

Teaching While Black: Witnessing and Countering Disciplinary Whiteness, Racial Violence, and University Race-Management

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Imagine a department where there is only one black professor, a common occurrence across universities and colleges today. She is the first black professor in the history of the department there and certainly the first to be tenured. After many years, she finally sees a graduate student complete her dissertation, a young black woman who is also amongst the first black females to graduate with a doctorate from this program. And while there are plenty of ancestors and kinfolk across states, countries, and even continents celebrating this achievement, some of the white faculty are not as ecstatic. In fact, a few white junior professors, self-proclaimed feminists who teach first year writing, both stunningly under-achieving in their fields, begin to tell people that the professor wrote the dissertation for this black female graduate student, with the full support of staff/administration in spreading this Untruth. In the parlour of black youth culture, yes, we can call that: *haters gon hate*. While fully acknowledging all *that hateration*, let's also dig deeper.

It would seem that any researcher or scholar in the academy would know that you cannot possibly present at conferences, give keynote addresses, publish your own articles, review other articles for peer-reviewed journals, work on your own book manuscripts, review other people's manuscripts and books in print, work on grant-funded projects, and then also *write someone else's dissertation for them*. It seems safe to say that it is a huge task to even make time to read drafts of advisees' dissertations. This event is just one of many that show how white faculty and staff can be deeply invested in the illogic of their racism. This story, along with the many other stories that I will tell here, will serve not as micro-instances of campus racism but as macro-pictures of political life in American universities. I intend for these stories to offer a context for the ways in which we must understand and rupture whiteness, racial violence, and the institutional racism of our disciplinary constructs in composition-rhetoric as central to the political work we must do.

TANGLED WEBS: RACIST PROCESSES SEEN, HEARD, AND FELT

Like any good theorist of race and racism in the academy today, I dutifully acknowledge that race is socially constructed and, therefore, a product of social relations and not biological/genetic difference. This does not mean, however, that I promote the general post-modernist zeitgeist and angst that would suggest that race is illusory or peripheral to social organization, past or present, or that our identities are so multiple and complex that race can evaporate as a social category (Roediger). The institutional racism in which students and faculty must daily think and act is always very real and moving according to the specificity of two directions: the local situation and the national tenor of the moment.

Zeus Leonardo's work particularly challenges much of our current research and discourse, especially when theorized solely from the location of white privilege, which, as Leonardo argues, only offers a passive description of white racial domination as if racial domination happens without active agents, making whiteness *a state of being dominant* rather than a calculated and calculating series of racist *processes*. Leonardo's focus on active agents is a compelling mode of analysis that I believe most scholars of color are discouraged from pursuing. While much of our work that has chronicled the multiple literate lives of students of color has been embraced, it is not clear that the work has actually *been mobilized* to change classrooms for students of color in schools and colleges. It is much safer for us to unfurl the specialized, disciplinary methodologies and vocabularies in which we have been trained rather than turn our analytical gaze onto our institutions and its actors that have maintained calculatingly repressive environments, policies, and climates for students and faculty of color. This is a kind of intellectual activist-work that is quite distinct from the organizational work that we do at bourgeois professional conferences and the scholarship that we most often pursue.

If we truly understand ourselves as social actors and not lone individuals, then we can move past a bourgeois liberal orthodoxy that would imagine the professors, staff, and administrators of my opening narrative as merely individuals in one department at one college and, instead, begin to see and name an entire constellation of actors and processes. There are tangled webs of authorizing, credentialing, and sanctioning that have gotten these very actors to the university positions that they occupy and that have created the kinds of academic departments and disciplines in which we do our work. In fact, my opening narrative is not particularly spectacular but highlights just another day on the job as I can tell countless stories just like it. It is what bodies of color must negotiate in white university spaces, even when those university spaces represent student populations that are majority of color (the only kind of university where I have ever worked). I have not worked at any single institution, to date, where I have found as many as even three other colleagues who notice, much less speak out, against these kinds of everyday racist microaggressions that I have described despite everyone's seeming incessant discussion of critical theories from postcolonialism/decolonization to intersectionality. The theories can become merely the stage for an academic performance, not a way of engaging the world and oppression in it.

The story gets even more complicated with these actors in my opening narrative. The web

of connections is, indeed, quite complicated. We have to begin to ask, for instance: what does knowledge in this field look like and do when overwhelmingly white editors have published the work of white scholars about students of color, and when those very same white scholars would so casually and calculatingly defame the only black female professor and graduate on their campus? What might it mean that our publications about students of color emanate from racist roots and what does it mean when a publishing apparatus affirms that? From where I stand, I see a field whose central knowledge-making industry—both its journals and the processes of selecting its editors---reproduces racist logics. The very theoretical paradigms in which we work often operate from a space that requires the displacement and denigration of black women. While I understand how and why so many of my colleagues have the privilege of ignoring these “slippages,” many of us do not have the luxury of overlooking such violence because we are its targets. In more pessimistic terms, many of us unknowingly contribute to a kind of “race-management science” if we accept academia’s (our home institutions and our field) embrace of our scholarship on race but do not speak or write against the ways our institutions actively reproduce inequality.

