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## This Ain't Yo' Mama's Composition Class: Addressing Anti-Blackness by Implementing Anti- Racist Pedagogy

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## This Ain't Yo' Mama's Composition Class: Addressing Anti-Blackness by Implementing Anti-Racist Pedagogy

### Abstract

Kyoko Kishimoto writes that those who practice anti-racist pedagogical practices are not only required to teach about race, but instead "teach about race and racism in a way that fosters critical analytical skills, which reveal the power relations behind racism and how race has been institutionalized in U.S. society to create and justify inequalities" (541). This is the work. And I have chosen to do it.

Steeped in anti-racist pedagogy "This Ain't Yo' Mama's Composition Course" aims to explore the ways that writing classrooms can affirm students' autonomy while simultaneously equipping them with skills that equate to "cultural capital." Anti-racist pedagogy challenges "embedded Eurocentrism and male privilege" not only in the what is taught, but in the how subjects are taught (Kishimoto 541). Integrating anti-racism into teacher training should be mandatory, but we consistently find unaware educators navigating complex classrooms that leave students uninterested and disembodied. This issue transcends the K-12 environment; many composition classrooms face difficulties when implementing anti-racist content and/or strategies. In composing a college composition course designed around antiracism— in content and approach— I came to a disturbing realization: the spaces in dire need of antiracist pedagogy are often the most resistant.

Students are coming from K-12 institutions whose curriculums misrepresent history and leave them feeling attacked when they are merely confronted with historical realities upon entering college. An absence of a comprehensive national history results in flawed rhetoric in the composition classroom. This is a disservice to the nation, but most sinisterly, it is a disservice to these students. While many would like to glorify our current distance from historical racial aggressions, as a black woman, I cannot afford to overestimate the positive qualities of racial diversity/integration. Because I have the audacity to hold degrees that grant me access to privileged spaces and be both black and woman, my mere presence shifts the dynamics of a classroom. It suddenly becomes raced. Language-use is literally put on the battlefield where micro-aggressions serve as swords and my only shield is an English degree that forces me to coddle non-Black students, while also defending my instructional choices.

Through personal experiences, this essay aims to use the freshman composition course as a point of advocacy for anti-racist pedagogy in K-12 classrooms, and thus the programs that train this nation's K-12 teachers. "This Ain't Yo Mama's Composition Course" explores both educators and student's resistance and discomfort with implementing such strategies, while also assessing what this means for our racial reality. Many of us are not willing nor prepared to engage the monstrosity of racism, and no one has a right to demand that kind of labor from us. It is a colossal task, but I maintain throughout this essay, that our children's lives depend upon it.

### Keywords

Anti-racism, anti-blackness, anti-racism, anti-racist pedagogy, rhetoric and composition, English, K12 Education

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“Racism, institutional and structural, is not about some kind of general and generic racially divided world somewhere out there over the rainbow. There is never any moment when racism is subtle or exists as some kind of fine mist that is out there but that I cannot fully see on campus. We need to stop talking about racism and institutions this way in our writing and to our students. Oppression could never work if it were invisible, unarticulated, or unfelt by those it targets.” (Kynard, 2015, p. 3)

The United States is hella racist; but the United States is also hella obsessed with post-racialism: a “denial of the highest order” (Howard, 2014, p. 397). Christina Sharpe’s harrowing text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) explains that for the U.S., “the ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and for this so-called democracy, necessary” (p. 7). Sharpe calls attention to African Americans’ navigation through the afterlife of legalized bondage and contemporized subjugation, a theory corroborated by Michael Dumas (2016) in *Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse*. Dumas (2016) argues that even in the face of emancipation, a “cultural disregard for, and disgust with blackness” permeated/permeates America’s social imagination (pp. 12-14). If we are not clear on this premise, then there is no way we can contextualize impoverished, gutted, and ghettoed neighborhoods that suffer from divestment and over-policing. If we cannot contextualize nor conceptualize these spaces as the sites of ruthless violence, then we cannot contextualize our Black students’ experiences and like many educators, we will come to understand difference as disadvantage.

