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Programmatic Efforts to Redress Anti-Blackness in Technical and Professional Writing

Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Ph.D.
West Virginia University

TEACHING WRITING NOW: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

Social Justice Matters in Technical and Professional Writing

Delivered Monday, February 22, 2021, from 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm.

The worldwide Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, following the unjust, state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery, amongst too many others, appeared to mark a turning point for many academic institutions in terms of attitudes toward anti-racism and anti-Black violence of all kinds. This is certainly not to say that racism and white supremacy in the academy were resolved by any means. Rather, it was as if anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, which had long been denied by many in the academy and beyond, became indisputable. People generally seemed more willing to listen. And although this sea change appeared following the events above, this moment was truly only

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possible because of centuries of collective efforts, primarily by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) organizers and intellectuals who have done the important work of articulating racism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy; raising consciousness; and organizing for equity and improved material conditions for BIPOC and other minoritized communities.

These efforts have brought on changing conditions and responsibilities, not only for students and faculty but also for many administrators in higher education, who are now more than ever rightfully called upon to address anti-Blackness and dismantle white supremacy within their organizations. Gone are the days when administrators could very easily deny, silence, and shroud over racism in our organizations and programs—or so some of us hope. Instead, administrators are increasingly called to take action when we are found to employ self-proclaimed white supremacists and faculty who enact racism in various ways. Administrators are also called upon to respond to curricula that center Eurowestern perspectives as well as the inability to recruit and retain faculty of color, even as there are some existing faculty who are resistant to such efforts in their units. How should administrators respond to and negotiate the varied perspectives and viewpoints—not just about whether racism is a fact of our contemporary lives, but also how precisely to address these problems—held by those within their unit?

This essay attempts to work through these questions and others as it reflects on and discusses some programmatic efforts to redress anti-Blackness in an undergraduate technical and professional writing program housed at a predominantly white research-intensive institution in the mid-Atlantic South, from my perspective as a non-Black, Asian American, woman of color and director of that program. Moreover, although I focus primarily on programmatic action, I insist that many of the ideas I describe in this essay can and arguably should be applied to our work with students. Specifically, we need to teach students to think critically about the institutions in which they are enrolled and work, as well as of the agency they do wield as stakeholders within those institutions. My experience as the Director of a Professional and Technical Writing program, a program that relies heavily on full-time, non-tenure-track instructors in a predominantly white institution, has taught me that administrative support is critical for encouraging large-scale considerations of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom.

Going back to the context of summer 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests resurged across the globe, the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) President, Angela Haas, issued a call to action for non-Black members, in particular, to take steps to redress anti-Blackness within our spheres of influence. Moreover, Haas

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(2020) asked that we “confront our complicity in anti-Blackness and how we have personally benefitted from the institutions and systems that uphold white supremacy and then assess how we can use our personal agency and privilege to make anti-racist change.” As an Asian American woman in technical communication, I understood Haas was speaking to me and others like me. I was led to think about the ways in which I have been complicit in anti-Blackness and how I have “personally benefitted from the institutions and systems that uphold white supremacy.” I recalled how I had taught professional writing courses using the ostensibly value-/culture-neutral language of “clarity” and “appropriateness,” without always and persistently asking: Clear to whom? Appropriate in what context? As an Asian American woman, I am often read as non-threatening, as a “safe” minority, and thus welcome into professional white spaces—usually until I open my mouth about racism and inequality, after which I’m treated with resentment or as a threat. I considered how I had adopted dominant U.S. standards of “professional” dress and appearance, and I know that doing so has enabled my access into various academic whitespaces. I realize that because I am read through the myth of the “model minority,” I am presumed to have certain capacities, especially in terms of technical ability and work ethic, while I am also presumed to lack what some view as true insight or depth. I also understand that as a so-called “model minority,” I am presumed to come from a middle-class, educated family that emphasized the importance of education and “not rocking the boat.” I know that what my actual background and upbringing was like is erased and replaced with that stock image. Moreover, as a newly tenured faculty in my first year as Director of the Professional and Technical Writing program at my institution, I understood that Haas was calling on me to consider how I could use my “personal agency and privilege to make anti-racist change.”

