

Am I The Problem?

James Eubanks

*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.
They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game,
but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*

—Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (99)

Whiteness has a way of permeating everything in academia. This is a notion that becomes clearer and clearer when you are Black in an English department in the South. To get to the English building, which until very recently was named after a segregationist Confederate general who was also a Grand Dragon in the Klan, I had to walk past locations where the slaves slept outdoors, or past a secluded monument that served as the University’s official apology for its perpetuation of slavery. Whiteness was present in the way that the faculty often mistook me for one of the other two Black men in the department. Whiteness was there in the lukewarm reaction by the department and University to racism or discrimination in the classroom and beyond that made existing as a graduate student much more difficult.

Once, I said as much in a meeting on diversity on the eve of a white supremacist coming to campus to speak.

“We talk, and never do anything,” I said.

I was told by a white peer that this time would be different.

It was not different.

It was that lack of support, coupled with considerations about professionalization that made spending a year as the department’s graduate student WPA an attractive proposition. I was a teacher and a student who was affected by these issues of racism and also the fallout that was wrought by the subsequent inattentiveness of the people who were supposed to support us. I saw WPA work as a chance to build a more inclusive and supportive department, not just for me and my peers, but for the students of color in our composition courses, who also needed support.

I finished my year as a WPA generally feeling good about my time in the position. I would like to think that everyone else feels the same way. I learned a lot about the type of administrator I would like to be. But with the benefit of time, distance, and hindsight, I often wonder if I did enough. I had moments where I was one of those people whose motivations I was vocally critical of. Everyone means well and says the right things, but the

talks about systems and hierarchies ultimately serve to pass the buck to someone higher-placed in that system. I did the same at times, almost without realizing. I give myself some grace, of course. I am a Black graduate student; I acknowledge that perhaps the odds were against me in terms of enacting all the changes I wanted to see. There is always a professional danger in being Black and possessing the temerity to speak out of turn. I was there as a WPA and my peers-of-color were demanding the same things of the administration that I had before I was a WPA, and I found myself trotting out the same sort of excuses that administration always did. “Things are moving behind the scenes,” or, “we are working hard on a few things.” And some things moved for the better, but I wonder still, had I just become part of the problem in the end? I was an administrator, with influence and things did not fundamentally change. That’s the hardest part, I think. The fact that I’ll wonder about whether or not I should have pushed harder for more change, faster change, will always stay with me.

I think about what I gained from my time as a WPA. I know how things move in administration. And I found that afterwards I was much more effective and tangibly successful as a student activist as a result of that knowledge. I have played a hand in creating lasting changes for the students who look like me, who will come after me. I founded a Caucus with a paid stipend for a graduate student coordinator, a position that will be there to advocate for teachers of color in the department long after I’m gone. And I know that it will because my time as a WPA taught me to get things codified so they are not subject to the winds of change or administrative capriciousness. That’s a big thing. But it stirred up that old worry that I could have accomplished much more when I was an administrator. But, I know the type of administrator that I want to be, if I ever have the chance again.

But I’m left wondering, where can I be my true self? Am I more effective on the outside, or can I be more helpful working within the constraints of a system? And that leads me to wonder how many white WPAs are having to grapple with these questions. Then I think, as I often do when making decisions in academic contexts, of the students who will inhabit these spaces after me, and my choice is clear. I still want to be a WPA because this work for equality for students, teachers of color, for all oppressed people who come under the umbrella of a writing program has to be done.

I was part of the problem before; I won’t be again.

WORK CITED

- Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Kitchen Table P, 1983, pp. 94–101.

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