writing courses. For me the WPA could be a conscious community builder. Yet for many fellow graduate students, the perception of a WPA was as micromanager, a taskmaster of TAs and adjuncts who taught courses that most tenured faculty were not interested in teaching. Although the intellectual work that our WPA produced proved otherwise, perceptions often function as agents of containment in how one can signify in the eyes of others. As a scholar of color in the academy, I learned how perceptions can produce the offspring of covert racism or the intolerance for cultural difference. Being an athletic black male graduate student at a predominately white university came with its own issues, ones that would surface when a black graduate student would be awarded things like highly coveted research assistantships. With that stated, the assistantship I was awarded as research writer for our WPA was met with some disdain. One white male graduate student questioned, “Is Collin even qualified for that position?” and frankly stated that I was “not a hard worker.” Other rumors stirred that I had received the position because of how I looked. Such responses speak to the pervasive level of scrutiny students and faculty of color face in justifying their success and presence at predominantly white academies if they are not emptying office trashcans, playing a sport, or mowing university grass.

This assistantship as researcher for my WPA gave me the chance to collaboratively write a teacher training manual and create our first co-edited first-year writing reader. I came with the anticipation that it would allow me the opportunity to participate in building a curriculum that aligned with the shared learning goals developed by our first-year writing taskforce that I was a part of the semester prior. But I would also come to discover a looming reality that subject position mattered in my interactions with other administrators and teaching faculty. I read many of the “Kitchen Cook, Plate Twirler” narrated experiences of overworked and feminized WPAs (Holt; Gillam; Hesse). But here I was, a brotha from an urban black community on the south side of Dallas, TX working the infamous managerial position of composition director, traditionally marked by gender and, as I would learn during my tenure, clearly racialized as well. As a black male who already experienced covertly racist responses to being awarded my assistantship as an RA to the WPA, the politics of representation in academia were nothing new to me. I was also aware of how one’s visible identity could predetermine how one might enter into collegial discourses,

especially at a university with perennial athletic programs. With athletics being big business at our predominately white public institution, specifically for men's basketball and football—both predominantly represented by black men—black male bodies are made most visible and meaningful in the public domains of athletic performance. Stuart Hall states that the “accumulated meanings” generated from these representations are important for how dominant culture marks the ‘Other’ as different (232). Within the context of my institution, these meanings enable binary oppositions of signification between black/white and athlete/intellectual. Black athletic masculinity needs to be marked in a certain way to maintain these binaries or else it forces dominant culture to rethink how they define difference. More specifically, it forces dominant culture to reconfigure how athletic black male bodies can signify in a university writing program.

Being a graduate student often found me taken for a university football player much more so than an academic. My athletic build does not always fit my students' image of a writing instructor. And in much of the disciplinary scholarship on gender in the workplace (Baliff, Davis, Mountford, Enos, Gerald), I had not found much that spoke to black male jocks who decided to shelve the football and direct a writing program. Therefore, I was left much to my own devices in managing the discourse that came with my body. As a WPA research assistant, the black body that I inhabit functioned rhetorically as a site of contestation to the traditional WPA identity of white and female I had come to know as a college student. Even in this intellectual space—at this Research 1 University—black corporeality needed to be performed through manual work. I grew to understand how black male corporeality might be read with greater acuity in my day-to-day social interactions while working in our office. In the first few weeks working in my position, our department chair came into our office requesting my assistance with menial labor—“Hey, can I use your big muscles to move a few desks and swivel chairs out of an empty faculty office and transport them to a storage room?” These moments were usually in the form of random interruptions while in the middle of writing the TA training manual that we were preparing for first-year writing instructors, or editing our soon-to-be-published reader. Besides the initial frustration of feeling exploited as a graduate student, the request to use my “strong muscles” to help move office furniture undermined my subject position as a black intellectual. In these moments of interpellation, I was asked to signify as another type of laborer in this working space. I thought about Mark Bousquet's article “Composition as Management Science” and wondered if maneuvering heavy desks down department hallways counted as “organized academic labor” (Bousquet). As far as I knew, it was not part of my original job descrip-