Freshman composition, which serves as an introduction to higher education, possesses the power to set a foundation for—at minimum—rhetorical freedom. Composition, by its very nature, is composed, and orderly. But what happens when you investigate this innate composure and disrupt this performative orderliness? This essay imagines a space where critical inquiry is messy, rules are consistently negotiable, and students *must* lead. By comfortably relishing in the uncertainty of students’ imaginations, this essay makes the bold claim that “This Ain’t Yo’ Mama’s Composition Class,” which is meant to subordinate the perceived authority figure and engage taboo dinner-table topics. “This Ain’t Yo Mama’s Composition Class” is speaking to those of us in education who are Black and routinely gas-lighted into believing that our experiences are figments of our wild, constructed imaginations. I am speaking to and for those of us—white, Black or brown—who are interested in helping ourselves and our students “come to a deeper understanding of the Black condition within a context of utter contempt for, and acceptance of violence against the Black” (Dumas, 2016, p. 13).

## **A Day Late and a Dollar Short: A Discussion on Anti-Blackness**

Black scholars have been battling white supremacy for too long, investing too much energy into convincing America of anti-Black racism. We are currently experiencing a dawn of racial reckoning, but many in power are hard-pressed to admit that this country operates as an adversary to its Black citizens. Most insultingly, they will not admit that this adversarial role is groomed in the classroom, even as an EdBuild (2019) study found that nationally, nonwhite school districts receive “\$23 billion less than white districts despite serving the same number of students.” For this reason, I do not aim to convince readers of anti-Blackness’ presence in education as much as I aim —through personal observation and inquiry—to inform the reader of its *pervasiveness*. I am fully aware that many of us are not willing nor prepared to engage the monstrosity of racism, let alone the distinct intricacies of anti-Blackness, and no one has a right to demand that kind of labor from us. But while it is a colossal task, I maintain throughout this essay that our children’s lives depend upon it.

I am arguing that if we accept the U.S. as anti-Black, we might more appropriately understand, and by extension, help our students understand false narratives, problematic discourse, and the national context of effective/ineffective rhetoric. Steeped in anti-racist pedagogy, this essay explores how writing classrooms can affirm students’ autonomy while simultaneously equipping them with skills that equate to cultural capital. Anti-racist pedagogy challenges “embedded Eurocentrism” not only with *what is taught*, but also *how subjects are taught* (Kishimoto, 2018, p. 541). Implementing these kinds of strategies forces us and our students to engage our nation’s racial realities and not blindly depend upon our nation’s far-off goal of racial equality. To that extent, knowledge of anti-Blackness and strategies of anti-racism should be mandatorily integrated into teacher training.

Separated into three sections, the body of this essay opens with “Truth Be Told,” which constitutes a reflection of my own experiences in higher education, which are inextricably linked to my position as an educator. These experiences provide clarity on the omnipresence of mythological history and illustrates how these myths can be weaponized in the classroom. Beginning with my own experiences, I hope to seamlessly guide the reader into the experiences of others through “Something in the Water Ain’t Clean,” which unravels the common belief of post-racialism, as fellow women educators—white and Black—share their own experiences in the primary and secondary classroom environments. These experiences vary by race, affirming Black American’s worst fears, while also illuminating the need for anti-racist teacher training. Finally, “There is More Than One Way to Skin a Cat” offers practical strategies and exercises for

implementing anti-racist pedagogy, which supports my belief that the composition classroom is ripe for racial reckoning: in this space, young adults locate and cultivate their authorial autonomy, forming a foundation for how they will access and navigate our workplaces, our nation and ultimately, our world.

