

Afterword

“Troubling the Boundaries” of Anti-Racism: The Clarity of Black Radical Visions amid Racial Erasure

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The first time that I ever related to an essay about writing program administration (WPA) was an epic moment. It was Collin Craig and Staci Perryman-Clark’s 2011 call for a racialized/gendered understanding of WPA work in “Troubling the Boundaries: (De)Constructing WPA Identities at the Intersections of Race and Gender,” now in its tenth-year anniversary.

At the time, I was three years into a WPA position. While I had certainly valued the work that I had read on “best practices” and labor polemics in WPA, none of that represented my life or the raced life of the university in which we all work. In contrast, Craig and Perryman-Clark connected the ways that racial embodiment in their graduate programs, in their universities, and at the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) structured a cohesive whole in the workings of institutional racism. They told us ten years ago, when they were graduate students in fact, that Black WPA Lives Matter. Up until that point, I had never seen WPA publicly called out this way in the research and I see very little today that recognizes this fact.

Perryman-Clark drew from bell hooks’s “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace” to examine the ways that one particular white man at her graduate university hypersexualized her leadership position in his request that she deal with a Black graduate student he saw as a problem. In detailing this experience, Perryman-Clark connected the hypersexualized, white violent contexts that have been mapped onto Black women’s histories and bodies to the everyday exchanges and encounters in her administrative work.

Craig took us further into the racial abyss that is composition-rhetoric graduate study and the CWPA. He described white men graduate students who questioned his qualifications for a graduate research assistantship but not their own. Meanwhile, white faculty and administrators expected him to move heavy furniture all while he was under their hyper-surveillance. And of course, the same white men graduate students had no grumblings in such instances of racial profiling against a Black man in their program; his alienation had not been a problem for them, only his reward.

Craig and Perryman-Clark assumed that the national conference of the CWPA might be a space where they could find a kinship network with whom they might reimagine theory and praxis at the intersection of their lived realities. They are certainly much more eloquent and generous than me, because I can never un-see their first-time attendance at CWPA as anything other than a racist mess. One conference attendee told them that they should do well on the market as minorities because even her college could use a couple more African Americans around the place. At one of the conference's dinners held at a park where a basketball tournament featured young Black men athletes, Craig was denied entry into the locked pavilion doors. For those of us who remember this moment and/or can just guess what went down: yes, the proverbial "Karen" at the door told Craig "you're not allowed in here." From my perspective, no real reconciliation or reckoning at the programmatic and systemic levels ever materialized for Craig.

And here is yet again another moment when many fail in a fundamental understanding of whiteness when we suggest that spaces like CWPA have been merely "unwelcoming" or non-inclusive. White space is never just an unfortunate accident and, instead, is always the product of Jim Crow segregations at the levels of policy, process, and affect. Black people were not merely "unwelcomed" at the whites-only drinking fountain and they have not merely been "un-included" in the discipline either. Jim Crow is not about the denial of niceness or inclusion; it is the heart of racism as Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines it: *group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death*.

Graduate students connected to CWPA created an online forum through the organization's digital platform to discuss Craig and Perryman-Clark's work which they saw as more than just an article, a text that, based on my own undercover work, wasn't reviewed predominantly by Black or BIPOC scholars who focus on institutional racism. With a whole article about Black folk being violated and locked out, the journal set up yet another white gatekeeping function in its review process on the way towards publication. Graduate students were the ones who paved the way for a more "endarkened" conversation via a set of blogposts that would center the essay more deeply (Dillard). I was one of the blog writers and no discussions came my way based on my posting. Today you wouldn't be able to even find those posts, because, ironically but not surprisingly, those blog posts were taken down just as fast as they went up.

