

# *This Bridge*: The Black Feminist Compositionist's Guide to the Colonial and Imperial Violence of Schooling Today

CARMEN KYNARD

In March 2015, the State University of New York Press published the fourth edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, one of the most cited books in feminist theorizing that arguably turned the tide into what we today call intersectional feminism. *This Bridge* is an anthology edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa first published in 1981 by Persephone Press and then published again in 1983 by Kitchen Table (Women of Color Press). The third edition, published by Third Woman Press, was in print until 2008. For seven years, new reprints were virtually unavailable. Reissued nearly thirty-five years after its birth, the current fourth edition contains an extensive new introduction by poet/playwright/cultural activist Cherríe Moraga, along with a previously unpublished statement by Gloria Anzaldúa. Hailed as a crucial space for offering a serious and collectively articulated challenge to white feminists by women of color and to the very notion that “woman” could ever be a stable, monolithic category outside of specific constructions of race, sexuality, culture, and history, *This Bridge* fundamentally reconceptualized what we do in

women's and gender studies (Alarcon; Sandoval; Barbara Smith; Anzaldúa and Keating).

Fall 2015 was the first school semester where the book was back in press again, and so it took a prominent, foundational role in my courses for both content and philosophical disposition. In those classes where I actually assigned the text, I was curious to see how students would respond to this canonical book that had never been assigned in my own college coursework, though a large part of that work centered on WGS. The conceptual frameworks of even the WGS courses that mark my own education have seldom included black bodies, notwithstanding the obligatory curricular add-ons where theory and critical discourse often seemed to disappear since neither the syllabus, classroom of students, or professors' backgrounds offered any deep engagement with or rigorous knowledge of the materials. In fact, I have never had sustained or critical discussions in any of my college courses—from undergraduate to PhD—about contributors to *This Bridge* like Cherríe Moraga, Nellie Wong, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl

Clarke, or the Combahee River Collective. Those names have only been part of what educational scholars might call my “out-of-school literacies” (Bruna; Hull and Schultz; Kynard, “Candy Girls”; Moench). And though Anzaldúa gets regular rotation on the various playlists of my field (I am a compositionist-rhetorician who works in English and/or writing studies departments) via textbooks and collections of feminist studies of rhetoric, Anzaldúa is most often inserted as just another “multicultural” voice in an obligatory nod to linguistic diversity in the post-Civil Rights era (Martinez). She is seldom situated as: 1) a fundamental shape-shifter in what counts as language within neoliberalist goals of a consumable/multilingual diversity; 2) a Chicana lesbian feminist who bends genres related to language and form as concomitant with destabilizing Western constructs of sexuality and compulsory white femininity; 3) a borderlands theorist who did not need the Western academy’s privileged approval as a poststructuralist elite in the academic metropole to challenge nation, empire, and capitalism; and 4) a critical rhetor whose word-work always merged all of her life-forces (Cantú 2011). Here I was, at this auspicious occasion, teaching as a Black-FeministCompositionist within university knowledge systems that have denied the intellectual presence of the life-sustaining women thinkers/activists for my life as both teacher and student. From the vantage point of race-radical black feminist teaching that honors legacies like *This Bridge*, two goals for my teaching seemed obvious: 1) the need to vigilantly recognize and critique the modes of racial violence that structure learning today; and 2) the need to pedagogically intervene in the neoliberalist logics that govern the way

language and writing are treated as white discursive processes. As a compositionist-rhetorician, my pedagogical theories focus sharply on language and writing, the place and space where we most often impose the most violence and social control in higher education. As a black feminist, however, my politicization of language and writing under the institutional domain of white (university) supremacy takes on significant new identities and passions. Inspired by one particular student’s text, experiences, and particular reflections of college literacy/learning in my first semester using the latest edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, I newly interrogated colonial and imperial ideologies (Paper-son 2010) shaping schooling/literacy for racially/economically subjugated youth of color and the ways race-radical black feminist thought offers an alternative praxis for teaching and learning.