Racism, institutional and structural, is not about some kind of general and generic racially divided world somewhere out there over the rainbow. There is never any moment when racism is subtle or exists as some kind of fine mist that is out there but that I cannot fully see on campus. We need to stop talking about racism and institutions this way in our writing and to our students. Oppression could never work if it were invisible, unarticulated, or unfelt by those it targets. Bonilla-Silva’s work on today’s college undergraduate students’ unwavering reproduction of color-blind racism seems everywhere replicated in our field. A misplaced faith in the progress of the field, shifting demographics at our colleges, or a naturally-occurring expiration of racism have left us inert and unconscious of our own race-reproducing tendencies.

DEEP HISTORIES AND THE COMPLICATEDNESS OF EVERYDAY LIFE: TEACHING NARRATIVES DEFINED AND REFINED

I am starting with the narrative of a black female graduate student and myself because I am suggesting that it is a critical context in which to understand the space in which black college students and faculty must write and carve out their (literate) being in colleges today. We face a resistance and questioning of our intellect that oftentimes look no different from what Phyllis Wheatley faced when white colonists found it difficult to believe that Wheatley had written her own poetry (Carretta; Doak; Langley). She had to defend her authorship in a Boston court in 1772 to a group that included the then governor of Massachusetts (Gates). It was only when she provided “proof” that they signed the documents verifying her authorship, which was included in her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* published in 1773 (in London, not the U.S.) While the adage that history repeats itself is much too simple to capture social complexities under race and gender in the United States, a historically situated understanding traced back to the first book of poetry published by a black woman, Phillis Wheatley, does offer critical understanding of the continuum of racial barriers.

The late Critical Race Theorist, Derrick Bell, argued that we must see racial progress as cyclical, sometimes regressing in catastrophic ways and, at other times, incrementally moving forward (Bell; Delgado). He called this position Racial Realism and saw it as the most hopeful and pragmatic theoretical lens and praxis to do anti-racist work. His reminder of the importance of Racial Realism seems a portent for today given the brutal murders of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown, the treatment of Rachel Jeantel's court testimony about Trayvon's murder, the nationwide protests that have animated young activists, the military-state brutality against protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, the discursive somersaults that law enforcement and state institutions continually maneuver to justify racial profiling, and the obvious and constant reminder that to be black in the United States is to be the target of a ruthless racial violence. As central to my own theoretical grounding here, I stick most closely with Sylvia Wynter's "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues." Written in the midst of the Los Angeles uprising of 1992, Wynter passionately urges us to decode our disciplinary sense-making that is ideologically wedded to the very same violence waged against Rodney King and South Central Los Angeles. I propose to take up Wynter's charge here: 1) that, we begin to *notice* the violence in the classrooms and research that we sustain, and; 2) that, we question the disciplinary apparatus that makes it possible that racially subordinated students of color will experience racial violence at the site where they are supposed to be democratically educated. I'm talking about the kind of social and political processes that we need in order to prevent racist logics as viable membership in this community that we call composition-rhetoric and I am calling these racist logics of the same order of violence as the murders of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown (and countless others), the dismissal of Rachel Jeantel, and the brutal targeting of Ersula Ore who was assaulted by campus police. Wynter was always sure that undoing racial violence is an intellectual and epistemological task, but only if we see the work in front of us.

I am offering my own personal experiences and stance of bearing-witness as more than just one individual's observations, but an indication of the levels of systemic racism that we do not address. General discussions about moral and philosophical principles of equity, equality, or diversity are no longer good enough so I take up the tools that Allan Luke privileges: the tools of "story, metaphor, history, and philosophy, leavened with empirical claims," all of which Luke argues are as integral to truth-telling and policymaking as field experiments and meta-analyses (368). I take up these tools in the context of myself as a writer and researcher of black language, education, and literacies and use narratives to offer stories of institutional racism that compositionists—and thereby, our field—have maintained. These narratives offer a place to decode the symbolic violence that is encoded into our disciplinary sense-making and move towards what a theory of Racial Realism might entail for our classrooms and discipline.

The series of stories that I tell here, beginning with my opening narrative, are intentionally crafted as method for organizing, presenting, and politicizing textual arrangement in scholarship (Coulter and Smith; Barone). Narrative as the form of my telling means that I am conscious of the ways that I use stories to understand and present the lives and literacies of students of color where my own cultural role as a black female storyteller enacts its own critical inquiry (L. Richardson, *Fields of Play*, "Getting Personal," "Poetic Representations," "Writing"; Gonick and Hladki).

