

Perryman-Clark, Staci M., and Collin Lamont Craig. *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2019. 167 pages. ISBN 978-0-8141-0337-1. \$29.99.

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Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration, edited by Staci M. Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig, puts a spotlight on the ways in which writing programs reinforce white supremacy, from pedagogy to profiles. The argument is that combating racism with writing programs isn't through an embrace of diversity (though it can help), but rather an acknowledgement that inequity is at the root of the system itself. Though the writing programs discussed in the text focus on college-level courses, the truths being surfaced extend through all levels of writing education, from preschool to the professional realm. In order to properly grasp the work that needs to be done, and the damage that needs to be undone, it is vital for the audience to listen to and acknowledge how pervasive racism is, as it emerges from the very premise of what writing programs are supposed to do. The contributors to this collection are uncompromising and clear-eyed in their observations; one hopes that white readers will work through the discomfort that this might inspire.

In this way, the foreword by Vershawn Ashanti Young is perhaps the best way to open the text. Writing in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), in which the shape of words reflects the way they're often spoken, Young doesn't begin with an attempt to explain why he's chosen this particular style of address. That lack of apologia is a distinct message in itself: *If you don't get it, nobody's gonna explain it to you. Figure it out*. It's also a direct critique of one of the traditional counters to students' rights to their own language. Young observes that, while there are few instructors who would outright discourage "language diversity," many do rely on the perceived truism that students "have to get ready for the teacher in the next class who will prejudice them or the employer who will not hire them—if they

don't speak or write a certain way" (xi). His use of AAVE is a calling in and a signal that scholarly work mustn't always be written in the way things have supposedly always been.

As *Black Perspectives* is geared towards writing program administrators, however, it focuses more on bringing questions of practical matters to the forefront: How this pedagogy could be enacted within a program, how practitioners could grapple with responses rooted in white fragility, how these efforts might play out in different institutional contexts, and how to make the work sustainable over time.

And while more could be said about and addressed to the experiences of indigenous and other person of color (POC) administrators, that is not quite this project. As with Asao Inoue's 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Chair's Address, instead of simply providing illumination, the text offers folks from those groups "fuel, words of charcoal and fire to go back to your schools and institutions and make things burn" (356). While the experiences across cultural and ethnic lines aren't uniform across the board, it's likely at least some of the discussion in the text will resonate for all segments of the readership.

Signs of the Times

Certainly, *Black Perspectives* arrives during a time of greater social awareness and upheaval. The most recognizable touchstone of recent years, #BlackLivesMatter, was launched in 2013 by activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—putting the spotlight on the ever-present mistreatment of African Americans by, foremost amongst others, police officers. Within the sphere of writing program administration, Craig and Perryman-Clark's 2011 article, "Troubling the Boundaries," offers examples of prejudice enacted far less severely, but rooted in the same authoritarian impulses. One anecdote in the article, taking place during the annual Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) conference, hinges on the moment when an unnamed white woman literally told Craig he didn't belong in the conference space, stating, "You're not allowed in here; this is for conference attendees only" (51).

Though almost a decade has passed, similar and more severe events have continued to occur. In 2014, Ersula Ore, a black professor at Arizona State University, was assaulted by a white police officer during her walk home from class (“They Call Me Dr. Ore”). In 2017, reporting from multiple institutions confirmed what seemed to be a surge in white supremacist graffiti and paraphernalia on campus spaces (Bauer-Wolf). In 2018, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) revised its “Statement on Anti-Racism” in response to “increasing incidents and forms of blatant practices, threats of physical violence, production and dissemination of racist and biased materials, and expressions of racism and other expressions of bigotry toward students of culturally diverse human backgrounds” (“Statement on Anti-Racism”). In 2019, Genevieve Garcia de Mueller, a professor of Mexican American and Jewish background, received anti-Semitic death threats during a wave of incidents at Syracuse University (Guzman and Svrluga). And we could go on.

In attempts to confront the underlying structures that foster white supremacy in educational settings, there has also been a stronger calling out of those structures on a national level. Prior to his chairman’s talk at CCCC, Inoue broached the subject of writing programs and embedded racism in a plenary talk at the CWPA conference. “We must do violence to the CWPA and our own writing programs if we are to address racism” (134), he stated, going on to explore the entanglement of language instruction and white supremacy. Young, in a call for proposals to the 2019 CCCC program, wrote in AAVE to introduce the theme, “performance-rhetoric, performance-composition” (“Call for Program Proposals”), emphasizing linguistic diversity as a norm, rather than divergence.

