

Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center, edited by Staci M. Perryman-Clark and Colin Lamont Craig. Urbana: National Council for Teachers of English, 2019. 167 pp.

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As readers of this journal know, those who run writing programs—Writing Program Administrators, or WPAs—are typically university staff or faculty whose role is to organize the various aspects of writing that take place in formal academic learning settings, such as writing centers or the composition classroom. And, as with anything in the academy, the situation of WPAs in a post-secondary institution is one fraught with difficulties that are tied to present day social realities, like racism. *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center* presents to us the aforementioned situation in higher education, where WPAs are tasked with crafting curricula for students across institutions, in individual departments, and inside classrooms or writing centers that impact Black students and students of color who inhabit them. This impact, unfortunately, is often racist due to an uncritical engagement with the socio-historical context of race relations in the United States. Accordingly, editors Staci M. Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig—building on their previous work in writing program administration—seek to push against the racist orientation of writing programs and the WPAs who run them. Explicitly, they chose to focus this book deliberately and justly on Black students, Black faculty, Black WPAs, and Black experiences in the academy. They front these various sites as valuable to all who work in and alongside the classroom. Overall, *Black Perspectives* serves as a call-in to WPAs who want to do their work well within historical and present contexts of higher education.

In contrast to the historical realities of marginalization in higher education, Perryman-Clark and Craig forward a platform for self-reflection, reorientation, and action that centers Black students as a priority. This platform, then, provides a foundation for the collection's contributors: WPAs of color who do anti-racist work and speak to their lived experiences, White WPAs contending with their own position and research when it comes to anti-racist WPA work, teachers reflecting on developing and centering curricula on Black students through Afrocentric teaching methodologies, and other scholars expressing their interests in forwarding ways to explicitly implement anti-racist writing programs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The editors have gathered a specific set of practitioners who all orient themselves progressively towards working

with anti-racist frameworks to counter what Asao Inoue, in the afterword, calls “. . . a White racial habitus in our judgement practices” (149).

Perryman-Clark and Craig chose each author in this short collection to shape the narrative that they are weaving about writing program administration. Grounding the overarching problem in local contexts, the introduction gives background on this project and takes readers through some of the racism the editors have encountered as WPAs. Chapters two and three focus on how two Black WPAs think through their positions and call for frameworks situated in Black ways of knowing. Specifically, in chapter two Carmen Kynard uses Afro-pessimism to discuss her refusal to orient herself in ways that allow White audiences to feel better about themselves and their work. She connects this to David F. Green Jr’s use of the cypher in chapter three, where he argues, “Cyphers, at their best, provide pathways for contemplating how publics read and remember together, as well as how such interpretive work helps to address difference as a social, cultural, and material reality of all writing instruction” (52). In chapter three, Green builds upon Kynard’s framework of survival as a Black WPA. He explains how current frameworks that many White practitioners take up are insufficient to the task of anti-racist WPA work.

Up to this point, the contributors have all been Black WPAs, but that changes when Scott Wible discusses his research on WPAs and his own position as a White male WPA doing anti-racist work in chapter four. Wible begins by discussing how his White contemporaries have not utilized opportunities to support and advocate for people of color; the root cause, as he identifies it, stems from his White colleagues who have not had to engage critically with White power dynamics in a way that would undermine their own positions of power in the academy. Even White WPAs like himself, who support anti-racist work, must push back against feelings of doing enough considering that “. . . without a radical break from the very ideological origins of black subjugation, such easily made solutions will, at best, only cater to the interests of white comfort and white fragility” (96). This chapter is important for White WPAs reading this collection as it builds upon Kynard’s beliefs about decentering White WPAs’ feelings; Wible models how feelings of adequacy are, in fact, admitting inadequacy. Chapters five and six take a different tone as the collection moves into practice. In contrast to the experiences discussed in chapters one through four, several contributors forward successful writing program models. The examples in these last two chapters can be thought of as useful heuristics for anti-racist and Afrocentric practitioners and WPA work broadly.

Specifically, chapter five is a moment where the collection breaks down how practitioners are doing the work of centering Black students in administration. Perryman-Clark and Craig begin by bringing our attention to an Afrocentric curriculum that demonstrates how we can focus on Black students’ needs in

the classroom. They invoke a definition of Afrocentric education from Molefi Kete Asante: “. . . a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. The Afrocentric approach seeks in every situation the appropriate centrality of the African person” (107). They also problematize some of the tried-and-true resources WPAs may utilize to build their curriculum, including the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ online Assessment Gallery, which lacks insights from any HBCUs; the 2008 WPA Task Force on Internationalization, which has no mention of Sub-Saharan Africa; and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing from the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project, which fails to include provisions for linguistic and cultural diversity (or language choice) and constructs all students in a way that erases the presence of Black students and students of color. Considering these omissions from WPA guiding documents, Perryman-Clark and Craig bring to our attention three programs—two at HBCUs, Spelman University and Huston-Tillotson University, and one at a PWI, Western Michigan University—as examples of Afrocentric orientations to writing curricula. The editors use these schools to build out a framework that coalesces into three principles that represent a Black perspective in WPA work: 1) Afrocentric pedagogical materials are placed at the center of the curriculum; 2) programmatic assessment measures are designed with Black student success in mind; and 3) successful writing programs understand that they can implement Afrocentric pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment practices and still support all students. These three tenets are built upon the lived experiences of the contributors and the successful work of writing programs showcased in the collection.

Perryman-Clark, Craig, and their contributors all point to dire moments in higher education in which writing program administrators make decisions about who to focus curriculum on, how to assess students, and how to treat each other as professionals. These are life and death battles. By centering Afrocentric and Black approaches to writing programs, WPAs combat White supremacist ways of being that insidiously show up in myths around writing, language, knowledge, instruction, and other aspects of education. Perryman-Clark and Craig have put together a succinct collection that directly challenges contemporary hegemonic writing instruction. They clearly affirm that those not willing to risk and lose the privilege they have accumulated as present-day WPAs need to make room for practitioners who seek to transform higher education through centering Black perspectives, Black students, and Black people. These ideas only take hold if WPAs become accomplices who can embody anti-racism in a way that Black bodies simply cannot; we need more White WPAs to be willing to take up Afrocentric frameworks in their classrooms, even if it means losing substantial privileges they have historically

held. Consequently, this text is a must-read for anyone who hopes to do socially just writing program administration, wants to impact the lives of others in materially consequential ways, and desires generally to be a good person. Throughout, contributors explain that in order to work towards a socially just world, we must divest in the orientations that give us power and privilege over others. WPAs are in unique positions to reorient writing programs and, in turn, academia towards anti-racist Afrocentric futures.

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