I begin with Craig and Perryman-Clark's essay for many reasons here. It should be obvious that their text is an intellectual and political foundation for this incredible collection of essays curated by women of color, Sheila Carter-Tod and Jennifer Sano-Franchini. Carter-Tod and Sano-Franchini

are bringing me full circle here in this ten-year anniversary of my own Black Mattering in WPA. Their vision and role are especially important right now in getting us past the field's tendency to ignore, appropriate, and/or plagiarize (yes, sometimes these things can happen all at the same time) the unique praxis towards racial analysis and critique by feminists of color.

This ten-year anniversary of my own Black Mattering in WPA and this collection represent a critical moment to also call out white racial erasure (and I will stress here that faculty of color can succumb to this as much as white faculty). Some days it is as if Perryman-Clark and Craig had not called out foolishness way back when, as graduate students no less; and some days it is as if the folk who are suddenly newly radicalized ever showed up back then in solidarity in any real or critical way. The so-called new social-justice-turn or new racial consciousness in the field not only erases a Black radical past, it also does the continued work of white settler logic in suggesting new arrival, new beginnings, and/or new possibilities on already hallowed grounds. This is whiteness at its extreme: the ability to declare a space as new and in your own image simply because you have arrived without needing to add, do, or recognize anything or anyone around you. Such practice also denies the possibilities for restorative justice because it allows white power to erase its historical trajectories and foundations.

In calling up white racial erasure, I am referencing the 1990s scholarship of Stuart Hall and Charles Mills who critiqued British and North American racial memory when it comes to the history of race and empire, what they saw as a willful mental repression that sustains contemporary, home-grown varieties of racism. They posited what they called "white racial amnesia" as a de facto ability to righteously move forward and in so doing erase the histories of racism and white supremacy and thereby sediment its endurance more than its rupture. Given the constant tendency to ignore their distinct presence and contribution, Black feminisms have continually positioned racial counter-histories in an intentional strike against racial/misogynoirist (Bailey and Trudy) erasure and its inability to evaluate the present with critical insight (Crenshaw, Alexander-Floyd, Boyce-Davies). Racial erasure thus maintains white supremacy because it allows us to dilute and/or only vaguely name the specific histories of anti-black racism which have crystalized racist practices in our ways of talking and doing.

I have never worked in a writing program where whiteness was not the *fait accompli* of its structure and yet, in every such program, the folk at the helm would tell you that they are striving towards and have achieved justice around racial equity, access, and diversity. After reading seemingly countless applications for the writing program at my current institution, I am stunned by the performativity of white folk espousing anti-racism.

White candidates do not interrogate their damn-near-all-white graduate programs or their damn-near-all-white institutions and yet we are supposed to believe that they have achieved an anti-racist ethos in their classrooms and research in relation to BIPOC. There is no evidence of a proximity to BIPOC scholars, anti-racist activism, or sustained study of BIPOC and race and yet they are race experts now. I have never before witnessed so many scholars maintain the field's whiteness and racism with the uncanny ability to call it *anti-racism*.

With this collection in hand, and ten years after the publication of "Troubling the Boundaries: (De)Constructing WPA Identities as the Intersections of Race and Gender," I question the newfound social-justice-turn everyone thinks they have made in a context where Craig and Perryman-Clark's experiences are routine encounters on campus and off. This collection asks us to reckon with our racist histories and current realities so I sit in this moment with many questions. Where, for instance, were wide outrage and national boycotting when our own national conference, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), decided it would retain its 2018 hosting location in Missouri? How do we account for people who, quite literally, would not honor a social action by an entity like the NAACP, but will hop on board when the call doesn't come from Black folk and Black organizing? As a reference point, the NAACP issued a travel advisory on June 7, 2017 after the passage of what they called the Jim Crow Bill, SB 43, a Missouri law that rescinded legal protections against racial discrimination sponsored by a white lawmaker whose business was being sued for race discrimination (Ortiz). In the advisory, the Missouri NAACP explicitly described the state's contemporary circumstances: the death of Tory Sanford, ongoing racist attacks against Black students at the University of Missouri who made headlines in their solidarity with Mike Brown and Black Lives Matter, public homophobic rants by white legislators, attacks on Black high school students, escalating anti-Muslim violence, excessive traffic stops and searches against Black motorists. They named the roots of current events in the historical violence faced by Black people like Lloyd Gaines and Dredd Scott and the formerly enslaved via the Missouri Compromise. Meanwhile, back at the farm, CCCC told us that its executive committee would think deeply about holding its conference amidst this NAACP call-out of anti-Blackness but hosted its own violence via the NDA/gag order that the executive committee had to sign. In the end, it made it seem as if the minoritized group of BIPOC scholars on the committee agreed with an almost-majority-white vote to hold the conference in Missouri. Basic common sense should tell us otherwise. In fact, if we ever even bothered to notice, we would see that one of the then com-

