

## **So You Think You're Ready to Build New Social Justice Initiatives?: Intentional and Coalitional Pro-Black Programmatic and Organizational Leadership in Writing Studies**

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Social justice initiatives require the same amount of (if not more) care than any other research project or activity we undertake. Treating social justice efforts without care is white supremacist and upholds anti-Black racism and misogyny, as doing anti-racist work in the academy is regularly and disproportionately delegated to Black women without appropriate institutional support, recognition, and compensation. Drawing on our organizational leadership experiences, we present a framework for intentional and coalitional pro-Black programmatic and organizational work in writing studies. We posit that making anti-racist organizational change requires a pro-Black ethic of community and care, deep engagement with Black Feminist research, and pro-Black praxis of “doing the work”—which requires fostering honest conversations and building tangible, sustainable commitments to the Black people in our community.

### **TOWARD A PRO-BLACK ETHIC OF COMMUNITY AND CARE**

Recent racial uprisings in response to the state-sanctioned murders of Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many other Black people in the U.S., accelerate attention to the longstanding, dire need for anti-racist action in all facets of academia, including writing studies programs and organizations. In response, many organizations and programs (in writing studies and beyond) published statements that condemned racism and/or committed to “avoiding racism” or working toward anti-racist praxis. Although these statements name “racism,” they often do so without directly addressing anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and their violent social, economic, political, and community impacts. If programs and organizations want to support our Black colleagues and communities, we must move beyond statements toward coalitional, pro-Black praxis.

Anti-Blackness permeates all communities, including writing studies communities and non-Black communities of color. Releasing statements and making promises for anti-racist change while simultaneously erasing the very anti-Black exigencies that led to the statements in the first place—

by ignoring, forgetting, or otherwise failing to name anti-Blackness and its white supremacist roots—participates in anti-Blackness.

How do Black lives matter in our writing studies communities? Education scholar Bettina L. Love (2019) writes, “for dark people, the very basic idea of mattering is hard to conceptualize when your country finds you disposable” (p. 2). For writing studies organizations and programs, the first step, then, is to not position Black people as disposable to or in our work. With all the expertise in cultural rhetorics, usability studies, transfer and uptake, and more in writing studies, we can do better and more to develop and grow a pro-Black ethic of care that works toward ensuring that no one in our community feels disposable. This effort requires everyone in our communities, and not just Black people or other people of color, to take up the work of redressing anti-Blackness.

A pro-Black ethic of community and care understands that there is no anti-racist future in our world, much less our organizations and programs, without the liberation of Black women, trans and non-binary folx, femmes, and other marginalized Black identities. In “A Black Feminist Statement,” the Combahee River Collective (1977) makes clear that until the world focuses on the freedom of Black people, and Black women specifically, “racism” writ large cannot be addressed: “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (p. 215). Thus, a pro-Black ethic of care understands that none of us are truly free until Black women are free—and that true liberation doesn’t come from reforming systems, institutions, programs, and organizations designed by (predominantly) white people for (predominantly) white people. Instead, taking a note from Afrofuturist epistemologies, we must work together to imagine new, justice-driven approaches to institutional leadership structures. This means necessarily challenging institutional structures as they currently exist.

It makes sense, then, that a pro-Black ethic of community and care requires that we center Black experiences, knowledges, and perspectives in and beyond the work we do in writing studies. McKoy et al. (2020) define Black technical and professional communication (TPC) as “including practices centered on Black community and culture and on rhetorical practices inherent in Black lived experience. Black TPC reflects the cultural, economic, social, and political experiences of Black people across the Diaspora. It also includes the work of scholars in the academy and the contributions of practitioners” (n.p.). Centralizing and amplifying the needs and voices of Black scholars is just the start, though. We must also work in and beyond

writing studies on redressing anti-Blackness and calling anti-Black racism by name.

To do this work, coalitions are important, as redressing anti-Blackness in academic programs, professional organizations, and beyond should always be the responsibility of *all* community members. Diversity and inclusion work, and anti-racist work more specifically, is a community responsibility and should not be outsourced to a single committee in a department or organization. As Jones (2020) explains, “Coalitional learning can emphasize the justice work across disciplines and across-justice-related interventions that we develop to address intersectional oppressions based on race, gender, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, and more” (p. 517). As writing studies scholar-teachers work to reaffirm commitments to being an anti-racist, and specifically pro-Black, it’s important to build coalitions of community and care that centralize the desires and experiences of those most oppressed—Black communities, and in particular, Black women. This means that non-Black members of our organizations need to look beyond their own needs and desires for our organizations, and think beyond “how we’ve always done things” or how things have always been to “how can we do better” and how can we reimagine our organizations.

#### NO ANTI-RACIST ACTION CAN HAPPEN WITHOUT ENGAGING WITH BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCH

While many are just coming to terms with the need to engage in anti-racist praxis, it’s important to remember that Black women have spent their lives researching and built their careers publishing their scholarship on anti-racist and pro-Black approaches to teaching, literacy, and writing studies for decades (Love, 2013; Royster, 1996; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1997). Given this, it’s arrogant, at best, and violent, at worst, to assume we can prepare our programs and organizations to engage in anti-racist work in a few short days or weeks or even months.. It’s not enough to listen to a Kendi lecture and then skip straight to the task force. It’s not enough to read a book, build or join a book club, or invite a Black scholar to guest lecture.

