

## Where Would We Be?: Legacies, Roll Calls, and the Teaching of Writing in HBCUs

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In their article “We are Family: I Got All My (HBCU) Sisters with Me” in the 2016 “Where We Are: Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Writing Programs” section of *Composition Studies*, Hope Jackson and Karen Keaton Jackson state, “It is our hope that the HBCU experience will one day be fully integrated in composition studies . . . without the designation of ‘special issue’” (157). While their article focused on writing center studies, their call echoes that of Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams in “History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies.” Royster and Williams call out composition and rhetoric’s sanctioned historical narratives that ignored the role of African American contributions to the field, especially those from HBCUs (572). Keith Gilyard, in the same 1999 issue of *CCC* that the Royster and Williams article appears, ends his essay by suggesting “...there never was a time when we failed to contribute to the field in some way. We may not have always been in the house of mainstream composition studies, but we were always knocking on the door” (642). Royster and Williams and Gilyard do the work of documenting intergenerational exchanges of African Americans in composition studies in their 1999 articles, providing evidence of Gilyard’s assertion that, yes, we have always been contributing to the field even when it has gone unnoticed.

A major move that took place recently points to HBCU writing program scholars charting a new path, creating spaces for intergenerational conversations that take place in their home spaces: Symposia on the Teaching of Writing and Rhetoric at HBCUs. Hosted by North Carolina A&T in 2014 and Howard University in 2018, these symposia brought together people in the field who converged around issues defined by HBCU writing program administrators, teachers, and scholars. As Karen Keaton Jackson, Hope Jackson, and Dawn N. Hicks Tafari wrote in their *CCC* article, “We Belong in the Discussion: Including HBCUs in Conversations About Race and Writing,” the first symposium led to more spaces dedicated to such conversations. One such space is Collin Craig and Staci Perryman-Clark’s collection *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center* that features primarily Black writing program administrators (WPAs) extending scholarly conversations in writing program administration to include the voices of HBCU WPAs. And while we celebrate the necessary conversations these spaces provide, Jackson, Jackson, and Hicks remind us that there is more work to do. They offer a set of recommendations and initiatives to eradicate

the consistent erasure of HBCU voices in central conversations in the field, especially conversations about Black students and Black community rhetorical and literacy practices. Those recommendations highlight the actions that our national organizations, publishers, and scholars at PWIs should take to ensure that HBCU voices are visible and central in the field's ongoing scholarly and pedagogical conversations.

As I reflect upon the intergenerational terrain of HBCUs, I ask this question:

where would we, in composition studies, be without writing and rhetoric faculty who have taught or currently teach at HBCUs and/or scholars in the field who are alumni of HBCUs?

I see this topic of intergenerational exchanges as another moment to point out that HBCU contributions are part of the foundation upon which composition studies is built. I argue that there is no mainstream house without HBCU contributions.

**My story.** As someone much closer to the end of my career—that gives me pause—than the middle, I take this moment, as a proud HBCU graduate of Spelman College, to point out a few important parts of the foundation. I had the great fortune to be introduced to the field of rhetoric and composition when I was an undergraduate at Spelman College by my first year writing and advanced composition professor and Spelman alumna Dr. Jacqueline Jones (before she became Jones Royster). While serving as Freshmen Dean, she hired me as the first tutor in the Spelman Writing Center. This was my first experience as a practitioner in composition studies. As a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I attended my first CCCC conferences in New York, then Minneapolis, and Cincinnati, where Dr. Royster (it took years before I could call her “Jackie”) introduced me to her friends -- remarkable Black women like Jerrie Cobb-Scott, who was a faculty member at HBCU Central State University, Dolores Straker, and eventually Shirley Wilson Logan, an alumna of Johnson C. Smith University, my hometown HBCU. These women introduced me to the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus and to the scholarship produced by Black scholars in the field who I was not reading in any of my graduate courses. Members of the Caucus, many of whom were faculty at HBCUs or alumni, modeled for me how intergenerational exchanges take place. It was in these conversations that I came to understand who Jackie Royster was in the field. So I ask, what would composition studies be as a field without the groundbreaking work done by these HBCU faculty and/or alumni? Where would the field be, for example, with-

out caucus member Melvin Butler's (Southern University) leadership in composing and publishing *Students' Rights to Their Own Language?*