TEACHING WHILE BLACK: TEACHING NARRATIVES FURTHER UNFURLED

In a graduate course that I once taught about New Literacies Studies, a white male student objected to Elaine Richardson's claim that women of color, with particular emphases on black women, are hyper-sexualized. In an extensive reading response that he wrote, Richardson's claims are unwarranted since "those women" are simply "promiscuous" and he placed "i.e., slutty" in parentheses after the word promiscuous, presumably because I might not know what such a word with so many letters might mean. He was, of course, not alone in his sentiments. More than a few white men in the class wrote about the ways we African Americans and Latin@s are no longer really challenged by racism; it is our laziness that keeps us behind since we just complain instead of working hard. Latin@s and African Americans are not the only groups who have gotten some heat in my graduate classes.

I have read numerous accounts from white graduate students in my courses about how Asian scholars, especially Morris Young and his book, *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*, were simply misinformed when thinking they were offering any pertinent information to anyone who has taught Asian students. In such examples, the numeric over-representation of one racial/ethnic group on a campus is akin to knowing about and respecting them. One might wonder, given this logic, why systems like slave plantations and European colonies, peopled mostly by brown and black bodies, were not oases of freedom, too. This idea that a teacher need not learn about Asian bodies because having their presence in a classroom is enough becomes fraught with problems. Two white female students once even visited my office to inform me, given their history of having taught many African American students, that Elaine Richardson (and myself since I upheld Richardson's position) do not fully understand how much better schools are for black people now and, as such, Richardson and I were distorting the truth. These two women even claimed to relate better (than Richardson and me) to African Americans given their Italian and Irish backgrounds, since they, after all, have experienced the same discrimination as blacks.

I have checked more than a few graduate students who never seemed to get the pronouns accurate on any Asian compositionists we read. It was obvious to me that they were unfamiliar with Asian names, like Min-Zhan Lu, who students often referenced with: "he argues. . . ." To deal with this, a group of white MA students decided to proclaim a new, radical gender politics for composition studies: they would exchange he and she pronouns for all authors since gender is, after all, only a social construction. And while that could be an interesting practice, this new radical experimentation was only waged on Asian bodies in the field: white scholars weren't subjected to these new experiments in she and he, his and hers.

I could go on and on like this. My narrative over-indulgence is meant to serve a specific rhetorical purpose here: rather than represent these examples as an exhaustive overview of my specific encounters, I intend to show these examples as casual, everyday occurrences. The responses that I have described are quite typical in the classrooms of black and Latina female professors, especially when your course centers the scholarship of folk of color and issues of race, class, and gender (Alfred;

Sadao and Johnsrud; Thomas and Hollenshead). The prevalence of such racist backlash against faculty of color seems such a steady data stream that we will continue to have a thriving research literature (Stanley et al; Stanley). Many of us are even taught how to account for negative student responses in classes that deal with race, class, and gender when we submit tenure files (Cleveland; Fenelon; Turner). The continuum is quite wide: depending on the school, black and Latina professors can expect calculated protection from offices like Minority or Multicultural Affairs; benign neglect in departments who don't seem to realize that their mentees say such things to faculty and peers of color (only the public expressions of "anger" by black students are noticed); or, at the extreme opposite end, we can expect departments to privilege white students' racist evaluations (Gutiérrez y Muhs, et al). At a National Women's Studies Association conference, for instance, there was significant discussion of one prominent university who validated the evaluations of students who wrote things about black female professors like: "this woman should never be a college professor; she needs to go back to the kitchen where her kind belong." Many of us know that this is what we must confront as the daily-ness of being a black or Latina female faculty member in white institutions. To imagine that changing such sentiments in white college students is an easy task is to ignore centuries of racial oppression and the current race-protest moment in which we live.

In the field of composition-rhetoric, however, we have an altogether different set of issues. For *each and every single* graduate student who I have described, *each and every single* one of them has been hired to teach writing on a university campus. These students are now adjuncts, contract faculty, or tenure track faculty; some work on campuses, especially those who are hired in the tri-state New York area where I teach, where the students are predominantly students of color. That young man who thinks all we blacks and Latin@s are lazy got hired to teach them by a team of compositionists who have been talking and writing up their programs in the field as offering important literacy opportunities for their students. That man who thinks all black and Latina women are "i.e. slutty" is *teaching them right now*. In some cases, some of these students are even proposing to conduct research about students of color. My anecdotes do not compose the story of an isolated, individual campus, but the wider culture of our field. Though I am an obvious member of the campus and program where these graduate students did their degree work, no compositionist or administrator has ever contacted me with questions about these graduate students' capacity for teaching students of color, questions for which I can surely supply a litany of responses. The only phone calls that I ever receive are when a graduate student of color is the job candidate and the one question that marks each conversation is about the collegiality of these young scholars of color: *do they play well with others?* I have seen no evidence, across dozens of programs, of any interest in white candidates' ability to work in classrooms with students of color, only an interest in whether or not young scholars of color will accommodate whiteness. When we talk about institutional racism as it impacts composition-rhetoric classrooms, the field, and college writing programs, we need never feel at a loss for seeing very specific, local iterations.

