

The Promise and Perils of a Disciplinary and Organizational Pipeline

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Figure 1. A 2009 Official White House photograph, “Hair Like Mine,” shows then-President Barack Obama bending down and 5-year-old visitor Jacob Philadelphia touching his hair. (Photo by Pete Souza)

Barack Obama’s 2008 election to the US presidency brought with it a social justice high that inspired marginalized groups with ideas of hope and possibility. Forty-three US presidents, so-called “leaders of the free world,” before him had belonged to its dominant racial group of “white people,” a category whose social construction and usage rose in line with the nation’s own need for “structuration,” production, and reproduction of whiteness at the top of the social hierarchy (Guess, 2006), while early in its ideations of power and in the absence of a caste or class system that other societies had long established. Obama’s rise to this seat of power became a symbol whose idealistic message insisted that we are a democracy and, no matter

our identities, have the capacity to be fair. Unfortunately, such a romanticization of the moment placed many of us on a plateau of complacency and postracial fantasy.

Of many iconic public media moments during Obama's two-term presidency, one that stands out as perpetuating this narrative was captured early on in White House photographer Pete Souza's iconic 2009 photograph dubbed "Hair Like Mine," in which Obama is bowing down so that 5-year-old Black boy and White House visitor Jacob Philadelphia could touch his hair. Lore quickly built around the picture: The boy wanted to feel if the President's hair was just like his. And we consumers of news media and reproducers who echo these narratives on social media soon projected our own consensus of the event: In a highly unequal system oppressing marginalized groups, the moment is an inspiring one that captures the power of seeing someone who looks like us in a position of power. But how is Jacob Philadelphia to go from this little boy to the heights of the man in front of him, navigate home and social life, personal and professional obstacles, succeed throughout his schooling and career, all within social systems that have been designed to exclude him—i.e., various institutional pipelines?

The widespread use of the pipeline metaphor began in the early 2000s by social scientists to describe the institutional ecology that led to alarming, unjust incarceration rates of Americans of colour, especially of Black Americans, starting with the term *schoolhouse to jailhouse track* (Browne, 2003) and later by an NAACP report using the more popularized term *school-to-prison pipeline* (2005).¹ Although this process has its roots much earlier, in the late 19th century, and arguably as a continuation and mere evolution from the fallout of the US Civil War, into that of attempts to perpetuate racial segregation through Jim Crow laws enforced at sites like separated bus seating, drinking fountains, public restrooms, restaurant dining areas, even socialization and marriage. When these laws were struck down, racial segregation as a social force needed to take on another guise, this time a return to the indentured servitude of slavery but in the acceptable legal structures of a post-Civil War USA.

The pipeline metaphor has since been borrowed and repurposed to describe other social-institutional processes such as the more positive school-to-college pipeline intended as a social safety net to prevent, or better yet to transform, who are perceived as juvenile delinquents and truant at risk of failing out of the intended preparation to be productive contributors to society. In the work of social justice efforts, the more positive pipeline has been used as an ideal process that encourages more accurate demographic representation in positions of authority and power. That is, if the position of the US presidency has mostly been held by able-bodied,

cisgender, publicly heterosexual, white males of Christian faiths, how can we ensure more adequate representation of the US population with more disabled, non-binary, out queer, people of colour, women of other faiths or the non-religious? The same representation project is thus also conducted throughout all levels of political office from the local to the global, as well as in various other spheres including academia and its various guises in college institutional and departmental governance, full-time and tenure-track position systems, journal editorial teams, and conference and organizational representation.

In spring 2013, I was nominated and urged to run for the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (CWPA) relatively new Graduate Organization (WPA-GO) office.² Not only was I elected by a graduate student body of around 200, but I was also appointed³ as the incoming Vice Chair who would in turn take on the Chair position. This position not only came with the burden of being the first WPA-GO Chair of colour, but with it also came access to another echelon of governance in its automatic placement as an ex officio member of the CWPA Executive Board, a historically white space that, up until my time, had only been transgressed by two other previous scholars of colour as a member, Chet Pryor and Raúl Sánchez, who by then were no longer in its ranks, thus with no overlap in our service. Operation Black Vote, a British not-for-profit organization that seeks to enfranchise Black and other racial minorities in Britain to vote in their elections, coined the term *snowy peak syndrome*⁴ to describe institutional structures that advocate for racial diversity but remain disproportionately white at the top while becoming more inclusive only in subordinate areas of the hierarchy. And both the CWPA's and WPA-GO's leadership strata at the time were disproportionately white. For me, there was no Jacob Philadelphia moment. I had no figure to show me the potential of what I could become, no one as a benchmark of hope and possibility. What I experienced during my time in this position is a cacophony of inspiring and discouraging truths that I hope might be of use for those of us doing relevant organizational work.

During my term as WPA-GO Chair and CWPA Executive Board Member, the two bodies worked collaboratively, through their respective Diversity and Inclusion Committees, to identify that the systemic root of the lack of representation at the top must be addressed from early on in the academic pipeline, ideally cultivated from even as early as students just beginning in undergraduate writing studies programs around the country that had been increasing in number, and that creating such a pipeline toward an eventually more inclusive CWPA, among many other organizations and subfields of Rhet/Comp, was one main charge of WPA-GO.⁵ I

want to acknowledge the great work that the CWPA did and has done since then. Mirroring WPA-GO's own equity efforts, Susan Miller-Cochran's presidency during 2015–17 began a more proactively inclusive recruitment of officers into the Executive Board, which has become aspirational, if not always realized, for officer elections since then. At least in terms of Board representation, today's graduate students now have a better chance at having figures, our figurative Obama bending over for a touch of the hair, in the CWPA leadership to whom we can relate.