Which, of course, returns us to *Black Perspectives*, which as noted previously, opens with Young’s exploration of its exigence. In their introduction, Perryman-Clark and Craig write that they are responding to, “specific racial microaggressions associated with [their] being black that challenge [their] roles as WPAs and colleagues doing curricular work,” as well as, “a critical need for scholarship that addresses microaggressions for both faculty and WPAs of color and students of color” (5). Plenty of texts have discussed the issues of

racism within the classroom, and racism among faculty, but *Black Perspectives* is concerned with racism enacted through writing programs, and the impact it has on those who organize them.

Enacting Pedagogy

In conversation with new graduate teaching assistants at a large research university, one professor has been known to have asked at least once, “Am I helping to build a better bigot?” That particular thread concerned possible teacherly responses to a student using biased sources to make prejudiced arguments: To highlight the likelihood of audience cynicism, rather than the instructor’s own moral qualms. The rhetorical question, however, also highlights a tension that many teachers experience, pulled between valuing their students’ own voices and acknowledging the likely response to those voices by other faculty and employers. If we vaunt practices like code-switching as the way to succeed in the world, are we simply building a society that rewards *implied* bigotry?

In “Troubling the Boundaries,” Craig and Perryman-Clark touch upon the rarity of formalized training available to future (and current) writing program administrators, noting the theorizing in the article is largely grounded in their own experiences, rather than a specific body of literature (38). There is, of course, plenty of discussion about diversity and multiculturalism in English education, particularly with curriculum selection and classroom strategies to support students from a variety of backgrounds. In educating graduate students to be administrators, however, there is a scarcity of resources.

In Chapter 3 of *Black Perspectives*, David F. Green Jr. considers how be melding “ways that African American rhetorical traditions can be deployed to rethink certain approaches to the teaching of writing” (51), folks might avoid replicating patterns of white supremacy. (What would happen if graduate students read Jacqueline Jones Royster’s, “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own” long before they looked at John Brereton’s Harvard-focused *The Origins of Composition Studies*? What might change if they encountered the indigenous practice of quipu before they talked about pencils as a technology?) In his chapter, Green suggests that one way to reconceive

writing programs is as a cypher (51). Rather than perceiving the classroom as a lecture hall, or even a circle of desks, the cypher—think a gathering of hip-hop artists into something like a freestyle rap battle (“What’s a Cypher”)—transforms a composition classroom into a place of mutual and playful innovation. In this reimagining, Green suggests the classroom becomes “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” (51-52).

Green also tackles more mainstream practices, particularly how the “writing about writing” pedagogy could serve as a springboard for discussing how race shapes the way writing is talked about (53). Invoking Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’s textbook, *Writing About Writing*, Green says instructors, instead of using current-traditional composition theory as a discussion springboard, could turn to texts that explore “black cultural dispositions” (54). By centering the “about writing” on minoritized rhetorical traditions, those traditions become “meaningful contributions to how we might think about and discuss writing with teachers and students, and to how we design our writing programs” (56). To displace white supremacy, we have to consciously divert our curriculum from Aristotelian temptations.

Chapter 4 of *Black Perspectives* brings Scott Wible’s meditation on white allyship in writing programs—and how white faculty can better de-center whiteness from how departments and programs function. Intriguingly, Wible calls himself out for not directly confronting people who make racist statements or support racist practices. “In effect,” he writes, “I naturally work to sustain my own psychological comfort and privilege instead of adopting other means to advance social justice for all students and faculty in our writing programs” (82). He also touches on the common fear of being perceived as racist amongst composition instructors, so much so that they avoid any discussions of race in order to risk a chance of being reported by students (88), which leads to them just . . . never talking about it at all.

This performance of supposed neutrality is, in itself, a danger. Inoue, who wrote the afterword to *Black Perspectives*, points out that the pretension of objectivity actually reinforces the structure of white supremacy. Within the classroom, the very language used to judge writing as effective shows the kind of valuation given according to racialized language: “Unseen, naturalized orientation to the world,” “a stance of neutrality, objectivity, and apoliticality,” “Individualized, rational, controlled self,” and “Clarity, order, and control” (150). Within white supremacy, whiteness is the default; not talking about it doesn’t make it go away.