**The Legacy.** Let's look even further back. We can put Anna Julia Cooper in conversation with Royster and Logan. Cooper attended and then taught rhetoric, among many other subjects, at Saint Augustine's (NC) in 1885 until she left to attend Oberlin. This line of intergenerational exchanges must include also Hallie Quinn Brown, former dean at Allen University and Tuskegee University, who was an alumna and a professor of elocution at Wilberforce in the nineteenth century and published several books on elocution. Let us not forget poet and professor Melvin B. Tolson who attended Fisk and Lincoln (PA) universities, and who built the Wiley Forensic Society that gave birth to the award-winning Wiley College debate team (made famous in the 2007 movie *The Great Debaters*) that defeated the national champion University of Southern California debate team in 1935. Racism kept them from being named national champions (Stone and Stewart remind us that Tillotson College, an HBCU in Austin, Texas, was closed because of the success of their declamation teams in defeating local white colleges). This focus on rhetorical delivery and oratory at HBCUs was not an exception (Kates, Royster and Williams, Gold).

Black rhetorical excellence has thrived at HBCUs. Pedagogical and scholarly creativity in the teaching of writing has excelled. Intergenerational exchanges (that is, mentoring, introducing younger scholars to the field, encouraging each other, and teaching Black students like Vice-President Kamala Harris, activist Stacey Abrams, and the late congressman John Lewis, to name a few) consistently take place. It was Royster, Logan, James Hill (Albany State faculty), and Teresa Redd (Howard faculty), along with scholars like Smitherman, who inspired my generation and the ones to follow, including Faye Spencer Maor (FAMU alumna and North Carolina A&T faculty), Eric Darnell Pritchard (Lincoln alumnus), Valerie Kinloch (Johnson C. Smith alumna), Karen Keaton Jackson (Hampton alumna and North Carolina Central University faculty), Hope Jackson (North Carolina A&T alumna and faculty), Dawn Hicks Tafari (Winston-Salem State University faculty), and too many more to name.

And a new generation of scholars teaching at or having been educated at HBCUs have continued to literally and figuratively author and embody the history of writing and rhetoric at HBCUs. These scholars—David Green (Hampton alumnus; Howard faculty), Brandon Erby (Tougaloo alumnus), Kendra Mitchell (Florida A&M University alumna and current faculty), Khirsten Scott (Tougaloo alumna and co-founder of DBLAC), Brittany Hull (Lincoln alumna), Mudiwa Pettus (Claffin alumna, Medgar Evers faculty), Cecilia Shelton (Winston Salem State University alumna; former HBCU faculty),

Temptuous Mckoy (Elizabeth City State alumna; Bowie State faculty), and Laura Allen (Spelman College alumna), among so many more—also continue to push the field forward engaging in critical conversations, making waves in areas within the field where people don't expect us to be (for example, digital media, technical communication), and creating a path for others to follow. Mckoy and Shelton, whose dissertations were awarded CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Awards in Technical and Scientific Communication in consecutive years (2020 and 2021), along with Natasha Jones and others, established a Black presence and excellence in technical communication. Where would the field be without their work—work that is changing the conversation to examine Black spaces in technical communication? And let me take this moment to make this point: From North Carolina A&T's technical communication concentration (directed by Professor Kimberly Harper, a NC A&T alumna) to Bowie State's three-course sequence in technical writing, HBCUs are preparing students to enter into professional and technical communication as scholars and practitioners.

This roll call is by no means exhaustive. It is not meant to be. It is meant to suggest, as Gilyard reminded us earlier, that we have been here all along, we are still here, and will continue to be. This incomplete roll call is my way of suggesting that HBCU intergenerational exchanges are about how the very existence of those who teach at HBCUs and/or attended HBCUs (along with those like Kynard and Eddy whose scholarly agendas include HBCUs) enter into a long-standing, dynamic conversation that not only strengthens the foundation of composition but also reimagine it.

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