### “The Black Feminist’s Guide to the Racist Sh\*t That Too Many White Feminists Say”: Portrait of a Student Named Lim

One student, whom I will call Lim, sets an important stage for my need to discuss the ways in which critical pedagogies and race-radical black feminisms can intersect to work against the formidable presence of the colonialist/imperialist paradigms that structure the possibilities for students’ knowledge, language, and writing in the neoliberalist university. Lim’s story functions as a central and cycling force of gravity in this essay, and I will return to his experiences in multiple instances. In centering Lim, I am following in the rhetorical footsteps of Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot’s work on portraiture as an aesthetic methodology for representing descriptive

analyses of schools and communities and moving past situating students of color in a state of never-ending skills apprenticeship to their teachers (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis; Lawrence-Lightfoot). Thus, I work as co-participant in the storytelling process where my narrative arc includes my own body's experiences (Boylorn). Portraiture, with Lim as my focus here, is an important political component for the ways that I discuss and build my discourse and research on classrooms. Students cannot serve as a generic, unnamed, and faceless audience in presentations of classroom strategies where we often hail a process as successful because a particular group of students responded well. Students' responses in classrooms are always conditioned by their social and cultural backgrounds and the institutions in which they express themselves. Zeroing in on decontextualized classroom activities and lesson plans alone can often be fetishized to such an extent that there is little room for understanding classroom learning as always socially constructed. We only end up replicating a kind of workbook, depersonalized approach to education that has done far more harm than good to marginalized people of color. Portraits put the social contexts of student learning into sharp focus so that we might better represent and understand multiple competing political processes that students navigate in college.

The very title of this essay has been re-mixed from Lim's poster project in response to *This Bridge* in one of my classes. In his poster for the class presentation, Lim juxtaposed Maisha Johnson's 2015 Web article, "The Black Feminist's Guide to the Racist Sh\*t That Too Many White Feminists Say," at everydayfeminism.com with quotations from

*This Bridge* (Johnson's Web text was not assigned in the course). Lim took Johnson's text, printed it out, and pasted it together so that it looked like a long, very official-looking scroll. Behind the scroll was a collage of multiple quotations from the writers in *This Bridge*. As I looked at it, I couldn't help but laugh out loud and asked Lim loudly across the room: "Yo, Lim, what you been readin'?" According to him, he decided to study more black feminism and fell in love with Johnson's Web article. Black feminism was helping him understand, on the one hand, white women's exoticization of his Asian/blackness in a world where, on the other hand, white women routinely disrespected his Chinese accent-bearing mother in ways that no other group did, co-signed the criminalization of his black father, and treated his desire for a black partner as irrational—the bridge that he called *his* back, to which I interjected in Amen-style: "go on, Lim, talk about it!"

Lim's desire to see where and how *This Bridge* lives now took him into digital spaces where he found new AfroDigital black feminist critiques. Part of the assignment for students was to imagine and explain why they thought *This Bridge* has made such an impact and continues to inspire. Lim was most compelled by the work of Maisha Johnson, a writer and content designer at everydayfeminism.com as well as a social media and digital activist who writes and organizes across various venues including Black Girl Dangerous and empowerment groups for incarcerated women in California. She opens her essay, "The Black Feminist's Guide to the Racist Sh\*t That Too Many White Feminists Say," by challenging accusations that her focus on racism is divisive for feminist movements. She describes three central

moments in her life that have shaped her consciousness and stance as a black feminist: 1) her first classes in WGS courses where she first began to articulate the role of patriarchal oppression in her life; 2) her realization that the feminist groups on campus that she was aligned with were mostly white and elided discussions of racism; and 3) her introduction to black feminist writing in her creative writing classes, the seemingly only place where radical black women's writings were fully and deeply incorporated into the curriculum. Lim visually amplified Johnson's last, third reasoning, since it was my writing class that first introduced him to radical black women's work. As Lim and Johnson both illuminate here, the explicit focus on the writings of radical women of color as a centripetal force in gender theory is not necessarily a foregone conclusion in WGS courses. I am not suggesting that the notion of a black feminist pedagogy is new or foreign, but the context of an explicit black feminist tradition for writing/literacy studies in urban, non-elite university settings (as opposed to being a researcher at elite universities) is a terrain often left underexamined.

Lim is thus a critical interlocutor with my ideas in this essay because he quite literally inspired my public discussion of what had hitherto been a mostly interior dialogue: on the one hand, my general disgust with the overwhelming whiteness and evasion of race-radical action and theory in literacy learning in college, and on the other hand, my frustration with the divorce between radical research content/methodology and critical pedagogy in gender studies. My interactions with Lim within the specificity of black feminist composition pedagogy, however, happened long before we met in a gender studies class. In