### **Truth Be Told: The Lived Experience of Anti-Blackness in Higher Education**

In the Fall of 2018, I taught a freshman composition course at a predominately white institution in the deep South. The course was themed “The Manifestation of Racism” and one student, even after choosing to remain in a course that was explicit about its content, boldly asserted, “I mean, racism almost sounds like a conspiracy theory.” I was taken aback because this kind of categorization ignores decades of research that details racism’s concrete effects. Such categorization assumes that we have no clue whether racism has an actual presence, which I find confounding. More confoundingly, this same student defended lynching, disparate drug sentencing, and even stood before the class and argued that white privilege is a myth because over 70% of NFL players are Black and the average NFL players’ salary is close to \$1 million. Never mind the plethora of fallacies contained within his logic, I was embarrassed by the silence that greeted him. I felt that I had somehow failed as an instructor because after countless readings, lectures and assignments on racism, critical thinking, analysis, and logical fallacies, *this* was his final argument, his final stance. During his absurd presentation, I couldn’t take my eyes off of him because I was afraid of what I’d see in the other students’ faces. I was terrified that I might be the only one who heard the blatant racist rhetoric being spouted, but when I finally scanned the room, his peers’ beet-red faces stared back at him in horror. Never before had a student’s mere words made me nauseous.

Over 80 percent of the student population at this Alabama university is white and many are well-off; according to *The New York Times* (2017), their families have a median income that more than doubles the national median, with 65 percent coming from the top 20 percent of income earners. When discussing raced classrooms, we are never discussing the ones made up of solely white students and educators. However, because I have the audacity to be both Black and woman, holding degrees that grant me access to privileged spaces, my presence shifts the dynamics of a classroom and suddenly, the space is raced. As Kynard (2015) emphasizes in the opening statement, for racism to work, its targets must be fully aware of its presence (p. 3). I contend that anti-Blackness is even more specific, in that its targets must be *routinely reminded* of their subordination.

In the Spring of 2019, my degree from a historically Black university was publicly questioned when pompous white male students asserted that a GED fared

better than a bachelor's degree from Alabama State University (Johnson, 2019). This was supposed to be a joke, but *my* undergraduate degree is from Alabama State University. Not only does this kind of posturing seek to humiliate Black students who matriculate from HBCU's, it seeks to identify Black peers as part of a whole, but it does so subtly, leaving room for an easy defense. Such a joke might be dismissed, because the perpetrators' Black peers are not from the targeted university, but the premise remains: Alabama State University, founded *by* Black people, *for* Black people, as part of a tradition of Black excellence, is unworthy. So regardless of intent, this kind of humor has a long history and is meant to elicit a visceral reaction.

These are the kinds of students I may/may not encounter, but the horror lies in the chance. This is what I have learned from teaching at a southern historically and predominately white university: the spaces in dire need of anti-racist pedagogy are often the most resistant and many composition classrooms face difficulties when implementing anti-racist content and/or strategies because they are greeted with firm resistance from students. My experience in Fall 2018 could have discouraged me, but my dedication to this work is strengthened by William Pinar's (1993) assertion that racism must be "confronted for the sake of functional competence" because "put simply, racism makes one stupid. The denials and distortions of memory and history it requires guarantee malignant intellectual development" (p. 66). Still, when students emanate from a school system that thrives on anti-Blackness, showing resistance to anti-racist pedagogy is par for the course.

I maintain that students' resistance to anti-racist pedagogy is embedded in their psyches during their time in K-12 institutions. These curricula misrepresent history, leaving students feeling attacked when, upon entering the college classroom, they are merely confronted with historical realities. The absence of a comprehensive national history results in flawed rhetoric in the composition classroom, a phenomenon that is exhaustively explored by William F. Pinar et al. (1995) *Understanding Curriculum as Racial Text*. Increasingly disturbing, students are trained to compartmentalize information, struggling to recognize interconnected genres like writing and history, or history and science. This is a disservice to the students, but most sinisterly, it is a disservice to this nation. In composing a college composition course designed around anti-racism—in content and approach—I found that I had to somersault between coddling non-Black students and defending my instructional choices.