tion as a WPA research assistant. Nevertheless, my department chair saw me through the gaze of servile labor; I was a tool for getting menial things done. “Big muscles” were associated with moving big things—chairs and desks—down an office-building hallway, one that I had walked down many mornings en route to my office to meet students for conferences. But more than that, the big black guy as furniture mover invoked a historical narrative of black labor, one where African Americans are found justifying their value and presence as citizens by the work they do with their hands.

These experiences were framed within a larger context of working with two women in a space traditionally marked as feminine, one where divisions of labor had been gendered. And although their identities as women in the workplace might have brought them different experiences from my own, I understood the rhetorical implications of bodies that are marked in certain ways to maintain systems of power. Thus, I wanted to build a culture of reciprocity with my female colleagues in a way that spoke to the gender and racial dynamics of our workspace and how these dynamics could positively inform the curricular and administrative decisions we made. For example, open and honest dialogue about our differences was an effective practice in thinking through how we would decide how race and gender as influential tropes in literacy learning would be represented in the texts that we chose for our first program-produced reader for first-year writing. Our intellectual efforts often found us in disagreement and having to make hard decisions about which texts to include, and which voices needed to be heard and why. As graduate students our vision for the reader was shaped by our beliefs that how one identifies racially, politically, or by gender gauges literacy practices and how one shapes relationships with others (Mitchell and Weiler x). When choosing selections for our reader, we followed this concept of literacy in choosing writers who demonstrated literacy as a “culturally connected” social practice of entering a range of discourses (Mahiri, Moss, Gee). We believed that this approach would allow first-year writers to see that diverse communities gain access to certain forms of literacy in ways reflective of their racial, gendered or political subject positions. In these moments, listening to my female colleagues became a critical practice for me as a male sharing our workspace. Listening enabled me to take their perspectives seriously as intellectuals who came from different gendered and racial locations. Listening allowed me to effectively see them beyond a patriarchal gaze and to engage them as colleagues and co-laborers whose insights and opinions mattered.

As a black male WPA research assistant, having an understanding of a gendered racial reality of what it means to be a person of color whose identity as male influences the complexity of one’s racial subjectivity, allowed

me to grasp how one might work towards making the dimensions of race visible in conversations about curriculum building and pedagogy. Furthermore, this allowed me to think through a conceptual framework for WPA work that could be developed through a process of reflexive thinking about how students and TAs might think through their own markers of identification, and how these markers mattered in curriculum development and literacy practices. In helping to shape the curriculum for our writing program, I took an active stance to look at race through a gendered lens while further exploring the dimensions of gender politics by recognizing its racial implications. The diverse feedback we received from TAs of all backgrounds in our program who were using the reader was useful for how we might further think about other intersections, such as class, sexuality, and ableisms. With that stated, some saw the reader as not representative enough of the range of identities they saw as intersecting. Others suggested that online spaces and the proliferation of students creating digital profiles offered another dimension to how identities are either shaped at the intersections of place and space. Overall we felt optimistic about the types of responses the reader generated.

Now our approach in using the intersections of race and gender in thinking about curriculum does not mean that one essentially needs to be a racial minority to fully understand how to address the intersections of race, writing, and difference or to interrogate fixed notions of race that undermine the professional development of writing program administrators and their affiliates. It does, however, suggest that directors of composition must build coalitions with faculty and graduate students across race and gender lines to effectively create a culturally inclusive program and disciplinary perspective that best serves learning objectives.