When discussions about race, culture, and whiteness go down in my graduate classrooms, it is often students of color who challenge white students, rarely other white students though many of them claim to do critical literacy teaching, anti-racist advocacy, and research amongst students

of color. I am reminded of what Bell described when he protested Harvard's refusal to hire a black female law professor: white faculty agreed with him behind closed doors when they visited him in his office but they never spoke up or out in any public setting (Bell, *Faces*). In one particular dissertation proposal seminar, one white female graduate student, someone who is "researching" students of color, spoke at length in a class about how she felt the program was better before the "angry black man" joined; some faculty expressed the same sentiment to me in the hallways, never once problematizing white students' racism. In this kind of culture where we groom our graduate students, it is students of color who will take the heat, much like Bell did, all alone, when he stood against the racism of his peers. Graduate classrooms rarely award those white graduate students who choose to defy majority-white peers and yet, white students' silence is hardly liberatory for them either. More importantly, such silence puts white faculty and graduate students at risk of losing real collegial relationships with and trust from people of color, who will be few and far between on their campuses as it is.

Malea Powell's 2012 Chair's Address seems all the more pertinent here: the call that we *decolonize* our pedagogies, classrooms, and epistemologies. We need to know the deep histories and contemporary realities about racially subjugated groups before we can have something to say about teaching them (Ladson-Billings and Tate; Dixson and Rousseau; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, and Lynn). The violence of seeing black and Latin@ people as lazy or promiscuous (i.e., slutty), the same as Irish or Italians, or too angry is the context of the classroom that, by my count, hundreds of black and Latin@ college students are sitting in this week, this month, this semester, this year; and, in each case, it was a compositionist who co-signed this placement into the field, position, or program.

If we politically and historically contextualize these narratives and anecdotes that I have provided, we have a very unique intellectual opportunity. I am not suggesting that our students with racist attitudes will not challenge their thinking somewhere down the line, but I am questioning how and why faculty of color experience such classroom events as routine and must do the bulk of the exhausting, debilitating, and non-value-added work of redressing students' racial wrongs, often without any support or acknowledgement from the departments, programs, schools, or fields in which they work. What I am also suggesting here is that we take advantage of an oft-missed opportunity: we can really see how racism works in our field if we ask when, where *and if* such graduate students' racism is ever challenged and re-directed outside of faculty of color's classrooms. I like to think of such students as a kind of dye into the field, like the kind medical doctors use: the dye that gets injected into your internal organs so that you can see where the problem areas are. We are not standing on the outside of racial violence in our discipline; we ourselves are encoding racial violence in how we constitute knowledge about people of color and how we are enacting racism with the people we hire and privilege as composition faculty.

There are, of course, position papers, policy statements, and white papers that we could design that need to address: guidelines for the awards granted to writing programs that explicitly communicate goals for culturally relevant literacy curricula offered to students of color; dispositions, research experiences, and practices to privilege when interviewing candidates to teach multilingual and multiracial students; articulations of PhD programming in the context of theory and praxis

related to teaching multilingual and multiracial students towards radical, anti-racist ends; definitions of ethics of practitioner research and qualitative studies for scholars who research in communities of color but do not represent or live in them. However, this kind of policy-building cannot replace simultaneous ideological analysis. I am talking about the kind of work that Wynter was asking of us in 1992: namely, that we interrogate the horizon of understanding that induces the collective behaviors of so many sites in the field where racist teachers carry forth composition classrooms and racist editors stamp new forms of knowledge-making.

Borrowing from Foucault's notion of the episteme, Wynter reminds us that race is a "classificatory logic," albeit fictional since it is a social construction that gets elaborated by our disciplinary paradigms. Wynter describes teachers and "universally-applicable" researchers as the "grammarians" of our order, those men and women who are able to directly reflect the frameworks, systems of value, and cognitive model that the discipline most desires (what she might call a sociogenic code) (*Do Not Call Us Negroes*). There is a discursive and pragmatic power, however, in the counter-narratives and counter-epistemologies that color-conscious compositionist-rhetoricians can use to rupture this horizon of desires. It is the work that Wynter was asking us to do in 1992 and 1994: the most dispossessed amongst us must turn the tide and become the intellectuals who (re)write the sociogenic codes of the discipline that currently bind us.