This labor becomes intensified as I move through a space that is filled with ideological myths (depending on who you ask), which at any moment could verbally, but violently assault me. Consider the white male student who insisted on calling Black Americans "colored," despite being asked not to do so three times, and then insisted on calling me by my first name in formal email and

informal class time. This same student defended police brutality by arguing that Black men *are* criminals, and their deaths are not a result of inherent bias, but a result of their affinity for crime. So, while many would like to glorify our nation's current distance from historical racial aggressions, I cannot afford to overestimate the positive qualities of racial diversity as I operate within an institution that admitted its first Black student only 57 years ago.

In "The American Nightmare," Ibram X. Kendi (2020) writes that "to be Black and conscious of anti-Black racism is to stare into the mirror of your own extinction," while also acknowledging that for those of us who actively advocate against our own subjugation, anti-racism is on us, and only us: "Racist Americans deny your nightmare, deny their racism" and leave you with a feeling of bewilderment (para. 12; para. 22). The violence of such denial is that it leaves Black students bereft as they realize they are deemed un-believable, a phenomenon explored in Jacqueline Jones Royster's (1996) *When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own*. To be a diverse body *and* perform what is considered diversity work is to be implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, accused of bias.

Anti-Blackness in the ivory tower affects my labor because the academy requires that I perform my job, but to the satisfaction of students who emanate from an environment rife with racial falsities. Anti-Blackness in the ivory tower manifests when Black academics are asked to expose students to ideas that differ from their own to incite critical thinking, but that exposure comes with restrictive parameters. Language is policed and the lived experience is dismissed as theory. Black academics are Black people who live in an anti-Black context, and we take this knowledge with us into the classroom. Imagine the agony of having to stand before a white classroom with the image of George Floyd pervading the news media. Imagine discussing climate control, knowing that environmental racism is almost always absent from the conversation. Now, imagine being a Black educator from Flint, MI, and knowing that your own family is experiencing clean water challenges due to anti-Black sentimentality, and a student proposing, "but maybe it's not a race thing; maybe it's because they're just poor." *This* is my reality.

### **Something in the Water Ain't Clean: How Educators Navigate Race**

We consistently find unaware educators navigating complex classrooms that leave students uninterested and disembodied. One such example is Bree Picower's 2009 study, *The Unexamined Whiteness of Teaching*. Picower (2009) explores how white teachers simultaneously deny and enact racism on their students, and while she doesn't specifically focus on anti-Blackness, a close examination of her interviews reveals that the interviewees' racism is deeply rooted in anti-Blackness. An analysis of these interviews exposes a particular disdain for the Black students' history and contemporary experience.

The white women educators who Picower (2009) interviews range from mis-informed, to racially insensitive, and on the extreme end, outright racist. One interviewee even admitted “I’m almost being a little racist,” but nevertheless, continued shouting, “you just want to say sometimes: Get over it! Like get over it! It’s 2005, get over it! You know, move on!” (Picower, 2009, p. 201). This educator demands that her Black students “get over” what they are still experiencing: anti-Black racism. Her lack of empathy is indicative of the staying power of oppressive tactics and most distinctively, she cannot even name the thing she insists that they move on from. The verbal absence points to the sinister way that slavery and continued oppression have been wiped from white Americans’ vocabulary, even as they are tasked with educating a nation birthed from those very things. Another teacher insists she doesn’t see color because her family has always hired help and this help has always been “someone who was like African American” (Picower, 2009, p. 202). The phrasing of “someone who was like” is gut-wrenching because it is dehumanizing; why not just outright call them African American, but it is almost as if such straightforwardness would be like...dirty phrasing. Picower’s interviews grow more unsettling.