the year prior to our gender studies class together, Lim brought another issue to my attention, in his same attention-grabbing kind of style, when he was in my first-year English/composition course. One of his closest friends in that composition course was a young man who had the "thickest accent in the class," Zeek (this is Zeek's description of his language, not mine). Zeek's "accent" certainly did not impede anyone's understanding of his speech but is noticeable to folks who spend their time marking nonwhite language as inferior (Bresnahan et al.; Lippi-Green). Lim and Zeek's class was also the class in which I was observed by my department as part of our college's mandatory institutional procedures. Zeek was very vocal in class that day (a computer lab day),<sup>1</sup> and the assigned observer asked Zeek if he could look over his shoulder and read as he was writing on the computer on a private ePortfolio/Web site. Zeek wasn't comfortable with it but did not feel like he had the power to say no to the observer, a white man (who chose Zeek as the only student to surveil as he composed). I didn't witness the white professor's request but noticed his intrusive hovering over Zeek's body. After many students and I began to glare at what the observer—the only white man in the room—was doing, the observer eventually returned to his seat. Lim let me know outside of class that he thought Zeek had been profiled because of his "accent" and was upset by what he saw as a clearly racialized encounter.

And Lim was spot-on. The observer took what Zeek composed in less than five minutes to write a diatribe against my classroom's lack of direct instruction on five-paragraph/"traditional essay" format. He further used the student's writing as proof of the entire class's non-facility with

English language, grammar, and writing. I had only arrived at this college a month before and had never met the observer or even passed him in the hallways, so it was impossible for him to know much about me or the specific students in the room. That official observation now remains part of my permanent file, although the observer did not have a PhD degree, background in educational/literacy studies, or a higher tenure rank. In essence, to borrow from Lim's labeling: we had all been profiled.

This incident is not particularly unusual given what I have seen at numerous universities where faculty routinely forward English language learners' emails, with the students' full names and personal information intact, to other professors explaining their disdain of and irritation with these students, a practice that is not in the least ethical or legal (Lynch; Walker, Shafer, and Liams). As of today, the only person who ever voiced concern over this observer's actions was Lim. Many faculty members and key administrators supported this negative evaluation in my file and expressed sympathy for the observer since "our students" have such "severe problems" with writing. The only critique mustered against the observer was that his intentions were misguided, though hushed whispers across multiple offices were not as forgiving of my supposed transgressions. Yet other faculty, especially those related to composition/literacy studies, thought this was the occasion to discuss new ways to teach grammar, as if this situation were ever about anything other than the *grammar of race*. Only white Western schooling's history of linguistic imperialism could account for the assumption that a student for whom English is a *fourth* language is illiterate and needs a monolingual white

man's physical surveillance (Canagarajah; Pennycook; Phillipson; Ngugi). English fluency will never result from the requirement that an English language learner in college produce perfectly typed sentences in five minutes at first utterance/word processing (Matsuda et al.); that fluency is only more compromised when a hostile white man hulks over a student while he is writing. This observer literally stood over Zeek's body as he was sitting at the computer, watched every letter that he typed on the keyboard, and then criticized the form of those words in the public document of a required, institutional form. This is *violence*. It's the kind of violence that higher education has not only sustained but always justified as right and good for classrooms with brown and black college students, always using the trope of language correctness to do its dirty work (Kynard, *Vernacular*). These two classroom experiences with Lim, one in a composition course and the other in a gender studies course, offer the literal intersection between my black feminist critique of neoliberalist literacy paradigms in college. Lim's experiences and understandings thus offer a set of critical connections between the epistemologies shaping *This Bridge*, the range of literate practices and classroom strategies that can move against such traditions of white Western learning, the process of empathy-building in the face of racial injustice, and the makings of a race-radical BlackFeministCompositionist pedagogy for college classrooms.

### #ICantBreathe: Neoliberalism as/ in University Assessment Today

Lim's coinage of our experience as a kind of racial profiling was not coincidence.

Right in his own hometown of Staten Island, New York, a New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer put Eric Garner in a chokehold in July of 2014 and killed Garner. Garner's death was only three months before I met Lim. Protests against the NYPD were raging on the streets of New York and on our campus when the semester began with the hashtag of #BlackLivesMatter solidified as a movement, not merely a social media moment. Despite the facts that NYPD policy prohibits the use of chokeholds, that Garner screamed out over and over that he couldn't breathe, and that the medical examiner ruled Garner's death a homicide, a Staten Island grand jury decided not to indict the police officer. The very semester in which Lim and I met was thus bookmarked by protests against the murder of Eric Garner in the fall and protests against the non-indictment in December when the fall semester ended. Lim's tag of "profiling," then, is very important here and marks the kairotic moment and naming of his very first literacy experiences in college. Lim's experience of writing and schooling as another kind of racial profiling is no exaggeration, lapse in his logic, or insignificant matter. The observer's power in literally positioning himself over Zeek's body, after seemingly selecting him based on accent and race, and rendering Zeek powerless—with Lim as witness—did not, of course, result in Zeek's physical death or Lim's incarceration like with the murder of Eric Garner and the witness who actually videotaped the entire moment, Ramsey Orta. That is not the comparison at work here. However, a white male professor's ability and institutional sanction to cast brown and black students and teachers as illiterate, incompetent, and un-voiced are merely the symbolic dimen-

sion of the state-sanctioned police violence in which we live (Bourdieu). What might seem, perhaps, more strange is that I regard most of what happens pedagogically in higher education as the symbolic dimension of neoliberalist bureaucracies and state violence even in WGS and/or ethnic studies where we often imagine ourselves to be teaching toward something different.