ANOTHER DAY IN THE LIFE OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM: A FINAL TEACHING NARRATIVE

Vickie, a young black woman and former student, a summa cum laude biology major and McNair scholar, was sent to her department's medical school advisor in her senior year of college. The advisor took one look at her, asked what her GPA was, and when she said 3.7, he told her she had no chance of going to medical school. He went on to explain to her that medical schools no longer accept "unqualified blacks" like her as they did in the 1970s and 1980s; that he only knew "one black girl" at the college who had ever gotten herself ready enough to get into medical school on her own "merit"; and that she probably wasn't going to do the same as "that other black girl." Other young black women shared similar stories about their "advisory" meetings: one woman was told that it was good she is Haitian because she will need Voodoo to pass her course; another was reluctantly told that she might, after all, actually make it into medical school since she was "only" applying to "those" medical schools at historically black colleges and universities. These are not things that happened years ago, but a few semesters ago, a seeming shock to many people who continually remind me: *yes, but look at Michelle Obama.*

When I have told this story to white audiences, many see each professor's attack as simply one, individual act of meanness, not systemic racism that structures black opportunities. And yet, it is the privilege under whiteness that only imagines such romantic individuality while Vickie and her peers are continually reminded on college campuses that they are *just black girls*. Vickie, however, cannot afford to understand this advisor as one, lone individual actor that the rest of the world won't replicate; and, at the same time, she can't let this man and that world eat away at her spirit and the

triumphant woman she already is, has been, and is becoming. These ways of reading the world, far more complicated than any skills-set we teach in our writing classrooms, are what we must imagine as central to college education today.

Though Vickie's university was among the three most "diverse" universities in the country, its "epidermic" diversity is mostly a historical accident, not one of the "intentionally figured counter-hegemonic discourse communities" that Theresa Perry describes when she looks at the history of HBCUs (Kynard and Eddy). This epidermic diversity has little, if anything, to do with understanding or rupturing institutional racism. In fact, diversity rhetoric works *alongside* institutional racism in the ways that corporate management schemas use diversity as mostly a marketing tool. "Lower-tiered universities" will especially promote their epidermic variability as their only competitive advantage in the food chain of college ranking scores. Current tropes of educating for diversity neither examine nor rupture the premises and beliefs of a social order that negates the poorest/of color segments of our population. Instead, paradigms of (especially linguistic) diversity trek relentlessly toward the creation of a multiple-languaged but standardized-English-speaking rainbow coalition of multiethnic consumers who can function in a homogenized (and collapsing) marketplace. Multiple "peoples of color" can be incorporated, via schooling, into the criterion reference of the middle class without sabotaging or contradicting the aims of current modes of capitalism. Legal scholars have especially shown how this appropriation and disconnection of diversity from race has resulted in color-blind law *while* de facto and de jure racial discrimination continue (Bell; Guinier; Orfield; Moses and Chang). Ladson-Billings ("Is The Team All Right?," "Preparing Teachers") and many other educational scholars, from Darling-Hammond to Swartz, have critiqued a set of teaching and learning practices under the hubris of diversity that work to actually block true inclusivity by: coding and lumping historically marginalized groups into one single-massed "other"; removing group identities, cultures, and political needs from view; obscuring racism, homophobia, and sexism; serving the interests of capital; and amassing add-on content to predesigned forms and models. The college that manages brown and black bodies by photographing them as happy smiling faces for corporate ad campaigns but then promotes the campus actors who denigrate them is well-aligned with what "diversity" means and achieves in this era. If we understand that we all work in managed universities in the way Bousquet has so brilliantly outlined for us (too many of us still don't want to really account for and notice the ways that we exist in the most corporatized versions of higher education ever seen), then we need to understand that capital and "management" in the U.S. have always reproduced racial hierarchies in distinct, powerful ways. Economically managed universities are no exception to this rule.

But this story gets better.

I was asked to serve on a panel for "teaching multicultural student populations" at the college and accepted the offer, thinking I would get in where I fit in, and used the moment to talk in great detail about Vickie's experience and what it means to alienate future black female doctors from a health care system that has stunningly failed to improve the health and mortality of black women. After describing Vickie's encounter on that campus, I asked what I thought might be some good questions:

- What if the discourses—those ways of speaking, writing, and thinking--- that we teach to students in schools are, in and of themselves, flawed and racist, or at least, problematically racialized? We can't really think that language and words do not matter, that language and words do not have consequence and material effect, can we?
- Can it really be a surprise that Vickie's advisor and his family are the dominant members of a system (both the medical profession and college campus) where African Americans have higher rates of avoidable hospital admissions¹, where nearly 35 black women die per 100,000 births as opposed to 9 white women, where heart disease was 50% higher among black women than white women in the 1980s and has increased to 67% now?
- What are the connections between how Vickie is treated on this campus and a larger paradigm of structural racism where as a black woman, she has twice the cervical cancer mortality rate compared to white women, is 28% more likely to die of breast cancer than white women, and—as if all that wasn't enough—will live roughly five fewer years than white women?²

I am not suggesting here that white faculty's racism is the center of gravity for such a system of unequal health disparities. My point with listing so many health disparities was not to chronicle the ways that black women die at the expense of noticing our lives. Instead, my point here was to ask a different kind of question for those interested in the educational life of someone like Vickie: how is the macro-racism that Vickie faces *off campus* (see "Income and Poverty in Communities of Color: A Reflection on the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau Data") different from the world she must navigate *on campus*? Our language and epistemology on campus are not innocent, benign, or socially non-determinant.