In the most damning confession, a white female teacher actually admits that she is afraid of her eight-year-old students: “I’m a small person and like I’m in a third-grade classroom and some of the boys are the same height as me. It’s intimidating” (Picower, 2009, p. 203). She doesn’t struggle to name what she is experiencing: “...that’s scary for me. [I’m scared that]...like...they would come at me” (Picower, 2009, p. 203). I am not only shocked by these admissions; I am also saddened. I have nephews who are eight. I am 5’2 and it has never occurred to me that in a fight, I’d lose against one of them. Picower (2009) frames these teachers’ defenses of whiteness most accurately when she states that “these tools are not simply passive resistance to but much more an active protection of their hegemonic stories and White supremacy” (p. 205). Maxine Hairston (1992), a powerhouse in the rhetoric and composition discipline, wrote that “as educators of goodwill, we shouldn’t even have to mention our anger about racism and sexism in our society—that’s a given” (p. 187). I daresay it is not a “given” and I’ve worked with several individuals who not only feel comfortable propagating their racist rhetoric in the classroom, but in their private lives as well. I wonder what Hairston would say of Picower’s (2009) interviewees. It is this contention that disallows my forgiveness of such ignorance. Some Americans might extend grace to these women and their mis-informed positionalities; I cannot afford such an extension because these positionalities are attached to real people who do real harm.

Black educators in the K-12 environment experience this harm firsthand. In a personal interview with a Black female educator, Sandra, she shared that her white peers’ show no interest in anti-racist pedagogy, even in an Alabama high

school named after a confederate general with an 83% Black student population: “I would say that my white counterparts are operating from a post-racial stance, for the most part. Some of them do say questionable things in their classrooms, but most of them say they don’t see color” (Williams, personal communication, March 8, 2021). This kind of denial stifles students’ cognitive flexibility; additionally, it creates a certain tension when educators avoid the thing that is most obvious about their students, for this is the thing that these students know affects their national navigation. Despite what we would like to believe, these students are aware of their “civic estrangement,” and “exclusion from the public sphere” (Dumas, 2016, p. 14).

Sandra admits that once she discusses race as it relates to pop culture, and the origins of the “N” word, the conversation gets tense, but “opens the doors. It makes the students feel comfortable and they want to know more” (Williams, 2021). She goes on to say that she doesn’t feel supported when trying to implement these strategies: “The curriculum does not address race, except for slavery. They deal with everything except race —poverty, suicide—and then skate over race. And the local board wants us to stick with the curriculum. The textbooks are inadequate, and the parents are aloof; they’re more concerned with their kids passing than they are with what they’re learning” (Williams, 2021). One might wonder how you discuss poverty by skating over race when Black Americans disproportionately experience poverty. One might find it odd that public schools discuss suicide, without also acknowledging that white men are the leading drivers of suicide deaths. The absence Sandra describes is “so stressed, so ornate, so planned” that it calls attention to itself (Morrison, 1989, p. 11). She goes on to say that even though she weaves ant-racist strategies into her teaching, she was not trained to do so.

Educators who are un-equipped to adequately deal with the complexity of race are then forced to seek resources for themselves and in counties that discourage race talk, this can be a daunting task. Sandra’s comments were echoed by another Black female educator, Barbara, who teaches kindergarten in Mississippi (Sias, personal communication, March 8, 2021):

I teach at a Title I school where about 95% of our students are Black. I try to incorporate more authors of color for exposure, but I don’t feel supported. Our administration has discussed us having a Black Vice President and that’s the only thing. In the curriculum, we discuss slavery, freedom, and now there is nothing to talk about. The administration has not even taken a look at what is going on around us. They’ve ignored social issues that directly impact the student body and the students. You know, they’re young, but they ask about stuff like George Floyd. They ask about Black Lives Matter, because they’ve seen it on the TV and I try to

explain in a sensitive way to not offend, but you know, they don't want us to talk about that stuff. (Sias, 2021)

Barbara points out how the administration at her school has commented on the positive aspects of racial diversity, without engaging the tokenizing effects of anti-Black racism. This is notable since the administration encourages discussing slavery and then freedom. Even in child-like contextual framing, students show a hunger for more information on race. Yet, there is nothing that supports Barbara in providing this framework. Notably, she must walk on eggshells in order “not to offend” but paradoxically, not to affirm her students' personhoods, which is a form of “everyday violence against Black children and their families” (Dumas, 2017, p. 17). Without a historicized and contextualized framing, Black students are left ignorant of the relationship between their family's historical and contemporary challenges.

