

White Supremacists and Urgent Agency: Memories from a Writing Program Administrator

Stephen Monroe

As a WPA, I return again and again to Micciche's idea of slow agency. When things get tough, I remember Micciche's advice to slow down, to defer action, and to think things through before racing to meet every request or to solve every problem (73). For me, such deliberation is always calming and productive. It is always a pathway towards better results. In January 2019, however, I was faced with an urgent situation that demanded urgent action. White supremacists announced plans to visit our campus.¹ It became a chaotic few weeks with potentially violent consequences, and I was forced to suspend my reliance on slowing things down. I improvised a new approach that might be called urgent agency. I worked in bursts, remained alert, and accelerated my decisions and actions. It was uncomfortable but necessary, and I learned something new about myself as a writing program administrator.

At first, I did not believe their rally would directly impact our department. Rumors were swirling and news stories followed. The white supremacists were pursuing publicity and talking openly about their plans. Like others on campus, I was worried, but I certainly did not expect to be involved. This was a matter for high-level administrators, not for a WPA. As the date for the rally approached, I began to eavesdrop on Facebook as the brash leader of these neo-Confederates broadcast oddly mundane video planning sessions. Their hateful rally would be held on a Saturday, not a class day, so our students and faculty would not be forced into harm's way. I was disturbed but not yet alarmed. That soon changed.

On one of his nightly broadcasts in February, the white supremacist leader began by reading aloud tweets from Trump and offering admiring explications. He then talked of violence and brandished weapons. He was speaking angrily before a confederate flag. He cursed our students and faculty. As I listened to his intense rhetoric, I remembered his coffee mug from a previous broadcast. It read, "Nobody Needs an AR-15? Nobody needs a whiny little bitch either but here you are" ("Time is getting close"). I was now alarmed.

That night, I sent my concerns up the ladder to the dean. He responded quickly. It seemed that our central administration was preparing a response. Law enforcement, including the FBI, was in the lead, and campus officials were working in lockstep with local government partners. This news was

very reassuring, and I defaulted to the familiar WPA position of liaison. I shared facts with my department, fielded questions from worried colleagues, and tried to provide tempered reassurance.

Then, with the Saturday rally just days away, the aforementioned leader posted a disturbingly specific video. Enraged because students were now planning a counterprotest for Friday to begin from Lamar Hall, the home building of our department and writing center, he yelled, “We are gonna crash their little party at Lamar Hall on Friday!” Repeatedly, he asked his followers to converge on our building. I noticed that 1,600 people had viewed the video.

By Friday morning, students and parents were reacting with fear to portions of the video circulating on social media. Our teachers were hearing from students afraid to come near Lamar Hall. Parents were telling them to skip class. My inbox was full. I called the chair of the other department housed in Lamar. He was equally concerned and hearing similar worries. He and I decided to close our offices and encourage everyone to stay away. On one hand, this was a difficult decision. We did not have approval from above. Class time would be lost; research would be disrupted. On the other hand, this was an easy decision. Our building was suddenly a focal point for external hatred. There was no time to wait. Emptying the building guaranteed some safety and reassurance.

By noon on Friday, the building was empty, save for a few wandering police. I stayed behind to answer phones and to watch out my window. It turned out to be an anticlimactic afternoon. By 5 p.m., I thought that perhaps I had been overly cautious. Perhaps emptying the building had been the wrong decision. Later, though, I checked Facebook. The white supremacists had posted a video shot that very afternoon. The aforementioned leader was joyriding through campus. His car slowed, and I saw our building in the background. “Hey! There’s Lamar Hall!!!,” he yelled. He smiled creepily, reached toward the floorboard, and pulled up a battle axe, posing with the weapon. Behind him, I could see our office windows, our front doors, our bike racks, and our usually crowded sidewalks. I thought of the many colleagues and students that could have been nearby in that dangerous moment. I found peace in our unauthorized and urgent decision.

As WPAs, we will likely face increasing external intrusions, threats, and perhaps even violence. We cannot assume that such conflicts will impact only deans, provosts, or presidents. Some of our faculty and students will be dragged into danger. Normal protocols and timelines will prove irrelevant. Such moments of crisis are unpredictable and dynamic. WPAs need to be ready. There are not many roadmaps. Leadership approaches like Micciche’s slow agency will remain essential most of the time, but we will

also need approaches akin to urgent agency for moments of crisis. We will need to steel ourselves for confusing and chaotic episodes. As we pursue nuanced antiracist projects in our teaching and research, we must also be ready to confront moments of dangerous and dire racism. During complicated and volatile times, our work as WPAs will become more difficult—and more important.

NOTE

1. For the full context and a comprehensive history of this period, see Ellie Campbell's excellent essay, "A Week in the Life of Ole Miss: February 2019 and the Fight to Take Down the Confederate Statue," in *The Activist History Review*. December 16, 2019. <https://activisthistory.com/2019/12/16/a-week-in-the-life-of-ole-miss-february-2019-and-the-fight-to-take-down-the-confederate-statue/>.

WORKS CITED

Micciche, Laura R. "For Slow Agency." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2011, pp. 73–90.
"Time is getting close to miss stands event Fri/Sat." *Facebook*, uploaded 20 February 2019, www.facebook.com/confederate901. Transcribed 1 March 2019.

Stephen M. Monroe is chair and assistant professor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Mississippi. He is author of *Heritage and Hate: Old South Words and Symbols at Southern Universities* (University of Alabama Press, 2021).