Instead, it’s important to ask: What expertise do I/we actually have in doing anti-racist work? What expertise do we need in order to address the anti-Blackness that has been present in our program or organization from the start? Anti-racist work, and more specifically pro-Black and liberatory work, should be preceded by the necessary research to do said work. Just as it is common practice to start new research projects by engaging deeply with the literature in the specific area of study, refining key concepts, devel-

oping a methodology, and establishing frameworks for coding, analysis, and assessment, so too must this long-established trajectory apply to anti-racist research, programming, and practice in our profession.

When Black scholars are invited to contribute their expertise to our organizations, institutions, and programs, it's also important for these institutions to do the work to ensure that events, lectures, and projects will not perpetuate anti-Black racism. For example, how are Q&A sessions being facilitated at these workshops and conferences? What infrastructures can be put in place so that experts sharing their work are not exposed to micro-aggressions in the form of “well meaning” or “devil’s advocate” questions? When we think about providing compensation for guest lecturers, it’s important to compensate Black scholars not only for the time spent delivering and preparing a lecture, but also for the emotional labor that they undertake to share their experiences in spaces that continue being white-supremacist. These are just a few of the considerations that organizations, institutions, and programs can account for when working to redress anti-Black racism beyond posturing and performing.

#### Doing (and Not Just Performing) the Work

In academia and in all facets of society, Black folx are policed through white-supremacist processes and protocols established under the guise of neutrality (Baéz & Ore, 2018; Kynard, 2015). For example, Black instructors are consistently policed through settler colonial heteropatriarchal infrastructures like student evaluations and faculty promotion and ranking systems that code Black faculty as “angry,” “loud,” and “aggressive.” These same systems that sponsor anti-Black surveillance and bureaucracy are now being mobilized to supposedly address racism and anti-Blackness by way of forming diversity & inclusion committees and anti-racist taskforces, distributing anonymous surveys, and facilitating “listening” sessions—all of which often puts more labor on already-marginalized students and faculty. Instead of building these initiatives within the same institutions of power while maintaining the same systems of power, white and non-Black POC can further advocate for Black faculty, students, and staff by leveraging personal and coalitional privilege and power in material, tangible ways.

So, what does doing anti-racist work entail for writing studies?

- **It must be coalitional**, engaging diverse stakeholders and community members across ranks, as well as across the organization, department, or program.
- **It must be reflective and reflexive**, allowing community members to reflect on ways that they are complicit and/or resistant to anti-Blackness and providing spaces to redress injustices and complicity.

It's also important to acknowledge the role that not only white people, but also non-Black people of color, can play in upholding anti-Blackness. The fact is, the closer a person aligns with whiteness, whether in appearance, ideologies, and/or actions, the better the chance they will be welcomed and included in academic institutions and organizations. Thus, it is the responsibility of non-Black POC to work intentionally to redress anti-Blackness and combat white supremacy (Black Latinas Know Collective, 2020).

- **It must be pro-Black and intersectional**, which includes: rejecting the re-centering of whiteness and other non-Black experience; acknowledging not just the ways in which our positionality may marginalize us, but also the ways in which it positions us in relation to power and privilege (and whiteness); and recognizing how positionality, privilege, and power change in relation to proximity to place and space and impact an individual's margin of maneuverability (Walton, Moore, Jones, 2019).
- **It must be iterative**, insisting that community members continually gauge how actions, policies, and procedures can better resist anti-Blackness. When an action, policy, or procedure no longer serves a community, it should be done away with, rather than adhering to "tradition" or the status quo.
- **It must be sustainable and permanent**, rather than *ad hoc* or in the moment, with an explicit anti-racist and pro-Black commitment in values and practice from leadership and broader department, program, or organization community.
- **It must grapple with power dynamics**, acknowledging (recognizing) the ways that positionality and privilege may silence and overlook certain groups. Community members must work to reject and dismantle policy and procedures that silence and marginalize and replace these systems with more transparent and open means of engagement, providing protection to those who are less privileged and inhabit more precarious positionalities (Walton, Moore, Jones, 2019).
- **It must not rely on labor from Black colleagues and community members** and instead harness the labor of those with more privilege and power. If Black colleagues and community members are called upon to help, this labor should not be considered obligatory and must be recognized, valued, and compensated.
- **It must be transformative**, meaning that working against anti-Black racism and oppression must permeate every aspect of the work of the organization, department, or program. This work must be evident in policies, procedures, hiring, curriculum, service, research, interper-

sonal relationships, and professional development. In addition, strategic plans and objectives must be imbued with anti-racist values and meaningful outcomes. The culture of the organization, department, or program must be transformed to engage in anti-racist and pro-Black work.

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