We cannot expect educators to magically transform into anti-racist instructors, nor can we expect that white teachers *want* to be trained out of their racist imaginations. Teachers must be aggressively trained to reject falsehoods, such as those associated with Black manhood, lest they feel threatened in a classroom full of prepubescent boys. These same educators must, at minimum, be willing to acknowledge that they come from a privileged, empowered group that has perpetuated psychological warfare and state-sanctioned violence against the very beings they are paid to educate; after all, they nor their students will “leave their race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or class in a heap outside the classroom door” (Pimental, 2019, p. 112). Philip Howard (2014) asserts that many of his teacher-trainees do not seem to get this. In *Drawing Dissent*, Howard (2014) explains that these educators lack “racial literacy” and will regurgitate racial expressions without admitting to “having ingested” these racial expressions “in the first place” (p. 397). So then, how do these educators deal with their marginalized, disempowered students? If Picower's (2009) assessments are any indication, we have much to fear.

### **There is More Than One Way to Skin a Cat: Implementing Anti-Racism**

When implementing anti-racist pedagogy, I realized, through previous semesters, that I would encounter a great deal of push-back from the historically white university where I teach. Kyiko Kishimoto (2018) writes that those who practice anti-racist pedagogical practices are not only required to teach about race, but to also “teach about race and racism in a way that fosters critical analytical skills, which reveal the power relations behind racism and how race has been institutionalized in U.S. society to create and justify inequalities” (p. 541). She goes on to profess that anti-racist pedagogy is not just for the humanities: “One

way to discuss race, racism, power, privilege in any course is to provide political, historical, and economical context to the development of the discipline, rather than looking at knowledge as apolitical, ahistorical, and neutral” (p. 545). The first step Kishimoto suggests is to disclose this decision in the syllabus and very early-on in the semester, so that students can make the decision of whether they are willing or ready to engage. I vehemently believe that the composition classroom is a perfect site for engaging racism and could be immensely effective if the K-12 curriculum, at the very least, did less harm. Below, I will show a single strategy used in three different classroom formats, for three different audiences and with three different lessons.

The following strategy, “Writing-In, Talking-Back,” gives students a critical thinking exercise, coupled with critical reading and authorial authority. The first text we often explore is the forward of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) for a variety of reasons: it is rich in content, the language is specific and illustrative, and the sentence constructions vary, demonstrating rhetorical finesse. At the onset, students visualize the spatiality of the forward, acknowledging the disappearance of punctuation, then space. They assess what these rhetorical strategies mean for the text’s intended purpose. Too, they explore the rhetorical strategy of allusion, as Morrison alludes to the Dick and Jane reading series, thus calling forth historical implications. Students note the narrator’s voice and tone. As a class, we look at sentences that are purposeful fragments and we explore why one of the country’s greatest writers would commit what are largely considered grammatical errors. This posturing allows us to explore how different writing strategies have come to denote error and it allows the classroom to address the question of who has the power to decide a country’s adherence to a particular grammar. This is an introductory exercise that constitutes the “talking-back” component.

For the developmental composition classroom, we can pivot to learning about the comma rules. I grant students the freedom to lecture on these rules by providing original examples and a small exercise for their classmates to complete. This allows interactive participation in the learning processes. We can then move back to the text, focusing on the first few pages, noticing, and commenting on where Morrison’s commas are placed. We label, explain and navigate these rules within *The Bluest Eye*’s first pages, allowing students to then choose a section of the text that they will re-write: the “Writing-in” component. Students alter tone and language, making deliberate decisions like the ones we’ve acknowledged. Some students combine sections, re-arrange or summarize paragraphs, delete entire sections, and decide to take on a voice that does not mirror the original narrator. Some students adapt whimsical language, placing their story in poetic form. This lesson is not confined to Morrison’s (1970) text, as it can be done with

arguments published by popular news sources and historical documents as well. This exercise prompts students to seriously consider rhetorical choices, a form of active reading.