It is completely logical and acceptable today, as just one example, to design departmental or programmatic learning outcomes that involve understandings or applications of intersectionality, a trope of radicality and inclusion for many WGS programs today. Students most often produce linear, thesis-driven essays in standardized English<sup>2</sup> within the norms of Western discourse and logic that can then be assessed according to a now standardized conception of intersectionality that no longer bears any seeming relationship to its political origins in black feminisms (Cooper). The assessment process squares up quite nicely with the tendency of outcomes assessment to be "resolutely linear and teleological" (Gallagher 46). This example of intersectionality connected to a learning outcome, a staple in many WGS programs, should bring cause for concern. What Chris Gallagher calls "simple-form documentation and reporting . . . nice, clean numbers for university administrators' spreadsheets" is the end result when something like intersectionality should, in fact, never be nice, clean, or simple at all (46). Such approaches to assessment (and their inevitable influence on curriculum and instruction) contradict the very nature of the intellectual, multilingual/multidialectal relationship students like Lim were experiencing with texts like *This Bridge Called My Back* and effectually turn back

the clock to my own days as a student when books like *This Bridge* were not even included in the curriculum.

Assessment practices connected narrowly to learning outcomes often fixate on the singular result of a student essay rather than on a student's openness to emergent ideas where something like intersectionality, as a theory and way of being/knowing, is always in process, always growing, always moving. This assessment landscape only privileges those students who can already mimic school-based, standardized, essayist literacies, only further recycling race and class privilege rather than offering any real portrait of who has really internalized intersectionality as a way of critically understanding the day-to-day realities of social hierarchies. After all, it should be obvious that writing a high-white-academese essay about intersectionality means nothing for actually having a critical disposition about it, much less advocating for or doing social change.<sup>3</sup> The departmental/instructor goal, therefore, of understanding intersectionality is reduced to what happens to all outcomes in assessment paradigms: they become a less meaningful and intimate part of teachers' and students' experiences, they get "enshrined in the bureaucratic machinery," they function within an "efficiency model," and they exist solely to serve the interests of (white) academic management (Gallagher; Stenberg and Whealy). Teachers are merely technicians who must measure, document, and report on outcomes in segregated departments, courses, and programs (Schön). These operational procedures are really not that different from standing over brown and black bodies and making sure that they follow the formula of a five-paragraph essay. Our students' serious interrogation

of power and oppression, including at the linguistic and discursive levels, is simply not achieved by mimicking forms (Smitherman and van Dijk).

Race-radical black feminist teaching is, of course, not immune from complying with the mechanisms of academic management at our colleges today. What I am suggesting here is that WGS and ethnic studies faculty often seem to work with a kind of diligence and critical attention to research and methodology. That focus, however, does not always extend to pedagogy and assessment. As a compositionist, I regard assessment as pedagogy and *research*: after all, a set of data *is* deliberately targeted, collected, and analyzed. As a black feminist, I regard every moment of research as politically loaded and question how much of our assessment-research works within dominant representations that reinscribe inequality. We easily become complicit in the neoliberal agendas of higher education that have often already targeted us as irrelevant and expendable.

We do not have to simply resign ourselves to the fate of an "instrumental" approach to technical rationality and efficiency or focus our time at white universities on merely replicating elitist academic research about communities of color. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, though not talking specifically about pedagogy, offers the best lens from which to see ourselves in the academy's current modes of capitalist production: "One must live a life of relative privilege these days to be so dour about domination, so suspicious of resistance, so enchained by commodification, so helpless before the ideological state apparatuses to conclude there's no conceivable end to late capitalism's daily sacrifice of human life to the singular free-

dom of the market” (69). Even in what we might regard as our most radical corners of the academy, neoliberalist management schemas colonize the pedagogical opportunities that we offer ourselves and our students.