#### BITCHES AND BALL PLAYERS, OR JUST BLACK INTELLECTUAL FOLKS? ATTENDING CWPA FOR THE FIRST TIME

It was our first time attending the annual CWPA conference. We, both African American research assistants to our WPA, decided to participate in the conference that year because we thought we had important stories to share. We wanted to present our experiences associated with confronting racism and sexism as graduate students training to be WPAs. We also wanted to share moments where we found ourselves in peculiar situations: being asked to do manual labor, experiencing excessive monitoring by our department chair, and being asked by tenured white faculty members in our department to handle issues with racial minority students whom they

deemed themselves too inadequate to deal with. As African Americans, identity mattered in our administrative roles as assistant WPAs at our institution. And our lived experiences in these roles were connected to how we were visibly marked by our race and gender. So for our conference presentation, we wanted to use our own experiences to shed light on the ways in which future WPAs of color must confront racist and sexist practices at the institutional level. And, we figured that as an organization desiring to include more graduate students, more junior faculty WPAs—more people interested in WPA work in general, our audience would be receptive to what we had to say. And they were, but this did not come without certain tradeoffs.

Prolonged stares made for socially awkward moments with conference participants who did little to alleviate our uneasiness with being some of the few folks of color there. One conference member, whom we had previously met when she attended an annual week-long rhetoric seminar Staci and I both helped to facilitate at our university, assumed an air of familiarity with us that we found both presumptuous and offensive. We only knew her informally as a member of the field who taught college writing and did administrative work at her public university. When introducing us to her network of colleagues she iterated, “These are the WPA’s bitches at their institution.” We were shocked and did not know what to think. When we both mentioned that we were on the upcoming job market, she then suggested that we consider our advantage as minority scholars and advised us to apply to her institution, which according to her didn’t have many African Americans and needed a couple more. Her acerbic comments coupled with the racial homogeneity of CWPA attendees that we had already noticed and felt during our short time there exacerbated our anxieties about being new attendees. As newbies, we saw this woman’s apparent acquaintance with multiple conference participants as an indicator that she was part of the CWPA community, as anyone would. Whether or not she represented CWPA and its mission is debatable, but how else is CWPA represented if not by and through its members?

Later on in the week, the conference decided to host dinner at a park that was also having a basketball tournament nearby. All of the participants in the tournament looked to be young black males—dressed in their basketball gear—lined up courtside, excited and eagerly waiting for their teams to play. I had noticed them as I was following conference attendees at a distance to the dinner. Upon approaching the dinner pavilion, the door was locked. I saw people I recognized inside eating so I was a bit confused. Then a white woman, who I would later find out was hired by CWPA as security, came to the door and shook her head as if to indicate that I had the wrong

place. Without opening the door, she spoke while I read her lips and tried to make sense of her muffled voice against the window glass that separated me and her, “You’re not allowed in here; this is for conference attendees only.” I stood there, frozen by her words, hoping that someone would recognize me on the inside and intercede. After she finally decided to open the door, I entered, visibly embarrassed and confused, scanning the pavilion in hopes that no one had noticed how I had been constrained by what Henry Louis Gates calls epidermal contingencies (10). To my obvious disposition, this woman retorted unapologetically, “Well you looked like a ball player!” This was in spite of my dress shirt, fresh new tie, and a conference nametag I wore around my neck, just like the other conference attendees. But, the existential truth was that I was still black, still different looking; and learning how to deal with those differences was becoming defined as my rite of passage at this conference.