Now imagine that this exercise does not take place in a developmental class, but instead with a more advanced student body. Instead of segueing to comma rules, we pivot to James Baldwin's (1979) *If Black English is not a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?* followed by Vershawn Ashanti Young's (2010) *Should Writers Use Their Own Language?* After each reading, students openly discuss these readings with their writing groups, then with the class. A penultimate discussion question might be as simple as "If I could talk back to Baldwin/Young, what would I say?" The readings themselves are an interesting pairing, because Baldwin uses formal language to critique linguistic domination, thus his argument is palatable (1979). But what does it look like to *actually* accept Black English? Young's (2010) piece challenges students' —Black and white— understanding of acceptance as it relates to racial-difference. Because Young's (2010) writing is completely outside of the scholarly norm, I expected students to wrestle with their inherent beliefs about language. White students might be hesitant, but one thing that I find alleviates this hesitancy is if they are the ones tasked with leading the discussion. Peers often respond better to one another, if only because they expect their classmates to support them when it is their turn to lead the class. The most exciting thing about this kind of classroom structure, though, is that you see the vast creativity of your students and what they are able to pull from one another. Student-created activities have ranged from puzzles, to debates, to Kahoot quizzes followed by open discussions. Giving students the freedom to facilitate class sections adds a dynamic layer that also de-prioritizes you as the source of new information. It lightens the heavy load of lecturing about and against language assimilation. While I expected hesitancy and discomfort with the premise of Baldwin and Young's arguments, I did not expect for students to struggle with the next reading, Toni Cade Bambara's (1972) short story *The Lesson*.

After reading Bambara, students were asked to write the story from a minor character's point of view. They had to decide what kind of language to utilize. Most of them chose standard English and even critiqued the way the children spoke in the story. I admit that I didn't know how to handle this; we had just read and discussed this very topic and it almost felt like the lesson didn't click. However, the success in this moment must be in exposure. No educator roots out a life's worth of learning in one semester. After completing the creative writing piece based on "The Lesson," students were able to use what they had learned from Baldwin and Young to compose a reflectional writing piece that explored what they thought about Bambara's short story, their rhetorical revisions, and the reasoning behind those revisions. It doesn't necessarily matter

what the students say in this reflection; the act of writing itself provides introspection.

Previously, I had not preceded “The Lesson” assignment with Baldwin (1979) nor Young (2010), and it was a complete failure. Many white students did not understand Bambara’s (1972) language and visibly shut down when asked to empathize. One white student outright called the children’s speech ignorant. This particular student walked into my classroom, and was confronted with a language he did not understand. Additionally, he was not provided context, which would have strengthened his analysis. The failure was mine, and this failure capitalizes the importance of framing and scaffolding information. Repeating the lesson revealed that when provided the tools, students often successfully navigate authorial choices, even if they are different from their own.

Now, imagine this same “Writing-In, Talking-back” strategy being implemented in a composition classroom at an HBCU. When assessing the misogynistic nature of rap music, a group of female students chose to “write-in” and “talk back” to the songs they’d chosen as especially problematic. In a group of three, they chose to explore misogyny in rap music through a rhetorical analysis and then, each student wrote an argumentative essay from three different angles. To engage this conversation, their research had to address intersectionality, racism, anti-Blackness and Black Feminism. They worked together to compile and share resources, discuss their readings and create robust annotated bibliographies, comprehensive outlines and provocative thesis statements. They peer-reviewed each other’s work and used what they learned in a previous “Grammar Hammer” lesson to suggest edits. I assisted them, but most often, they were assigned taskers and given class time to fulfill these tasks. After researching and composing their argumentative essays, students were asked to move their topic outside of the academic realm. This particular group of young women decided to “Write-in” a proposal for local radio stations to discontinue the excessive radio-play of problematic songs. This authorial move gave them a sense of agency, even if only for a class project. As a part of their “Talking-Back” segment, the female students presented their proposal to classmates, and facilitated an open discussion with only the male students. I truly believe these students’ investment in their topic forced other groups in this class to rise to the occasion, which emphasizes the collaborative effort of establishing classroom culture.