In my brief moment on the panel, I argued that, as faculty, we needed to adopt an activist stance where we challenge colleagues who endanger our students' daily lives with what Critical Race Theorists call racial micro-aggressions. I also argued that we must challenge the overt, off-campus racism our students also encounter, like our Muslim students who can never drive home on break without being stopped by the NYPD or fly home without going through multiple searches at the airport. I questioned the desire to create tried-and-true lesson plans for every ethnic group, the pedagogical version of an ethnic food court, and instead asked that we not make students of color the smiling/happy objects of marketing's corporate ads but actual bodies with histories of racial subordination that they are living out, both on and off campus. That to me would be the definition of teaching racially and ethnically diverse student populations. But it all seemed to fall on deaf ears.

In the Q&A session, a white female professor waxed on prophetically on how she works with students to make sure they do not wear big earrings in the business world, pointing at me and my earrings, and right when I thought I would go in on her, I was just even more stunned: without even a pause about my earrings, she went on to discuss how she had to learn to teach "the Chinese girls" who do not know how to talk or think, fully deploying "Chinese" as the code name for Asian students on the campus, though our Asian student population was not made up predominantly of Chinese-American communities. And, as always, though the room was heavily populated by white, senior tenured faculty, it was me, the most junior and the only woman of color, who challenged her.

Since that day, this white woman has been promoted to dean; and Vickie's race-perpetrator is still the medical school advisor and has been promoted to director of scientific reasoning by a white male administrator who was sitting in the very audience of the panel discussion (given my description of her advisor and his long tenure at the university, he knew exactly who I was speaking of). As if that weren't enough, Vickie's perpetrator also directs the IRB office, which means he oversees all research on exactly the kinds of bodies he is utterly unable to value and humanize.

What I am suggesting here is that Vickie's experience, particularly under this corporate rubric of diversity, is routine, systematic, and systemic. None of these promotions are accidental or coincidental and for those who think I am simply a conspiracy theorist, I remind you of David Gillborn's argument that racism has never needed a conspiracy to be operational. As I have already iterated, I do not believe that *some* universities do not operate under these kinds of white supremacist cultural logics; whiteness doesn't require that we will all see or notice racism. What I am suggesting then is that in Vickie's routine experience, we see a crucial lens into the ways in which universities maintain white supremacy as a structure of both formal and informal rules where norms for the distribution of resources, benefits, and burdens are actively maintained.

It seems that in institutions where formerly white colleges and universities have experienced a browning and blackening of their student populations, not by conscious/deliberate action like with HBCUs but by geographic accident, racial anxieties actually increase for the most powerful, campus white stakeholders. The policing of black and brown bodies and minds gets escalated, a fate too many of us in the field do not readily challenge since many of us discuss racially subordinated students from university spaces that do not enroll many of them and, therefore, can often fetishize practice rather than engage the equally tangible and necessary work of interrogating the distinct kinds of institutional racism that still bar students of color from the very universities that enroll the largest number of them. Our inability to explicitly situate and name the acts of everyday institutional racism that are always inherent to teaching and to the literacies of our students seems stunningly related to James Gee's critique that what we have called our social turn--- and its focus solely on the social processes of learning—was never really political enough. We never really interrogated systems of power, though we may have certainly improved learning structures. In this absence of a deliberate critique of power, we ourselves created the very possibility that progressive philosophies of education could be completely co-opted by neoliberalism such that even corporate mechanisms under current standardization regimes sometimes sound like us: *we may have supplied a much too-neutral language.*

But this story gets better still.

While I was on the "multiculturalism panel," being schooled on the kind of earrings I need to wear, learning how "stupid" "Chinese girls" are, and hearing just how inaudible the suffering of black women and Muslim students is, I had numerous voicemail messages waiting for me as well as a barrage of emails. I was being called to campus security for something a student was claiming he wrote in my advanced, undergraduate composition class: *could I really be teaching about race theory?* was the question.

In the class, one student, who I will call Sammy, elected to write an essay that uses his own experiences as a multiracial young man to interrogate America's neo-racism. Sammy is biracial (A

Caribbean black father and white-skinned Latina mother) which, in his case, means he “looks Arab,” with features that he describes as “a long, pointy nose, protruding ears, long eyelashes, tan skin and bushy eyebrows”--- all of these racial descriptions are the student’s.) As someone who is most often labeled as Muslim, Islamic, or Arab, based solely on his appearance, Sammy is routinely subjected to stops and searches: when he is driving, every time he goes to the airport, at the subways and at every major transportation setting. His writing red-flagged the campus security office when he printed his assignment on a campus printer. While I was, quite literally, presenting on a panel about educating our multicultural student population, Sammy was called into security headquarters and interrogated about his writing. Not even 10 minutes after my panel presentation, I had to phone in and assure the campus-homeland security that Sammy had indeed completed this assignment for me.