Later that day, after talking to my academic mentor, she made public on a popular online social network the events that occurred—“I am now officially pissed at CWPA. My stunningly smart, exceptional teacher, African American grad student just got refused entrance to the conference dinner.” Our conference drama had officially become public dialogue in a matter of hours. This public scrutiny or rebuke by my advisor, who is an accomplished Native scholar in the field, would soon reach the CWPA president who immediately put the issue on the agenda for the conference Town Hall meeting. The CWPA president also wrote about the issue in her online Presidential Blog entitled “WPA Directions – Issues for Action,” reminding members “WPA is all of us.” At this point I still had not spoken with the CWPA president about what happened, but I had read her seemingly hasty blog response. The response described the white woman who denied my entrance as one who “was horrified and apologized profusely” to me, when in fact I never received an apology. I read on as the rhetorical impact of racism on my embodied experience was neutralized by a “we are the world” discourse of inclusion. WPA is all of us? I did not feel that way. I became fed up with all that I had experienced at CWPA and what now seemed to be an effort at damage control to quickly clean a spill before it became messy. Hyperconscious and emotionally exhausted, I decided to skip the rest of the conference and resigned to hiding in my hotel room. I became the “obviously upset” black male attendee who was no longer present; one that, in reality, most of the conference members did not really know or had not met. Thus, in my absence I could only be made visible by hearsay and spoken for by the CWPA president. I existed in a place between their imaginations and reality. While the president attempted to give recognition to my issue in blog writing or at the Town Hall meeting, to acknowledge

that the proverbial black man had been discriminated against at the conference, my subject position as colleague had already been rendered invisible and incapable by the rhetorical situations that had confined me to exist as Other or more specifically, a “WPA’s bitch” or the trespassing “ball player.”

As a concession, the CWPA president did take time to shed light on a critical point about the reality of our racial differences: “Because of the bodies we live in, we don’t all experience the world in the same way. Last night was a stark reminder to me that as a white person, the ways our colleagues of color encounter small acts of racism in everyday interactions are invisible to me.” As people who live in bodies historically marked by difference, we agree. Circumstantial realizations by those who both represent dominant culture and are in positions of power can ignite real progress for change, but they also remind us of the privileges that come with not having to live in a racial consciousness or recognize race *as* a consciousness in one’s personal, political, or administrative agendas unless provoked to do so.

In hindsight, the meaning of blackness was fixed in the sure reality of these moments. There were rules as to how we as black graduate students could signify, regardless of our attempts to look, act and fit in as professionals who were part of this academic community. Needless to say, this reaffirmed our subject positions as outsiders at this conference and conjured the all too familiar feelings of isolation we had come to know as African American graduate students on our predominately white campus (Williams; Lewis et al.). Now, we would be remiss to use a lady’s racist comments, awkward stares from conference attendees, or being denied entrance into a reception for not “looking” like a conference participant to paint broad brush strokes in describing the overall views and sentiment of CWPA. While we know racism and discrimination can indeed be systemic manifestations, they are also products of individual worldviews and choices. But we also believe that just as CWPA is represented through the astute administrative and intellectual work that continues to advance it as a discipline, it also needs to be held accountable for when its members fall short in making CWPA a habitable space for everyone.

As we seek professional development at conferences and work to build culturally sensitive environments in our writing programs, we speculate on how race and representation factors into the goals and objectives implicated in CWPA’s mission and professional practices. More specifically, we bring into question the implications of the scarcity of African Americans participating in CWPA and the sobering reality that WPA men and women of color as practitioners are nearly nonexistent in our field—or at least CWPA as an organization. We offer our narrative experiences in attending the conference of writing program administrators to shed light on how our local

issues at our institutions reflect our experiences within the larger discourse of writing program administration. We do this to assert that issues of racial representation should begin to be addressed globally so that we might develop a collective consciousness in building dialogue on how to frame race and difference within WPA discourse.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WPAs

We applaud the timely response to these issues that was initiated after our experiences and believe they can serve as catalyst for having a fresh conversation about diversity in CWPA. However, as folks of color who have grown too accustomed to reactive rather than proactive responses to racial insensitivity, we wonder if WPA as a sub-discipline in composition and rhetoric is doing enough in addressing issues that reveal how our disciplinary relations are also mediated by cultural differences. In the service of writing programs to “educate the academic community and the public at large about the needs of successful writing programs,” (“WPA Bylaws”) race matters in how we embody and perform our roles as program administrators and colleagues. Thus, developing a language that serves the interests of diversity should be factored into the goals of the CWPA’s objectives and implemented into the agenda of our national conference and cross-institutional dialogues. While there are no clear-cut answers for the lack of representation of African American WPAs, there are practical steps we can take towards making both the WPA position and discipline habitable spaces for our differences.