## All T, No Shade: Praxis in White, Bureaucratic Systems

One of my students fondly (and often) reminds me of my early-semester “attitudinal” remarks in class where I warn students that they will not be privileged for writing schoolish essays with controlling thesis statements, Western/linear logic, and standardized English grammars, nor will I be quizzing and examining them on social justice theories. Though producing good grades on that kind of writing and testing might be their desire in the university’s hierarchical knowledge system, it is not mine since none of that could ever signal that they had seriously dealt with their homophobia, transphobia, racism, and love of all things white. It is easy for me to say and mean such things, but building curricular events to match that kind of pedagogical and philosophical model is more difficult given the ongoing possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz) in both curriculum and pedagogy in higher education.<sup>4</sup> It means continually busting up my and my students’ relationships to privileged textual productions and the privileged bodies that go with them. Critical content without critical pedagogy is simply not an intervention in the status quo of our educational sorting processes.

In Lim’s class, we read the entirety of *This Bridge* in our first thematic unit that followed the general introductory framing of the course.<sup>5</sup> In that unit, students read one of the seven sections of *This Bridge*

(which includes the new set of opening pages, a section called Theory in the Flesh, texts about Racism in the Women’s Movement, a section on culture, class, and homophobia, and more). Students wrote a two-page response to collect their questions and ideas about their reading selection and then met in class with other students who read the same selection, called their affinity group. Our task was to cover every inch of this book and imagine why this book, now more than thirty years old, has rippled through gender studies/feminisms of color so continually. In class, each affinity group was expected to know its section well and then teach the rest of the class. At another class meeting, each person presented a poster of different issues in their selection of *This Bridge* with each affinity group getting its own designated area on the classroom walls. These posters are now part of a multi-year scrapbook called *Scrap Our Backs*. In class, we transact with the individual posters in what I call a gallery style: the posters are taped to every inch of the classroom and then we walk the gallery and “read” *This Bridge* literally on the walls. This is distinct from the usual academic poster sessions where the graphics are always treated secondarily to the oral delivery that the presenter offers, making the term “poster presentation” an oxymoron since it is usually an oral presentation. Lim’s poster was one of thirty-five visual artifacts that semester in a classroom activity literally intended to write the freedom of women of color on every inch of the walls. The point here is to offer students alternative classroom assignments and arrangements consistently and constantly throughout a semester where each unit of study involves all of the following: fierce collaboration, responsibility

for peers' learning, visual rhetoric, sonic learning, kinetic movement in the room, spatial reconfiguration of the classroom, and nonlinear counter-storytelling essay strategies. The goal is a classroom that looks radically different from schooling's white scripts for learning/writing. Every curricular decision must provide space for the intellectual and textual work of school to move beyond mere performance of standardized grammars and white respectability on paper.

Meanwhile, many of my colleagues simply could not imagine that: 1) students were dividing up the book and teaching one another about it rather than listening to my lectures and taking quizzes on its significance, and 2) we were using posters—visuals—to communicate central ideas since such visuals were not believed to have such communicative capacity. These Western, individualist, print-centric notions of teaching and learning only belie what counts as text in a twenty-first-century, multimedia age (Alexander and Rhodes; Banks, *Digital*; Banks, "Aint"). Many black feminist teachers are highly successful with multimodality and multimedia in classrooms since the confines and boundaries of Western print culture and its knowledge hierarchy have never included us in the first place. Classrooms shaped by new media and technological experiences are seldom attributed, however, to the unique competencies of black women professors in the academy. Of course, the insult that we are lowering standards will surface, but this is just the academic version of white flight's usual residential lament of "there goes the neighborhood" whenever we move in somewhere. As Catherine Prendergast reminds us, whiteness as a property value means that white college students/white

colleges are automatically equated with high standards. Meanwhile, brown and black college students represent lower standards, especially when they have migrated into previously all-white spaces like the City University of New York where I work; the exact same is true when those bodies pertain to faculty rather than students who come in, unwanted, disrupting the perceived sanctity of white teaching and discursive styles in classrooms. Whiteness as a property value (Harris) thus means that we will be insulted whenever we move our bodies into white educational spaces, so we would do well not to give merit to such white paranoia as harboring any real critique of or relationship to our actual standards.

Equally pernicious of and endemic to whiteness as a property is the belief that black and brown students do not have the facility and capacity for language and communication to handle multimedia work, the very kind of paternalistic whiteness that makes feminists of color challenge white ways of knowing and being in the first place. These kinds of constructs of my black and brown students' minds and bodies in schools are what I am calling part of the ongoing colonial and imperial violence of schooling. I borrow here from La Paperson's work as well as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang where the discussion of colonialism and US schooling for impoverished youth of color—whom La Paperson calls biopolitical targets—*is not simply an analogy*. Inspired by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the term colonialism in this context refers to something that has no singular or general form, but a set of multiple iterations of empire. Paperson thus sees brown and black students' subordination as part of and central to our very modern school system, not just a historical accident of

past discriminations and current economic pockets of poverty.

