

## Introduction: Why Anti-Racist Activism? Why Now?

Vershawn Ashanti Young, University of Kentucky, and Frankie Condon, University of Waterloo

This special issue of *Across the Disciplines* on the theme "Anti-Racist Activism: Teaching Rhetoric and Writing" came about in the midst of and, in some ways, as a result of, a contradictory and still circulating rhetorical phenomena: the widely circulated pronouncements of the death of racism that surrounded and followed the historic campaign and election of the first U.S. president of African descent. These pronouncements were and are still uttered by two different constituencies, who, interestingly enough, rarely agree. We read and hear sentiments expressed by perhaps too-hopeful liberals, acquiescing to a hype that racism is only a problem for those who unreasonably perceive themselves to be victims of a time long gone. The other group might be called the staunch conservatives (and these are definitely not limited to political categories)—the Rush Limbaugh types—who attempt to de-trope race, to unlink remarks, policies, perceptions, and practices, clearly designed to stigmatize, berate, and oppress people of color from the perpetuating legacies of white privilege. For both groups, President Barack Obama is a poster child, because as Senator Harry Reid (D-Nevada) put it once, he is read by many as a non-threatening "light-skinned African American with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one" (Cillizza). Thus he can be black enough to represent the liberal agenda for minorities to reach the upper echelon of politics and American society, but not black enough to stoke the prejudices that conservatives hold against black cultural forms of speech and behavior. The only racial barrier might be the look of his skin, but as Reid intimates, even that's light enough not to offend.

However, serious students and teachers of race and rhetoric do not so easily compromise, are not so easily positioned into camps or persuaded to hold perceptions simply because they are popular. They do not, we think, in the wake of "post-race" rhetoric, separate the rash of effigies and slurs against Obama that still appear on college campuses from political rants like the one Limbaugh spewed just days after the 2009 inauguration, saying in one moment that "a lot of people right now... they're absorbed in the historical nature of this, first black president and so forth." "That is wonderful." And in the very next moment says, "we are being told that we have to hope he succeeds, that we have to bend over, grab the ankles, bend over forward, backward, whichever, because his father was black, because this is the first black president."

No, this commentary cannot be separated from the rise of the blatantly racist rhetoric by even self-described non-racists, like the recent Facebook post by Denise Helms, a 22 year-old white female in Turlock, CA. Helms was fired from a Cold Stone Creamery ice cream store when she wrote the night after the 2012 presidential election: "And another four years of the n\*\*\*\*\* ....maybe he will get assassinated this term..!!" (Bennett-Smith). During a news interview, Helms reflects on her post, saying, "The assassination part is kind of harsh....I'm not saying I'd go do that or anything like that, by any means, but if it was to happen I don't think I'd care one bit." What may be even more stunning

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than Helms' recalcitrance, however, is her claim that neither she nor her FB post is racist ("Denise Helms").

Now, these are just a few examples, a drop in the proverbial bucket, to illustrate the necessity of a continued public discourse on race and racism. Our specific claim in this regard is that we, i.e., those interested in a just and egalitarian society, need to renew our commitment to intelligently and publicly deliberate race and to counteract the effects of racism. But should this work only take place in the wider public? What about examining race and engaging anti-racist activism on college campuses, in classrooms, sites that are of particular interest to readers of *ATD*? To provide our response to this question, we'll use two more examples that inform this special issue, two that are directly from our experiences and are also about college students.