Following Joseph Janangelo, we recognize that WPAs are “multiply situated” across ranks, institutions, and identities. Yet we believe that, if equipped with the right rhetorical strategies, we can be conjoined by a common language of activism that demystifies our differences and advocates for better working conditions, visibility, respect and access to resources. We believe that this can first happen by revisiting our institutional documents in our respective institutions. Program policies and learning objectives must reflect an activist agenda to see diversity as more than a “topic,” but a part of every scholarly audience, community and university (Powell). Retheorizing and repurposing our institutional documents as artifacts of “rhetorical action” works towards changing the culture of our institutions (Porter, et al.), and we believe and hope such action can also change individual attitudes about difference. We as WPAs must construct our policy statements and program philosophies to reflect a mission to engage, challenge and learn about difference. This is the type of rhetorical action that can work

towards a strategic initiative plan for CWPA and our individual institutions to explicitly assert that identity matters in how we as writing program administrators go about shaping the social and cultural infrastructures of our writing programs. Writing program infrastructures are both rhetorical and ideological. Thus, these infrastructures can influence our perceptions on diversity, but they can also be revised through our rhetorical practices. Developing a rhetorical approach to both program and interdepartmental relation building gives us a language to hold each other accountable for how we align our administrative, curricular, and interdepartmental social practices to a commitment to honoring diversity. This makes change possible at our institutions.

We realize that changing individual attitudes or worldviews that are discriminatory can be a daunting or impossible task for any WPA. But this does not mean that institutions cannot be rhetorically structured in ways that impact our actions and attitudes about difference. It does not mean that learning how to honor difference cannot be part of professional development. We designate CWPA's Mentoring Project initiative as the ideal platform where we begin cross-institutional dialogue with WPAs on how to develop a language and collective action plan that serve the interests of cultural differences. Rethinking our administrative responsibilities as a rhetorical process of relation building at every level must be a priority for CWPA if we are to recruit the voices and perspectives of a more diverse body of scholars.

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This essay offers a framework for understanding an identity politic in WPA scholarship that is constructed along an axis of multiple intersecting identities. Exploring how race and gender intersect in our own narrative experiences invokes new conversations that also locate heterosexism, classism, nationalism and other isms as intersecting themes of oppression and discrimination. As demonstrated in our narratives, much of our understanding of these intersections concerns not only the ways that our bodies are visibly marked in institutional spaces, but also the ways in which these bodies become marked in disciplinary spaces, including CWPA. Politicizing these markings reveals how academic communities still need historically marginalized groups to signify in certain ways to maintain a status quo of power relations. We use our narratives to call attention to this status quo and to make visible the interlocking discourses of oppression that we continue to challenge at our institutions. And to the CWPA we ask—Who has the authority to speak for us, and who has the authority to define who

we are and what our purposes serve to advance its mission? To echo Toni Morrison, “it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us... We are the subject of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience...” (31-2). In the wake of the institutional and disciplinary challenges that we face, we take courage in our rhetorical abilities as WPAs of color to use our own voices as agents of change, to define and speak for ourselves, and to make visible our presence as we work alongside our CWPA allies in a spirit of equity and diversity.

## NOTES

1. The implications of this for WPA scholarship is another essay.

2. See PA Ramsey’s “Teaching the Teachers to Teach Black-Dialect Speakers,” where Ramsey presents a narrative on being assigned a course on teaching “Black-dialect” speakers because he was African American, even though he had no apparent training or expertise in teaching this course. Also, see Paul Kei Matsuda’s “Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A Division of Labor,” where Matsuda argues that the history of ESL writing instruction has been traditionally designated the responsibility of TESOL and L2 programs and departments and not writing departments, and that this is problematic, since all writing instruction should be the responsibility of composition.

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