Another group in this class completed this project using representation of the justice system in rap music as their chosen topic. To “write-in” they wrote letters to incarcerated Black men, and to “talk-back” they created their own rap song. Another group explored familial trauma and created a flyer and proposal for a parenting club to increase the visibility of Black fathers in impoverished settings. As part of their “talk-back” they held a community forum in the

classroom, asking community members to donate fictitious time and/or funds. These lessons illustrate how content is seamlessly mixed with skills: the students were able to practice analysis, research, teamwork, presentation and public speaking.

I found that all three of these settings were ripe for racial reckoning. Providing students the resources to take the wheel is effective for multiple reasons, some of which have already been shared. Students in my composition course often discuss liberal and conservative values, and by extension liberal and conservative publications, and more pointedly, liberal and conservative rhetoric. They are asked to create thesis statements through these two lenses. They are asked to compose comparative rhetorical analyses using sources from two different ends of the political spectrum. I consistently emphasize that we are less interested in content than we are in the structure of the argument, the language choices, the implied audience, thus prioritizing rhetorical strategies, which is difficult for students. However, by giving them the opportunity to “talk-back” in reflections of their own writing, we alleviate some angst. There will be mishaps, as outlined at the beginning of this essay, but the beauty is that most students are fully equipped to handle difficult situations and just as they are capable of wrestling with uncomfortable complexities, they are awaiting the challenge.

### **If You Can’t Stand the Heat, Get out of The Kitchen: Teaching Is Political**

In composition classrooms across the nation, we expect students to find their unique voice, tell their unique story. This becomes increasingly problematic when they’ve been trained to deal in black and white and disengage grey areas. This becomes increasingly problematic when they’ve been trained by educators who are mis-informed at best and racist at worst. This becomes *excessively* problematic when our Black students have been repetitively asked to alter themselves so that they are palatable in academia. This kind of instruction disenfranchises marginalized students and supports a hegemonic system that privileges whiteness in a society that claims it wants to move past race and the tensions that arise from that very present thing.

We, composition instructors, want students to engage deeply with topics so that their writing is multi-layered, robust, intuitive, but at the same time, some of us don’t want to get into politics nor race relations, religion nor sexuality, ideology nor history. This is counterintuitive. All rhetorical situations are based on the full range of who we are; discourse is based on how we think, what we believe, the spaces where we are groomed and those we are drawn toward. If we are not willing to see our students and their variety of experiences, we have no business in the classroom.

Students and educators *should* be investigating power structures and exploring their own positionalities in relation to their local, national and global communities. This work demands a heightened level of patience and the kind of self-actualization that bell hooks (1994) mentions in *Teaching to Transgress*. She warns that “if professors are wounded, damaged individuals, people who are not self-actualized, then they will seek asylum in the academy rather than seek to make the academy a place of challenge, dialectical interchange, and growth” (hooks, 1994, p. 165). This work is intimate. For me, this means coming to terms with my Blackness, my woman-ness, and my experience in the country I inhabit. Un-tangling the web of the mythical national imagination should not fall on me and only me. The call for anti-racist pedagogy in teacher training and anti-racist strategies in the K-12 classroom cannot fall on deaf ears. Those of us doing this lonely and isolating work are exhausted. *We need help.*

### **Notes On The Contributor**

After completing the National Child Defense Fund's Child Defender Fellowship, **Sharanna B. Brown** created Read&Reign, a community literacy outreach program that targets elementary schools in under-resourced areas. Born in Flint, Michigan, she holds a bachelor's degree in communications from Alabama State University and a master's degree in English: Creative Writing from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Brown is a doctoral student, studying African American literature at Auburn University and currently works as a curriculum developer with Montgomery's Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC).

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