After the catastrophic tsunami hit Japan in 2011, Alexandra Wallace, who was reported at the time to be a third-year political science major at UCLA, criticized Asian students and their families for their non-"American manners" in an online video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7B8xKVHP0lc&feature=fvwrel>). She says there are "old Asian people running around this apartment complex every weekend. That's what they do—they don't teach their kids to fend for themselves" (Wallace, 2011). This, observation, she says,

[B]rings me to my next point. Hi. In America, we do not talk on our cell phones in the library! I swear, every five minutes I will be OK, not five minutes, say like, 15 minutes I'll be like deep into my studying, into my political-science theories and arguments and all that stuff, getting it all down, like typing away furiously, blah blah blah... and then all of a sudden, when I'm about to like, reach an epiphany—over here from somewhere, "OHHH! CHING CHONG LING LONG TING TONG? OHHH!" (Wallace, 2011)

Wallace herself believes the calls were made by students to their friends and families impacted by the disaster. Yet this possibility did not temper her tirade against "Asians" as a whole, who were, in her account, undifferentiated by geography, nationality, culture, or language. There were numerous rejoinders, counter criticisms and parodies of Wallace. However one response stands out in particular: a YouTube video posted by the chancellor, Gene Block, stating his disappointment in Wallace and her claim that she represented the perspective of UCLA (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6feGp0GQVJ8>).

Co-editor Vershawn Young used Wallace's video and that of Chancellor Block in a lecture to illustrate how to analyze the rhetoric of a digital media controversy. He was approached after class by one of his two African American students, both females. She said that showing the videos were a waste of class time and that race was not an appropriate topic for a rhetoric class. Because of his previous experiences discussing race, even in classes such as African American literature and African American studies, Vershawn has backed off from discussing race in general education courses. That was the case in this freshman writing class, where these videos were the only instance where race was discussed, and this time in a unit designed to examine controversies in digital media. As a result of this and sundry experiences, Vershawn often wonders what makes students, even students of color, so skittish about analyzing race. What makes students believe that race is something that resides outside of college? If even in ethnic studies classes some students are race shy, then in what classes and in what forms should race be considered in curricula? And what would be the result if there were no discussions of race at all? Would the campus be more peaceful? Would racism die? On the other hand, what might happen if more colleagues engaged rigorous examinations of racial politics? Would race raise from taboo to understanding, to increased racial consciousness?

Like Vershawn, co-editor Frankie Condon too struggles to create openings for and a willingness among her students to take up the matters of race and racism in course readings and class discussion. While Frankie's students seem to understand, in the abstract, race as a social construct, many continue to struggle against the possibility that racism continues to exert material impact in the lives of peoples of color. Others struggle with the problem of accountability—are quite willing to attribute racism to individuals, but resist recognition of the ways and degrees to which systems and institutions they have been taught are self-evidently good and from which they benefit may be organized to perpetuate racist racial projects.

Most recently, Frankie has worked with students in her writing center theory and practice course to recognize whitely epistemologies and rhetorics both in their own literacy narratives and in the stories of literacy and learning underlying scholarly accounts of the work of writing centers. While this approach seems to have the advantage of helping students to distinguish between essentialized notions of racial identity and learned ways of thinking, doing, performing the self in the world, Frankie notes the slowness of the work, the occasional but notable refusals of some students to engage with readings on race and racism, and the small but consistent number of students who continue to assert that any conversation about race and racism is a conversation animated by "reverse-racism."

And so it is, that despite widely circulated pronouncements of racism's end, politicians and citizens, yes students and persons of the general public, continue to engage in racist rants, deny the structural and cultural impact of racism in institutions or appeal to race as a means of galvanizing their (predominantly white) bases. What's more, our students and the public's perceptions unfortunately support legislation across the States to both limit the ability of teachers and students to study the history of race and racism in the U.S. and also to curtail the cultural and scholarly production of artists and intellectuals of color. Further, teachers of color, particularly those most expert and experienced in teaching English as a Second Language, and who speak and write World Englishes are being publicly castigated and exiled from their classrooms. This is certainly connected to the fact that racist logics and rhetorics are morphing rapidly such that explicit racism in public discourse is not only frequently overlooked but also rationalized and legitimated, and implicit (coded) racism continues unabated.