As I’ve moved through the ranks of academia, I’ve found that those transitional moments shifting from graduate student to tenure track and pre-tenure to tenured and administrative positions were all key lessons in the affective imprints of systematized power. It took time and processing for me to understand that I now possessed certain capacities and privileges to enact changes that would have been much more challenging if not impossible before. It took even more time to internalize those understandings in an embodied sense. I was used to being the person critiquing administration and agitating upward. It took more than a minute to realize and feel in my body that I was now one of those administrators I’d been critiquing, with greater authority than I’d had previously, and that I should be looking to myself, at least in part, when engaging in institutional critique because I now had a greater capacity to enact change in the direction of racial justice and equity.

That same summer, ATTW Vice President Natasha N. Jones and ATTW Fellow Miriam F. Williams (2020) issued a statement wherein they called for the “just use of imagination” that “supports the deconstruction and abolishment of oppressive practices, systems, and institutions.” They explain that “a just use of imagination is not destructive, even as it seeks to dismantle, because using imagination in this way also calls for the replacement of oppressive practices with systems that are founded on equality, access, and opportunity.” In addition, they state, “The just use of imagination is not just conceptual. It must be enacted.” This call challenged me to think more expansively and creatively about what it means to re/vision a piece of an institution that is disproportionately white and that implicates many different stakeholders with sometimes divergent interests and concerns. In addition, with the backing of the national ATTW, these important calls within our profession supported my efforts to engage in a “just use of imagination” locally within my own program.

At the time, I had just completed my first year as the Director of the Professional and Technical Writing undergraduate program at my university. As a tenured Asian American woman in a position of administrative authority, I was compelled by these two statements to think about what I could do to make lasting, material change in the direction of redressing anti-Blackness and white supremacy. What would make the most sense in the context of my specific program? I noticed how many academic programs, including my own department, released statements affirming that Black lives matter. Although I personally do believe there is value to such statements, I recognize that they are not ends in and of themselves. That is, such statements do contribute to the culture and climate of an organization. It’s the difference between an administrator who openly acknowledges that racism exists versus one who prefers not to say it aloud. In the former situation, employees and students of color are validated rather than gaslit, and their realities denied. But of course, not gaslighting Black folks is not nearly enough. In addition, I had heard critiques of such statements when not accompanied by more direct action, and I wondered what the most effective approach would be. I decided to start a working group to address anti-Blackness within our program. I will share with you what we did and why and how we did it, not to present it as exemplary or to say that this is what others should do, but rather to participate in a conversation about how we might make anti-racist, institutional change in ways that make sense for our respective contexts.

To form the working group, I emailed the faculty and GTA (graduate teaching assistant) listserv for the Professional and Technical Writing program and invited all who were interested in doing so to join me to address anti-Black racism in our program. I believed it was important that the membership of the working group was

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entirely voluntary. I was not interested in this space being used to “debate” with people who had lukewarm feelings about the injustice of anti-Blackness and white supremacy—for me, there is a time and place for such conversations, but this was not it. I also understood it as a way of communicating to the program that everyone who wants to be a part of this effort is capable of—and responsible for—taking actions to redress anti-Blackness and white supremacy. I especially wanted to support those with the desire to engage in racial justice but who perhaps didn’t know what to do. Yet, I was not about to require anyone to do unpaid work, keeping in mind that our program was composed of many non-tenure track faculty who are not compensated for doing service. I included a description of the working group’s purpose, which was to collectively strategize and take concrete actions to redress anti-Blackness within the Professional and Technical Writing program, whether in relation to curriculum, pedagogy, recruitment, or any other domain. I also shared Dr. Haas’ call along with Cecilia Shelton’s recent *TCQ* article, “Shifting Out of Neutral’: Centering Difference, Bias, and Social Justice in a Business Writing Course” (2020) to provide some context for the formation of the group. After hearing from several people who were interested in participating, we set up a meeting that took place on Zoom on Thursday, June 11, 2020.