I never talked about this moment publicly with anyone other than my undergraduate students. There were so few faculty of color on that campus, less than any other campus I have ever visited, taught at, or myself attended, that we see each other very little and amongst those who do have a critical race perspective (there are even fewer), well, let’s just say that we had our plates full. There was no single white ally anywhere on the campus, as was the case when I spoke up against a female faculty member’s racist targeting of our only black male student in the grad program. I had already witnessed what Thomas Ross describes as the perpetual twinning of white innocence with black abstraction: white perpetrators of racial violence look back with shame while the assault on black bodies gets completely divorced from very specific, centuries-old experiences of racism. White faculty, especially junior members, eventually found a way to fault the black male student as it protected their tenure trek or, rather, their whiteness; meanwhile, white graduate students distanced themselves altogether from the issue, though they are writing dissertations on race theory (Linda Smith’s work seems relevant here where she argues that Indigenous people have been the most researched subjects in western science but that has meant very little, if anything at all, for their liberation or the ease or end of their suffering.) No post-colonialist, no critical theorist, no African Americanist, and no queer theorist thought anything of this situation because they counted on white supremacy to let them sit on the sidelines and observe violence, racially mark the black male student as “difficult”; racially mark me as angry and inappropriate (I never seemed to pick the “right time” to discuss race with white people); and racially mark the white woman as “innocent” and “victim.” With a white male faculty and staff running to protect her moral and pedagogical virtue, this white woman was simply someone who had intended no harm, the usual escape hatch for racist perpetrators, enlivening a black counter-narrative that might aptly be traced back to Ida B. Wells’s *A Red Record* (one might wonder what an intentional racist act might look like if this is what white educators do when they are not acting intentionally.) With that kind of racial memory at an institution that shamelessly pimps its students’ epidermic diversity when it serves white corporate interests, I knew very well that the campus homeland security, all former NYPD, would have impunity in demonizing both Sammy and me.

On this Typical Day at a university campus, after relaying Vickie’s story about a man who would be eventually promoted, after being told that my earrings are inappropriate and that “Chinese girls” are stupid by someone promoted to upper level administration, after dealing with the campus

homeland security, I had to go teach my race theory class. I got there five minutes late and the students had already started the class without me, with Sammy leading, who, smarter than myself, had recorded the entire conversation with campus-homeland security. The students then basically directed a discussion with Sammy and myself where we uncovered that Sammy and I basically walked into our interrogation with the same focus and goals, though we did not talk to one another beforehand: 1) we were both told lies about one another that we automatically knew were concocted stories; 2) we referenced and quoted the same critical race scholars; 3) we walked in with a conscious decision to not bow our heads and act like good, scared Jim Crow Niggras; 4) we guessed our white male interrogator's questions beforehand; 5) we both used trickster, signifying motifs and answered all questions with questions. From that point on, if and when students wrote “dangerous” texts, they gave me a USB drive and I printed/read it from my computer at home or they took it back to the Old Skool: they hand-wrote their texts. It seems ironic that while brown and black bodies across the country use social media and technologies for subversive means, at this college, the most subversive technology for students to discuss race was paper and pen.

While the hyper-criminalization of Arab bodies in the context of a university that celebrates its diversity and multiculturalism seems a contradiction, it is actually a logical aftermath if we see that the ideological apparatus under diversity and multiculturalism sustains and propels racism. I am reminded here of Wynter's 1990 work in *'Do Not Call Us Negroes: How Multicultural Textbooks Perpetuate Racism* where she shows how new “code words” of minority, diversity, and cultural pluralism replace the terrain of race and only further marginalize the centrality of both black and Indigenous groups to the instituting of America.

THE NARRATIVE ARC: A HAPPY ENDING

It is worth explicitly stating here that when my racially subordinated students were writing texts that fused and infused their experiences with critical analyses of race, their bodies, experiences, and voices posed enough of a threat that we had to communally design counter-surveillance textual productions to actually do racial analyses. I had printed out hundreds of articles by compositionists on campus printers. And while I may have *thought* those readings were radical, I have been never called into campus security for them. It wasn't until students did the racial analyses themselves in their own writing classroom that campus homeland security came *literally* calling for them and me. None of these academic texts for academic audiences that we imagine to be so socially transformative has held as much of a threat as when racially marginalized college students counter-narrated their own experiences with white supremacy on and off campus. I just assume that anything perceived this dangerous in the hands of young multiracial, working class, first generation college students *has got to be right*. It would seem to me then that this is a first order of business on a to-do list for a complete dismantling of the hegemony of diversity discourses in higher education that operationalize racial assaults on the bodies of students of color.