These are points that need to be at the forefront of graduate student education. By striking out the “default” curriculum and wholly replacing it with one centered on blackness, the essential whiteness of writing programs is revealed as a painful absurdity. (In conversation with 2020’s #OscarsSoWhite controversy, Franklin Leonard satirizes the situation by flipping the table, imagining a ceremony where almost all the nominees are POCs. He posits a world where, “the Academy’s failure to appreciate the talents of actors of European descent,” and the Tarantinos and Scorseses of the world get nary a mention. Now think about how generative the conversation could be if it was suggested that graduate students *not* be enculturated with the Breretons, Berlins, and Bartholomaes.) To debate exclusion is to consider worth; it should be done more often, and better.

White Fragility

Inevitably, folks will object to a wholly non-white curriculum, and likely most of those folks (but not all) will be white. In *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Robin DiAngelo defines the titular concept as when

[t]he smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel

the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy (2).

Said fragility often results in ironic situations when white people respond to accusations of racist behavior (whether intentional or not) as “reverse racism,” thus deflecting any possible opportunity for self-reflection with indignation. One striking experience is detailed by Lydia Wilkes in her piece, “The Same Old Racist Stuff,” wherein she describes her presentation on white fragility in the classroom being interrupted by a white woman who couldn’t wait until the end of the talk to tell Wilkes that, no, what was being described in student conflicts was not racist at all. The audience member tried to pre-emptively shut down discussion of racist behaviors, which “cast a pall of negative effect over the room: yet again, a white person became a White Person” (108).

In his afterword to *Black Perspectives*, Inoue invokes Carol Anderson’s work to state, “White rage is often subtle and masked through the status quo, through behaviors, actions, and policies that do not account for the unequal racialized ways that students and teachers are racially constructed in writing programs in hierarchical ways” (144). Any disruption of the norm feels, to many white (and other) folk, as a personal affront. After all, if we have succeeded and even excelled in our writing program work, doesn’t that make us complicit?

So how should we respond to objections to de-centering whiteness in the curriculum, what’s seen as “doing violence” to our writing programs, as Inoue suggested? How do we counter the claims that glossing over Cicero impoverishes a graduate student’s learning? That a classroom in cypher mode ill-serves our students? Returning to Wible’s discussion of allyship is appropriate here, for in addition to awareness, allyship has to move beyond encouraging nods and self-righteous tweets in order to be successful. Wible writes, “An accomplice is someone who gives something up, who puts something on the line, who is willing to be critiqued, who is willing to lose something. . . . An ally seeks to understand; an accomplice is willing to do the work” (78). And that means moving on from fragility and developing resiliency. Scholars, white and otherwise,

need to critically examine their own privilege in order to be accomplices. And they need to be willing to do that work themselves, instead of asking POCs to explain them into understanding.

Institutional Contexts

Another facet to confronting the racism of writing programs is to step away from the individual and look at the institutional. When it comes to writing programs, the institutional is best understood in two parts: personnel and precedence. Personnel is, perhaps, the easiest practice to recognize and critique. In Chapter 2 of *Black Perspectives*, Carmen Kynard introduces the concept of “plantation logic” (30), a sort of unstated labor structure that dictates expectations of roles within the academy and, as with many institutions, demarcates according to perceived race.

To illustrate, Kynard shares a story about a year she switched places with Debbie, the department’s administrative assistant who was also black, in hosting faculty parties (31-34). It turned out that nobody found the switch remarkable, or even noticeable. (I will note that back in my administrative assistant days, I traded places with another admin in another office, who was also Filipina, for department meetings. The switch was, there also, not noticed or remarked upon.) Even though Kynard was greeting colleagues—people who ostensibly worked closely with her on a regular basis—there was no remark about her taking on a task that might be seen as subservient. “White supremacy has no logic,” she notes, “only an excessive repetition that gives it a networking of practices” (47). Because the majority of assistants on campus were black, the white faculty did not question Kynard’s new positioning.