Paperson's distinctions of imperial education and colonial schooling are especially critical for challenging white pedagogies of racial control. Colonial schooling involves hyper-scripted management schemas, like what we see in the schools that we know construct a school-to-prison pipeline (Ferguson). Colonial schooling also refers to what Gary Orfield considers a contemporary civil rights issue, namely the "implicit assumption" that brown and black students are incapable of "advanced intellectual work and that, therefore, the opportunity does not have to be provided and we can focus on rigidly drilling basic skills" (281), precisely the argument that my observer and the institution (for upholding his review) were making. Meanwhile, the imperial focus in education involves the training of a few select, hand-picked, model brown and black students who will be included in the metropole. As Paperson argues, these are all investments in whiteness, tied up intimately with professionalism, careerism, standardized English, and white discursive norms of logic and organization where all alternatives are cast as irrational and illegible in the institutionalization of whitened academic achievement. Relief from oppression for people of color is presented, therefore, as an exchange with an investment in whiteness, an exchange that is discursively and theoretically supported with an educational science that often empiricizes this mode of schooling, reading, and writing. While studies about the education of youth of color abound, schools and classrooms for them still mostly look and function within these colonial and imperialist-styled regimes and norms.

## All T, All Shade: New Black Design > White Institutional Surveillance

Schools do not merely reflect and represent social inequities; schools *produce* social inequalities as well. And although teachers cannot be held singularly accountable for the stratification that our schools design, we are not entirely innocent or blameless either. If, in our own classrooms, only white middle-class students or the young people who have attended mostly white middle-class schools do well in our classrooms, then our classrooms are reproducing racial/class hierarchies. We cannot scapegoat remedial programs and/or previous teachers when the fact is that the only competence that matters in our classrooms, the only competence that we test and assess for, is a white/colonial tradition. Teaching outside of and without white supremacy means doing things very differently in our classrooms where learning does more than serve white property interests. Our processes and strategies will change according to time and place, but the political imperative remains for as long as schools reproduce racial hierarchy.

For me, at this moment, I am attempting to alter the design and delivery of my course content. Given the corporate feel and design of course management learning systems (e.g., Blackboard) and their control via institutions' central administration, I have chosen to build out my own Web sites, continually experimenting with multiple platforms for my classes. At other colleges where I have taught, I always had students whose tuition bills weren't paid in time for any host of reasons: loans were not approved yet, scholarship money was not in yet. There was always

some kind of bureaucracy getting in the way. To motivate students to get their finances together, many of these universities would simply drop students from their classes. This means those students could not access course blackboards, making my class part of routinized, institutional processes of punishing and alienating our most economically disadvantaged students, always of color, and giving financially overprivileged students, always white, just another leg up.

Public Web sites as a central curricular space for the college courses that I teach offer opportunities to center much more than the Western academy's glorification of print-based texts. Sound and music, for instance, add new layers of rhetorical meaning so that students can see and understand that there is a real person behind any Web site or text whose thinking and actions are always culturally shaped. Each of my course Web sites is now, in many ways, a black cultural experience given the language, images, videos, and sounds that I have chosen.<sup>6</sup> I have a simple point here that I intend to convey to students: *you do not have to give up who you are to make meaning where you are and to survive and thrive in that space.*

Between the black vernacularized visuals and writing that shape my course syllabi and the digital spaces that organize my classes, students are very clear about the identities that I unapologetically mark as my own. Oftentimes, in students' first assignments, they write me a letter offering a mic check with their own questions and comments about the course, syllabus, and Web site.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the very first assignment asks students to transact with me about the course's frameworks and goals. One Web page even offers the food policy where I relay to students that I expect

them to clean up after themselves when they eat. I share my own personal history where, in college, it was more likely for me to see someone who looked like me working as kitchen staff, as an office assistant, or as a custodial manager. Today, I stand as a tenured, associate professor in the twenty-first century, and not much has changed. I dare the students to count the number of black and Latinx women faculty at the college and see that those numbers really look no different from when I was in college more than two decades ago in a previous century. This story means that the people who will have to clean up after our mess are people who look like me. As a college student, my white wealthy peers tore up the common spaces given their complete comfort with having black women clean up after them (which could take hours after the weekends). As an eighteen year old, I was offended and am just as offended as a grown black woman today. I ask students to be mindful of the invisibilized hands and bodies that make their spaces livable. As simple as it sounds, if they clean up after themselves, it shows that they can treat our world and shared space as a community rather than a plantation where they imagine themselves to be master.