I want to return here to Leonardo's reminder that critical analyses of race have to begin with the objective experiences of racially subordinated masses, since it is not in the interest of such groups to

mystify the process of their own dehumanization. This seems critical to me in the field where even the texts that address race/anti-racism parade mostly white authors with an obligatory nod to the celebrity minorities of the field, allowing yet another publication of a white text by white authors who have often themselves perpetrated exactly the kinds of white supremacist violence that I have talked about in this piece. We need what LaNita Jacobs-Huey has described as *the natives* “gazing and talking back” in ways that explicitly interrogate *the daily operation of white supremacy in our field and on our campuses* rather than more performances of psychologically-internalized black pain for the white gaze (a practice that garners white attention and consumption, but never social change). I am not talking to or about those scholars seeking celebrity status, acceptance, or more face-time; this is work that requires you to make people *uncomfortable*. *Some folk gon need to get called out*. As Leonardo argues, in the least, this kind of focus on the objective experiences of racially subordinated masses as the frame for understanding the dynamics of structural power relations would finally move us away from always ONLY imagining a white audience when we write about race, literacy, life, and schooling. We only chokehold racial understanding and change when we proceed at what he so aptly calls the “snail’s pace of the white imaginary” (Leonardo 80).

Insomuch that the stories I am telling here can have a happy ending, I will tell you that Vickie was accepted into each of the nine medical schools to which she applied with full scholarship. Sammy is at a MFA program that will allow him to focus more fully on racial experiences. The success that I see in Vickie’s and Sammy’s final endings is not in their material accomplishments but in their consciousness and ability to both navigate and *counter-narrate* the white supremacy they have faced and will continue to face, both on and off campus---two sides of the same coin. We need to follow their lead and counter-narrate the mainstream assumptions on which far too many have built their ideas about literacy and action in higher education.

CODA

In this coda, I am offering a series of contemplative questions. I imagine two audiences here: 1) marginalized faculty/graduate students who are in the midst of or will soon experience antagonistic racial encounters on their campuses; 2) folk who want to better understand what I am talking about and how it impacts my critiques of and frustrations with both the academy and our field. By centering questions, I am asking readers to insert themselves into and experience a sense of urgency about the issues I have discussed. There are no *right or wrong* answers here, but you **MUST** come up with answers. Treat these questions as a lens onto a landscape that many may not have looked at closely before *but as promises of what is coming in the very near future for YOU*.

1. Think back on the excerpt about Vickie. Imagine that Vickie comes to you in tears about what her medical school advisor has told her. What will you say to her? What will you say, in that moment, such that when she walks out of your office, you will contribute to the humanity that she has been denied? What’s *your* script? Now, imagine that this is the kind of exchange you have in your office at least once a week. What will you do to rejuvenate *yourself* so that you can return each week without feeling depleted? To borrow

from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such routine interactions on our campuses?

2. Vickie is now in medical school. However, the professor who racially marked her as inferior is still at the university, with an even more privileged post than he had before with access to even more students of color. What will you do to counter his impact? You should assume, as is the case in this story, that no other administrator supports your concerns (*yes, you MUST STICK with this fact; do not retreat to your privilege and assume that when you talk, you will be heard*). Who will you talk to? What will you do? What is your role as a teacher? As an activist? As a WPA? To borrow from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such routine promotions on our campuses?
3. Visit Dr. Yaba Blay's website and read her post about Tiana Parker, the seven-year old girl in Tulsa, Oklahoma who was dismissed from school in 2013 because she wore dreadlocks (<http://yabablay.com/a-care-package-for-tiana-locs-of-love/>). What is the college version of your "care package" for black girls like Vickie? To borrow from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such experiences of black girls in schools?
4. Imagine that the one and only black, Arab, or Latino male in your class creates a writing portfolio where he has extensively researched police brutality and racial profiling and has also included his own personal experiences. Campus security reads the work since it was printed on the university server and so questions you about your class and your curriculum. What will you do? What will you say? What will you say to the student about his writing in the context of his campus experience? What is your role? For those of you who will simply prevent the one and only black, Arab, or Latino male in your class from writing about such issues, how do you describe your curriculum, teaching philosophy, and writing politics given this prohibition? To borrow from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such routine experiences for black, Arab, or Latino men on our campuses?
5. You are at a new university and you represent a marginalized group there (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, size, ability, there is no one else in the department like you). Every semester of your graduate course, students write about this marginalized group of which you are a member in denigrating terms. Every. Single. Semester. You are the only person in your department facing this dilemma. What will you do? Assume that there is no willing mentor on your campus, who will you talk to (*yes, you MUST STICK with this fact; do not retreat to your privilege and assume that you always have supportive colleagues*)? Where will you go in the field---in the publications or at the conferences---where you can find intellectual work that addresses these issues? If you don't find a wide range of such publications or conferences, what do you think accounts for this silence? To borrow, one last time, from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) racism in education, inside

and outside of classrooms?

NOTES

¹(i.e., hospitalizations for health conditions that, in the presence of comprehensive primary care, rarely require hospitalization) Go to <http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/nhdr03/nhdrsum03.htm>

²See www.blackwomenshealth.org

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