The common institutional response when disparities like this are pointed out is to fill what seems like whatever position comes up first with a POC. Unfortunately, however, that is often where the effort ends. Karla Thomas, in “Organizational Red Flag: ‘We Welcome Diversity,’” warns that institutions who trumpet their commitment to diversity are often those that focus on optics more than inclusion. The mere presence of a POC is assumed to “solve” the problem. (I have more than a handful of colleagues, all of whom

are POC, who have been either placed in or assumed to already be a part of their campus's designated diversity committee.) What institutions should be doing first, Thomas suggests, is ensure some "anti-bias, anti-racism, and equity training" for leadership and staff. This type of training is best held as mandatory workshops, perhaps modeled on or inviting in talks by groups like StirFry Seminars and Hackman Consulting Group, where confrontation and reflection lay bare unacknowledged prejudices. Best practices to ensure diversity *and* inclusion are possible for educational institutions; it is simply up to us to institutionalize them.

With precedence, that other aspect of institutional infrastructure, we are faced with the seeming-unbudgeable "things have always been done this way." Things like the use of standardized tests as admissions standards, mascots modeled after offensive stereotypes, and the perception that scholarly advancement is signaled by spotless grammar. Practices are seen as neutral simply because they have persisted and been perpetuated. As discussed earlier, however, it is impossible to speak, to teach, or to administrate from a neutral standpoint—we bring our positionality into everything we do. But we cannot also, as individuals, single-handedly dismantle institutional suppressions that have been evolving for centuries, especially in the span of a semester. Change is daunting if it's perceived as starting from scratch, but as Perryman-Clark and Craig point out in Chapter 5, many universities have worked long and hard to establish equity—particularly historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Program Sustainability

HBCUs offer a template for how writing programs can center blackness (102), and the field of writing program administration could look to them to see how to accomplish it. HBCUs, in fact, aren't given the spotlight often. Perryman-Clark and Craig note that, in a previous iteration of the CWPA website, none of the programs highlighted or linked to were HBCUs. The current CWPA website does not include any statement or resolution that addresses race and ethnicity, and the latest iteration of the Framework for Success (co-written by CWPA, NCTE, and the National Writing

Project) doesn't include discussion of cultural and/or linguistic diversity in a significant way (105).

What gives?

In Chapter 6 of *Black Perspectives*, Perryman-Clark and Craig spotlight some writing program best practices, including a more distinct call for cultural competencies (104), as modeled by Spelman College and Huston-Tillotson University, both HBCUs, and Western Michigan University. In the book's companion website, they also provide course materials from those programs. Folded into the programs are three principles *Black Perspectives* recommends others follow:

1. "Afrocentric pedagogical materials are placed at the center of the curriculum" (107)
2. "Programmatic assessment measures are designed with black student success in mind" (109)
3. "Successful writing programs understand that they can implement Afrocentric pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment practices and still support all students" (110)

Taking the examples provided and the principles above, WPAs are given a playbook for programmatic development and a starting point for the project of extricating white supremacy from a writing program's structure. Further, the emphasis on assessment zeroes in on how common writing pedagogy obfuscates the problem of white supremacy by focusing on language choice and rhetorical context. This ersatz advice is equivalent to responding to a question of inclusive student populations by toothlessly proclaiming the institution is committed to diversity, without clarifying what exactly is meant.

How Do I Teach That?

White supremacy is codified when students are asked to shift from AAVE to Standard Academic English in order to signal belonging. What does it say about the educational system we support if we tell students they all have to "pass" in order to thrive within it? Young

writes in *Black Perspectives*, “I am against code-switching, replacing beautiful black speech and rhetoric with white ways with words” (x). What goes unremarked, however, is that in addition to being a published scholar and established professor, Young is currently the chair of CCCC. It could be interpreted that AAVE, then, might only be acceptable once you’ve risen in the academic hierarchy. So how, then, do WPAs ask instructors to “get out the way of black students’ agency and learn to allow, support, and help steer it” (xiii)?

There cannot and will not ever be a perfect way to address the whiteness of writing programs, but in *Black Perspectives*, Perryman-Clark and Craig offer ways to start. Question preconceptions and strive for allyship. Listen to black, indigenous, and POC colleagues and students, and believe them when they share their experiences. Replace “traditional” pedagogy and theory studied with rhetorics too often relegated to special topic seminars. Rethink how students and their writing are encountered, experienced, and evaluated.

Black Perspectives provides knowledge and tools to begin this daunting and necessary work. And now that we know, the question becomes: *What’re we gonna do next?*

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