Ironically, these efforts have not been sustained at the WPA-GO level, which I attribute to the fleeting, temporary nature of graduate student status and work, with subsequent officers constantly reimagining and restructuring the organization's structure and activities in ways that deter long-term sustainable efforts such as maintaining pipelines. This lack of continuity between administrations then contributes to a vicious cycle, rendering attempts at a pipeline a Sisyphean task, and resulting in an unrealized mechanism intended to cultivate inclusivity at the top. This year, the organization experienced a crisis of homogenous leadership that necessitated special elections, and I have to wonder if we (previous administrations) are doing all we can to document the importance and weight of proactively seeking out a diverse pool of applicants because our marginalized colleagues do not necessarily have the self-confidence to nominate themselves. Likewise, there is the question of how much, or if at all, subsequent cohorts do all they can to consult organizational history to find and continue these efforts. It is unfair to us that our inclusion be reduced to the ghettoized space of special elections because inclusive efforts in the periphery means that they are not working effectively to deconstruct systemic racism and marginalization.

Yet this tangible structural problem is more easily addressed than some of the more systemic, cultural issues. As a dark-skinned Asian Islander leading a group of majority white officers in WPA-GO, two white peers constantly challenged my authority with the reasoning that I was not being progressive enough, and not understanding let alone acknowledging the difficult balancing act of presenting radical ideas from the mouth of an intimidating Brown body. Just as disturbing to me is that other white peers in this space, during these moments, took no actions and remained passive bystanders of this systemic racism. This attempted coup and lack of ally support hindered our efforts to create long-term pipeline mechanisms of inclusivity within the graduate organization toward the parent organization and greater field. They are all still dear colleagues and friends of mine, and my speaking out about this issue while we remain so shouldn't come as a surprise. I share these complex, personal thoughts and framing because

I want white scholars to know that this kind of emotional repression is a frequent burden that their colleagues of colour must carry in order to seem agreeable and less threatening as a strategy to stay within academia.

As well, it was a lonely experience when seeing the activities of our peer organizations in the NCTE and CCCC as models of what is possible. For instance, when their various caucuses responded against police brutality by an Arizona State University Police Department officer upon our Black colleague Ersula Ore through releasing public statements (Kuebrich et al, 2015; Perryman-Clark and Craig, 2019), my urging the CWPA Board to release our own in solidarity was met with bureaucratic resistance under the guise of policy, reminiscent of what the recent Outcomes Statement Revision Task Force has claimed as their roadblocks. That moment served not only to devalue the lived experience hardships of scholars of colour but also, through the dismissal of my concerns, to keep me divested from the field and discouraged me from ongoing participation, creating a kind of blockage or even break in the figurative pipeline.

These two experiences—one at the entry point and the other within the pipeline—show that these spaces, at least at the time, were hostile environments for the lone scholar of colour.

Academic-cultural critic Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) observes that, in European-colonized societies, the emotions of white male nationalists have the privilege of being acknowledged as legitimate, while the emotions of immigrants, people of colour, and women are dismissed as irrational and therefore illegitimate. My concern here is that the CWPA, WPA-GO, if not other academic organizations and academia itself in general are subject to white nationalist discourse in our attempts to cultivate the pipeline. If my holding authority within traditionally-white academic structures and my attempts for recognition of the injustices against a fellow scholar of colour are delegitimized, then our idealized pipelines cannot function properly. In her later work, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Ahmed continues at the more explicit site of academia by identifying a performative culture in our institutional enunciations of diversity efforts, which might include antiracist statements, faculty diversity book clubs, land acknowledgements, and mandatory diversity training. She thus calls for a commitment that must move beyond performance and to fill the gap between performative and non-performative commitment as the rarely tread space we must inhabit (140).

My hope for CWPA, WPA-GO, and all rhet-comp and writing studies academic organizations, in efforts to establish and maintain effective inclusive pipelines, is that we do so by officially documenting our successes and failures within the racist and exclusive structures. Perhaps more impor-

tantly, the mentoring of those entering the pipeline by parent organizations and established scholars would greatly benefit by integrating an understanding of how to navigate and negotiate these complex organizational histories and corresponding systemic issues. The early scholars at the start line are increasingly more diverse than the population of established scholars. That is, we are not all so lucky as to have mentors who represent a possible future for ourselves. And so, beyond programs and conference events merely pairing mentors and mentees, we might also consider the explicit training and preparation of mentors to better deal with issues their mentees may be internalizing and unwilling to bring up with those who don't look like them or share their life experiences.

I urge all scholars of colour and marginalized groups to keep account of any language, microaggression, moments that are clearly and explicitly, or at times feel subtly, exclusive. Document them. These efforts burden more labor upon us in our mission to be more inclusive and representative. But doing so will enable each of us to write and share our truths to willing audiences when opportunities arise, like I have here, in order that future agents of change—ourselves included—in these spaces may consult them toward the transformation we seek with the benefit of time and renewed empathy.

NOTES

1. This document is no longer available to the public but is quoted and cited in and as early as Heitzeg (2009) and Evans & Didlick-Davis (2012).

2. By a white peer, Kenneth Walker. I would not have done this myself, as academics of colour, especially graduate students and early career, often are not equipped with the self-confidence to strive for such positions in our field(s).

3. By then-Chairs Laurie Pinkert and Brian Hendrickson.

4. Introduced to me by Robyn Tasaka, University of Hawai'i.

5. With the help of existing mechanisms as an official CWPA mentor for the WPA-GO in the Past President (then Rita Malenczyk) and a CWPA Mentoring Committee (then comprised of Michele Eodice and Joseph Janangelo).

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