Like Perlow, Bethea, and Wheeler (2014) critically remind us, our bodies as black women are as culturally signified and communicated in our classrooms as anywhere else in the world. My first meeting with students thus deliberately emphasizes "counterhegemonic frameworks as well as raced and gendered bodies" in ways that confront and preemptively address students' preordained hostility, mistrust, and defensiveness against black female professors (Perlow, Bethea, and Wheeler 247). I can count on losing white students

after the first day of class when they examine the syllabus and Web site. I can also count on students of color filling those empty seats. In many ways, this aspect of my pedagogy has protected me from the usual attack by white privileged students on evaluations, an embattled territory for black female professors across the country (Berry and Mizelle), simply because they choose to leave my classes.

Heidi Safia Mirza tells us that the sheer weight of whiteness ensures that white supremacist, heteropatriarchal culture is self-reinforcing in the academy. As a social space, American universities have their own history where white bodies, once predominantly white male but now increasingly more inclusive of white women, belong. Black bodies, especially those adorned with race-radical black feminist consciousness, are, as Nirmal Puwar argues, regarded as “trespassers” and “space invaders.” In fact, I have rarely shared lesson plans or deep intimate conversation with colleagues because of the animosity and punishment tactics any discussion of counterhegemonic teaching frameworks can generate. However, because of institutional requirements under current assessment regimes, departments must now archive all syllabi and, as such, surveillance and punishment of black women’s pedagogies are newly mobilized. As a kind of pre-emptive strike, since my syllabus and teaching are being surveilled anyway in the new archive requirements, I use open, digital platforms to archive my own pedagogy and offset white administrative evaluations.<sup>8</sup> In this way, I can build and connect to my own external, kindred audiences who can look at the course Web sites, syllabi, and teaching strategies and offer alternative, black-referenced systems of credibility. White

administrators, as just one example, were none too happy about the food policy that I was using on my Web site. At that time, the policy was only a few sentences long, but the resistance to it indicated the kind of trolling of my course Web sites that was happening in addition to the hyper-scrutiny of the required paper syllabus that I submitted. In fact, I was called into the chair’s office and asked to consider how white students in my class might feel since she, as a white person, would be uncomfortable with the words in my syllabus. Since the college is almost three quarters black and Latinx and I do not direct my rhetorical identity toward what Robin DiAngelo has so aptly named white fragility, I resisted my chair’s request to remove the policy and instead made my food policy its own separate Web page.<sup>9</sup> I extended my prose and let an instrumental version of James Brown’s “The Big Payback” serve as the page’s soundtrack: “get ready, hey, gotta deal with you, gotta deal with you, lawd . . . get up and get out . . . gotta get ready for the big payback.” Thus, I offer my students an example of how one deals with racist resistance to and white colonization of your language and worldview, an inevitability in the academy: clap back!

The black vernacularized design of my course content and delivery styles offer students and myself an alternative to the white discursive cloning that academics privilege and centralize in their theories and pedagogies. Mobilizing a black vernacularized pedagogical space means using the language of African America (AAL) not merely as a set of linguistic moves that operate against an imagined standardized norm (Richardson). AAL is also a languaging/meaning-making system that represents its own epistemological and ontological systems (Gilyard). It is

a sonic, visual, and spatial intervention in white ways of knowing and shapes the contours of how I attempt to mobilize a race-radical black feminist pedagogy. And, as Lim helped me to notice, it also offers multilingual students like Zeek a more liberating space for writing, language-as-meaning-making, expression, and creativity than white institutional control.

## Hell You Talmbout?: A Charge for the Future

Curriculum and instruction are always deeply embodied. Even when I am not being explicit, the specificity of this #BlackLivesMatter moment is implicit in how I think about schools and classrooms today. Janelle Monae's song, "Hell You Talmbout" is one example of an anchor to my pedagogy, what Rakim called "a dope beat to step to." This rallying song/chant was dedicated to the #BlackLivesMatter Movement and made freely available to anyone on Soundcloud. On her Instagram page, Monae explained the message of the song: she channels and records the pain of her people, her own political convictions, and a challenge to those who remain indifferent.

In our current political moment, I want to push students to think more deeply about the ways they write and design to canvas their own humanity, and I think the question "Hell You Talmbout?" can drive language/writing curriculum in the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup> Monae's black vernacular culture expression, "Hell You Talmbout," is an expression that she would have heard from her grandmothers and great-grandmothers and on and on. My students will undoubtedly have been wrongly taught that this is slang or a colloquialism: slang refers to short-term temporary sayings and

colloquialisms refer to small regionalisms. "Hell You Talmbout?" is, however, neither short-term nor local in the context of black language. The expression challenges the truth of what you have to say and expects you to have something of weight and importance to say back. Despite what school will tell my students, they need to mobilize all of the languages, dialects, and vernaculars at their disposal if they want to attract and move multiple audiences.