In view of the foregoing, as co-editors of this special issue of *ATD*, we perceive a pressing need to continue and deepen a critical dialogue about race matters, particularly in classrooms that take up the pedagogical aims of synthesis, analysis, argumentation, persuasion and presentation, in short, the teaching of rhetoric and writing. To this end, we have invited other artists and teachers, intellectuals and scholars from two broad sites where writing takes place— from the disciplines, e.g., critical pedagogy, English studies, gender studies, performance studies, writing center studies, writing in the disciplines, and teacher development—and from the public, e.g., performance troupes, after school programs, and literacy centers—to join us in keeping the dialogue alive.

When we first made our call, we were particularly interested in submissions that are richly informed by activist epistemologies, by which we do not only mean going door to door or canvassing, but also scholarly and teacherly activism that bring about critical thinking, which can often take the shape of critical autoethnography, performance ethnography, models of anti-bias organizing, critical race theory, and theories of intersectionality (race, class, gender, sexuality).

We were also interested in co-authored essays that explore connections between the academy and community, across disciplines, and among those who occupy different institutional roles or positions. And since *ATD* is an online journal, we also encouraged submissions that might perform the argument in ways beyond the traditional academic essay, perhaps employing images, video, or taking

the form of a website. The contributors to this volume did not disappoint. The works in this issue are as eclectic as they are informative.

In "Reframing Race in Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum," Mya Poe offers approaches to integrating reflective and critical dialogue about race and racism in work with faculty, graduate students, and administrators across the disciplines. Poe offers a frame for faculty across the disciplines to enter the conversation about antiracism broadly as well as about antiracist pedagogy. The co-authors of "Going There" demonstrate the ways in which pedagogical engagements with those conversations unfold in and through writing centers. Moira Ozias, Phil Zhang, J Quaynor, Jessie St. Amand, Talisha Haltiwanger, Evan Chambers, and Geneva Canino explore the ways that stories of writing center work are both illuminated by race theories emergent in writing center and composition studies and trouble or complicate those theories in practice.

In her essay, "Critical Race Theory Counterstory as Allegory," Aja Martinez demonstrates the power of allegory—a trope common in critical race theory—to make systemic and institutional racism visible and, thus accessible to critique and intervention. The story of Dr. Rosette Benitez in Martinez' essay surfaces both the underlying racial logics of the assault on ethnic studies in states like Arizona, but also the long-term consequences of suppressing the histories, cultures, and cultural production of peoples of color in the U.S. Co-authors Dae-Joong Kim and Bobbi Olson show how global and local concerns or debates about race can be constructively deployed in the classroom. In their essay, "Deconstructing Whiteness in the Globalized Classroom," co-authors Dae-Joong Kim and Bobbi Olson trace the movement of raced-white rhetorics among, between, and across student/teacher identities that instantiate or resist national, cultural, and linguistic difference in the writing classroom. Finally, co-authors Rasha Diab, Neil Simpkins, Thomas Ferrell, and Beth Godbee examine the possibilities and limits of narrative in the work of antiracism. Collectively, they explore the intersections between and interdependence of personal, interpersonal, and institutional domains in service of actionable commitments to antiracist activism. Diab, Simpkins, Ferrell, and Godbee challenge faculty committed to the work of antiracism to make those commitments meaningful by recognizing the interrelatedness of their work across multiple domains and in partnership with others.

This robust issue is heartening in these critical times where the assault against anti-racist activism and curricula that address race in the U.S is high. But the authors presented here prove there is still a broad constituency committed to such activism and education. And like us, they also continue to see the importance of rhetoric and writing to these efforts. As the co-editors, then, our biggest wish for this issue is for it to reach those of like mind, to encourage and buoy their resolve, and to spur others to join the band.

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## Contact Information

Vershawn Ashanti Young  
University of Kentucky  
1249 Patterson Office Tower  
Lexington, KY 40506  
Email: [vershawn.young@uky.edu](mailto:vershawn.young@uky.edu)  
Phone: (859) 257-1271

Frankie Condon  
Department of English Language and Literature  
University of Waterloo  
200 University Ave W.  
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada  
Email: [fcondon@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:fcondon@uwaterloo.ca)

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