

# Where We Are: Discourses of Crisis in Rhetoric & Composition

## Fakers and Takers: Disrespect, Crisis, and Inherited Whiteness in Rhetoric-Composition Studies

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I've seen it time and time again. Here comes that PhD student whose coursework, professional CV building, and entire process of dissertating has focused exclusively on literary theory, and now they done turnt whole-tail-around, because they want a job in rhetoric-composition studies. Lo and behold, they haven't been hired for any literary-exclusive job but since their graduate program made them teach those writing courses then maybe, just maybe, they can fake their way into this discipline. Nevermind the fact that they complained the whole way through about having to teach college composition. Each and every time, a faculty member in rhetoric-composition studies flies off to the rescue by coaching them on application materials and interviews. All that's missing is the cape. Most call this collegiality. I call it selling out. Either this is real intellectual work or it's just casual conversation in office hours for stragglers whose fields of study have ghosted them.

I have always gotten crazy office hours requests: the graduate students who ask for reading suggestions for their new anti-racism and/or Black-people chapter, because racism and Black folx are small enough to fit into just one chapter for them; or the students who ask BIPOC faculty to be on their committees to stamp the thesis as relevant even though nothing in the thesis is actually relevant to BIPOC today. This is why I shut down requests for office-hour composition training on top of everything else. Because I am a Black feminist educator who works at the intersections of Black literacies and rhetorics, race and education, and "endarkened" theories and practices of composition/writing studies, I know marginalization when I am experiencing it (Dillard). The focus of my research has always been on the lived, literate experiences of Black communities, and my praxis always attempts to intervene in and interrupt the racist legacies of college literacy education in the United States. To be blunt about it: I must always recognize, understand, and counter marginalization, and that's just not what white-majoritarian scholars do well in this discipline.

I'm not saying that every graduate student studying literary theory exploits rhetoric-composition studies. The ones who are critical understand our trans-disciplinarity and anti-disciplinarity (Pough). I'm also not saying it's like this in every department, but I have seen this mess everywhere I have worked.

E-V-E-R-Y-W-H-E-R-E. In my most current contexts, I hear so many graduate students talking about teaching composition courses as just paying one's dues...until they move on up... that I don't know what to do. They drop that gem so casually and so frequently that it seems like it was taught to them or, at least, co-signed. One even announced in a public meeting I attended that you don't have to think to teach first year writing courses. If it weren't for the word limit, I would go on and on and on with such examples. These students are not learning these elitist, anti-pedagogy, and anti-composition discourses from composition-rhetoric scholars, for sure, but they get away with it since the discipline's whiteness prevents any kind of real redress. The responses to my complaints about such foolishness go down something like this:

1. General disbelief or deep regret—with no action—that such things are happening (because Black woman talking = unbelievable, unheard, unimportant, or unactionable);
2. Insistence that things were never like this before when the culture was composition-studies-affirmative (because then the students and faculty were whiter... and less queer, less activist, less colorful, less race-conscious);
3. Insistence that things are much better now than in the horrible past (because we must be thankful for white benevolence now that the field is more non-white, more queer, more activist, more colorful, more race-conscious);
4. Private complaint about the literary faculty but never stepping to any of them (because that kind of resistance means risk and only rhetoric-composition folk can be publicly and officially insulted);
5. Negative descriptions of rhetoric-composition faculty and students asking for discipline-specific support (because how dare they claim we have a different expertise or any expertise at all);
6. Requests that sound like the remix of . . . can't we all just get along? (because rhetoric-composition folk are the offending party);
7. Proclamations that I just don't understand the context or past events (because whiteness = truth as if that has ever been the site of historical accuracy).

Some of this is just confederate nostalgia for how grand and absolute former white control was. It's that or toxic positivity where we, as Sara Ahmed describes, perform white happiness and collegiality (and even "happy talk") as a mode of domination that replicates oppressive social ideals and institutions (14). The neoliberal university, white racism, and anti-composition all converge, and many more than just the supposedly super-evil upper administration are complicit. We, as rhetoric-compositionists, are also at fault here,

because too many exude such a tepid response to the racial violence and white settler colonization of our colleagues. And that response co-signs them.

To throw it back to Immanuel Wallerstein in his borrowings from Frantz Fanon, worlds sometimes shift when dominant structures (momentarily) collapse and move away from their previous almost-equilibrial state (Darder; Goonan). There are moments of disruption, disjuncture, or contradiction where power can no longer contain and dominate in the same ways that it once had. As Dylan Rodriguez continually reminds us, these moments don't last long, though, and promises of radical transformation seem to slip far away as a renewed regime takes over (Goonan, *The Real News Network*). Other than these fleeting moments of rupture, we've always been in crisis. There's just no other way to understand a daily workspace where everybody and their momma can conceal truths, scapegoat, secretly scheme against, and talk sideways about an entire discipline and no one hems them up. There are no new crises for us, just the ongoing crisis of life under racial capitalism (Melamed) as it dictates the continual violence of the post-slavery university (Boggs, et al.) and endless modes of schooling, reading, and writing manufactured by white settler styles of English studies (Y. Rodriguez). Even our crisis modes, crisis responses, and crisis rhetorics are too white to help us.