mittee members, Eric Darnell Pritchard, has never returned to CCCC since that moment, not even to collect their multiple awards for their critically acclaimed book, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*. We have to thus ask ourselves why we have allowed folk to build their current anti-racist platforms on top of such levels of unseeing and uncaring (the very argument Pritchard is making in their book) and therefore on top of the literal inability to notice the loss of Black lives.

And you don't need to look very far to find social media posts from folk who called a 2018 CCCC boycott a simplistic and/or problematic response. What is the difference between now and then? Is it the white approval and white attention that came in 2020 that makes it so sexy now to center/exploit Black protest? I was floored by the general anti-Blackness circulating with the anti-boycott sentiments of CCCC given the historical roots of a Black and Brown boycotting ethos inherent in activist work going back to the NAACP's boycott of the *Birth of a Nation* film and up into the infamous struggles of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Chicago Open Housing Movement, and the Delano Grape Strike. Today's newly-radically-anointed even trotted out the routine Walmart argument to justify their embrace of CCCC in Missouri: the one where you recognize, yes, Walmart, does some bad things, but you embrace racial capitalism anyway because Walmart offers Black folk new menial, exploitative labor. And what about all those people who said they couldn't jeopardize their careers by not attending CCCC? Does their anti-racist "area of expertise" today not involve risk? Are we anti-racist only when it is safe (i.e., sanctioned by white organizations)? Who then is their anti-racism for? Others from the newly-radically-anointed said boycotting wasn't their choice of intervention because they had greater plans (which often seemed to revolve around their own clout and visibility). How has the interruption of deep-rooted political frameworks of a white supremacist organization become so synonymous with pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities within it? When do Black Lives Matter more than white economics in our organizations? My questions don't stop here though.

I also have questions about white and white-passing scholars who have turned the other cheek *repeatedly* when Black and Brown feminist graduate students and early career faculty were facing violence in composition-rhetoric programs with the justification that the perpetrators are/were supportive of you. That's not even a basic, ground-level level anti-racist ethos: if you are white-passing and you are treated well and ignore the Brown and Black folk who are not, then you are actively maintaining racism. This ain't hard. And truth be told, this describes a significant number of folk in the field and even some folk with the nerve to try and show up in this collec-

tion. I have questions too about all of the Black Lives Matter statements produced in this field in the summer of 2020 without nary a Black scholar mentioned and/or with the assumption that we are all the same and espousing the same politic.

In this moment, we must never forget that our “new” political affordances in academia in relation to Black Freedom were made possible by radical Black queer feminist activism outside of the academy, not within it (Cohen). As Saidiya Hartman warns us, there’s a wide disparity “between what’s being articulated by this radical feminist queer trans Black movement” and the language and practices of institutions and corporations. In her now infamous words, particularly noted by activists everywhere challenging the academy:

The possessive investment in whiteness can’t be rectified by learning ‘how to be more antiracist.’ It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism. What is required is a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference.

Hartman reminds us that rhetorics of abolition, defunding, and non-reformist reform are decades-long movements by Black/Feminist/Queer/Trans folk who have inspired the most powerful “clarity of vision” of our moment. This collection stands in homage to that clarity, but it remains to be seen if this field can match such a vision or merely appropriate its energy towards the continual “possessive investment in whiteness” that it has always upheld.

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