While many teachers may tell my students that only one kind of English is appropriate, effective language use is never that simple. It is not an accident that Monae and her ancestors said "Hell You Talmbout." The expression simply does not mean the same thing as asking someone what they are saying. The very language matches our history. Monae's music, lyrics, and call-and-response style match how civil rights activists used song; her drumming and chanting sound are identical to 1920s black college student protesters who used the lyrics of slave spirituals for their chants. Monae's labelmates, Wondaland, have a beat and time that could be a New Orleans band marching in the street, the infamous drumline at your favorite HBCU, or an African drumming/galvanizing session before a maroon rebellion. The language that we use to represent our histories and current realities must be deliberate and should not match what Jim Crow schooling has anointed as the one right way and set of rules. I hope my students will take inspiration from Janelle Monae, make sure that when they write and design, they are really saying sumthin and know what the hell they talmbout!

History has shown us that imperialism and colonialism never fully conquer their

intended abject subjects. The attempted “shock and awe” campaign of my official classroom observer did not succeed either. Ironically, my institution-sanctioned observer turned Lim into a black feminist, since Lim took my later introduction to gender studies class not fully knowing what gender studies really was and only wanting to understand why black feminism meant such a different kind of classroom than what he was used to. He said he was curious about this place of black feminism that shaped how I responded to my observer and why I have supported none of this kind of pedagogical violence for multilingual brown and black youth. In turn, Lim helped me grow even more confident. Each course Web site, syllabus, thematic project, unit of study, and classroom activity is now louder, more visual, more African American vernacularized than ever. My scholarship today is also more deliberately vocal in its connectedness to students like Lim and Zeek despite the neoliberalist, corporate ethos of courtesy-and-service-with-a-smile that far too many faculty of color use as their excuse for inaction against and compliance with higher education’s racism.

As Katherine McKittrick reminds us, black women’s lives are certainly enmeshed with traditional geographic arrangements, but our different ways of knowing and writing constantly contest the ways that space is (re)produced, and this includes the space of classrooms and, thereby, the academy. I began one fateful semester in gender studies asking Lim and his classmates to use their intuitive sense of race, gender, sexuality, and justice to deeply consider how and why *This Bridge* has galvanized critical thought and action in WGS. I had no preconceived answers to this question in mind when I

designed the assignment. As my students responded to *This Bridge* with inspiring insight, I went on a journey with them where I too began to more fully understand how women of color feminisms and black feminist thought have been a life/mind-sustaining catalyst of my work as a compositionist-rhetorician. To remix Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous words from *This Bridge Called My Back*: “The world I create in the [classroom] compensates for what the real world does not give me.”

#### NOTES

1. Because my students have had limited access to a digital culture where they are situated as *producers* rather than as consumers, I devote a few class sessions each semester to computer lab help in relation to Web design and coding.
2. I use the term *standardized English* here rather than the usual nomenclature of standard English which implies an unchanging, absolute entity as if formed by nature. *Standardized* stresses the point that this language system has been deliberately chosen and maintained.
3. The Web site that houses and directs students to their assignments for my WGS courses is: [blackwomenrhetproject.com](http://blackwomenrhetproject.com). To see how I specifically explain my politics of writing, go here: [bit.ly/writing-policy](http://bit.ly/writing-policy)
4. For more on how this relates to gender studies, go to [carmenkynard.org/category/teaching-gender-studies/](http://carmenkynard.org/category/teaching-gender-studies/)
5. To see my teaching unit related to *This Bridge*, go to this main Web page: [bit.ly/bridge-unit](http://bit.ly/bridge-unit). Subpages can be found under the main page.
6. To see how I explain the use of a course Web site to students, visit [bit.ly/got-to-be-real](http://bit.ly/got-to-be-real)
7. For an example of a mic-check assignment, visit [bit.ly/microphone-check](http://bit.ly/microphone-check)
8. For all of my courses/course Web sites, go to [carmenkynard.org](http://carmenkynard.org)
9. For my current food policy, visit [www.blackwomenrhetproject.com/the-food-policy.html](http://www.blackwomenrhetproject.com/the-food-policy.html)
10. Go to [www.realwriting.org](http://www.realwriting.org) to see how I explain “Hell You Talmbout” to students.

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