Crisis suggests urgency and is rooted in a kind of presentism that smacks of white settler colonization. I am indebted here and everywhere to Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang/la paperson, Audra Simpson, and Sandy Grande, in particular, for educating me over and over again about the ways white settler logic frames education, schools, and life. I am also inspired by the wisdom of folk like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Tiffany King who show me what it looks like to be a Black feminist working towards "constellations of co-resistance" (Simpson 229). The racial amnesia or positive glossing of the white past is not only typical of settler societies, but required. The suddenly urgent and often "unquestioning push forward" that crisis usually asks of us masks the way that the white settler past is always still here and fully operational (Tuck and Yang 229). Furthermore, Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell remind us that crisis rhetorics about the university are particularly rooted in the assumed benevolence of white liberal humanism (434). The self-proclaimed "common good" guiding curriculum and linear progress narratives of American higher education, in general, work against us recognizing universities as structures that have always invested in power and dominance via slavery, land theft (land grant, gentrification, urban renewal, etc), Eugenics/white supremacy, Jim Crow segregation, prisons, anti-immigration law, and more.

The disrespect for the composition classroom that I have described here is also not new and has had devastating consequences for literacy in the academy. Our discipline has blasted this disrespect, especially its concomitant exploitation

of adjuncts and instructors, for longer than almost anyone else. Entire institutions like the *Journal of Basic Writing* have kept the flame burning because basic writing has been the most assaulted and insulted of our composition classrooms (Zeemont). Some have even advocated for the absolute termination of first year writing because it seems to never be respected. Our canons and cannons on labor exploitation are full. Marc Bousquet's formidable and foundational contribution to what we now call critical university studies (though his work is not often acknowledged enough as such) represents the unique lens on intensified workloads and the casualization of labor (exploited adjunct labor) at the site of composition studies.

The composition classroom is always implicated in the intensified alienation of academic work, especially when the state disinvests more and more from education and core public services. The universal requirement of first year writing functions as a major part of the algorithm that determines college course offerings—and thereby hiring. As compositionists, we know that the livelihoods of graduate students, adjuncts, lecturers, and/or instructors are sacrificed in this labor/profit algorithm, though we straddle a wide continuum of political responses to it. Consequently, non-tenure-track faculty teaching composition courses are often alienated from the work they do in classrooms, because they literally hold up the entire program/ department. Yet few seem to truly recognize this fact. Meanwhile, undergraduate students are alienated into greater and greater abstraction with very few discussions of and meaningful relationships with the social and political consciousness that writing in college can represent. I've never heard anything I would call a meaningful conversation about undergraduate literacy pedagogies in the service of social consciousness in any English department where I have worked since my beginnings as an adjunct in 1998. The focus in program meeting is usually on depoliticized skills-building; the focus in departments is usually on graduate education, which oddly represents prestige but not labor or racial equity. Within the terms of all this labor exploitation, undergraduate students in composition courses have the lowest exchange value since they literally sit in the seats assigned to the most exploited workers.

In the midst of all of this are colleagues who insist that they respect college composition: it helps their graduate students get a job since college composition is what they will likely be teaching, even as literary scholars. And while many see such sentiment as a sign of collegiality and a valuing of the discipline, I see this as the vulgar, market-based logic of neoliberalism that it is. I am not a writing teacher because it gives me a job or hits the sidebar requirement of the job that I prefer. I am a writing teacher because, like every Freireian and critical literacy scholar and radical teacher I know, I believe in the power of writing, literacy, and classrooms to intervene in an oppressive world; I believe

in young people's race protests and radical interruptions of global white supremacy as its own literacy; and I believe in composing and curating whole different kinds of texts about BIPOC with and alongside young people who strike the empire back. As a Black feminist compositionist, I am enmeshed in neoliberal relationalities. Yes. But because of my Black feminist ancestors, I also belong to a lineage who knows that the praxis of Black pedagogy is an act of social protest (Cooper; Perkins). This ain't a paycheck, and the composition classroom is not my bank account or lower-rung stepping stool.

The current iteration of composition/rhetoric/writing studies is often regarded as a newcomer under the English Studies umbrella, and so its marginalization today is often regarded as a mere accident of the historical timeline. But rhetoric and its connection to philosophy are not new to the academy. Rendering it as such further manages and disciplines rhetoric-compositionists who are paternally or maternally seen as too green or too young to understand disciplinary histories and are thereby groomed into complacency. Marginalization, however, is never a mere misfortune and always a deliberate calculation, especially when whiteness is the end result.

Today, I no longer speak in terms of crisis. Instead, I am inspired by Tamika Carey's work and like to think of myself as operating from the place of what she calls Black feminist "rhetorical impatience." I remain righteously pissed off by folx who promote incremental or benign change and a gross glossing of the racist past as equivalent to equity and reparations. I ain't tryna hear or be near folx who exploit my body, my time, and this discipline and its classrooms that I have made my own. I see all of what these folx are up to. I hear the histories they belong to. I look at the ways they disregard and yet co-opt rhetoric-composition studies and its classrooms and then try to gaslight me into thinking it's just my imagination. White power, misogynoir, neoliberalist clout-chasing, and racism are never difficult to see, decipher, navigate, and teach against if you livin' like a real rhetoric-compositionist out here.

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