To discourage performative allyship while also being open to genuine collaboration and also to respect people’s time, I prepared a flexible agenda with prompts for discussion. After introducing ourselves to one another and discussing guidelines for how the group would function, we got straight to work as we engaged in three steps: 1) problem identification; 2) cluster formation; and 3) working in clusters to determine outcomes, roles, and methods to be implemented. For step one, problem identification, we endeavored to understand the problem of anti-Blackness and white supremacy in the Professional and Technical Writing program. We focused on our program in particular not because it is more problematic than other units within the university but rather because we felt that this was the place where we were best positioned to enact anti-racist change. But first, because anti-Blackness and white supremacy can—and often is—interpreted in different ways and manifests in numerous ways, we discussed the terms and their applications to higher education and professional and technical writing. I had prepared some research on terminology and anti-Blackness in higher education that I shared with the group. I mention this because sometimes I get the sense that, because of the courses I teach, people at times assume that I arrive already prepared to do this kind of work, that I’ve internalized and memorized terminologies, theories, and histories, including the relationship between anti-Blackness and higher ed, and that I am recalling ideas based on my specialization.

This can sometimes translate to white folks seeing *themselves* as ill-prepared to do anti-racist work, because they didn't come in trained and already aware of these things. In actuality, I took the time to do research to prepare for the meeting while also making an effort to be reflexive of my own positionality and privileges. So, if you can do research, and if you are willing to learn, you can (and should) engage in anti-racist action. At the same time, non-Black folks in particular need to do so with a sense of humility—an understanding that we do not and will not ever fully understand anti-Blackness. Yet, we need to be open to learning and listening anyway because the goal is not to achieve expertise, but to participate in ongoing efforts to redress anti-Blackness and dismantle systemic racism.

In my research, I consulted existing explications of anti-Blackness, particularly by Black thinkers. What I found was kihana miraya ross' (2020) description of anti-Blackness as “a theoretical framework that illuminates society's inability to recognize [the] humanity [of Black folks]— the disdain, disregard and disgust for [their] existence.” In other words, it is not limited to consciously hating Black people. Rather, anti-Blackness is a “fundamental component of the identity of this nation,” and ross (2020) also says that anti-Blackness is “endemic to and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life.” That is, anti-Blackness is not an exception; it is a ubiquitous element grounding current U.S. sociopolitical system and thus an always present lens through which we *all* interpret our social, economic, historical, and cultural realities, even as some of us endeavor to resist and reform it.

In the context of higher education, Dancy, Edwards, and Davis' “Historically White Universities and Plantation Politics: Anti-Blackness and Higher Education in the Black Lives Matter Era” (2018) outlines how, in alignment with ross' articulation of anti-Blackness, “Public education...is predicated on anti-Blackness. Public education funding is a direct model of plantation politics. The maintenance of a public education system dependent on property taxes institutionalizes a social arrangement of dispossession. It also serves as an anti-Black filter for higher education” (p. 187). In addition, they describe several ways that anti-Blackness manifests in higher education, where Black perspectives are othered—in theory, research, curriculum, etc.; Black faculty are often mistaken for students, janitorial or other staff, etc.; and Black faculty are often dismissed as “diversity hires.” In other words, “For a Black [person] to exist within higher education as a thinking being is oxymoronic in the white psyche” (p. 184). Dancy, Edwards, and Davis also describe an extractive relationship between universities and Black communities, where “Black male bodies on college campuses are seen as primarily generators of income and properties of entertainment” (p. 184).

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In addition, “Microaggressions, tokenism, impostorship, and racial battle fatigue attest to the psychological torment regularly visited upon Black humanity in higher education” (p. 188). Within our own university, I’ve witnessed many of these things. To provide one modest example, I think of how as of summer 2020, out of the 213 buildings on our campus, only two are named after Black folks—the first, Peddrew-Yates, is named after the first Black student to enroll and the first Black student to graduate from Virginia Tech. The second was re-named very recently in 2019, after the Fraction family, who were among the 200–250 enslaved people at the plantation that existed on the land the university currently occupies. In these ways, anti-Blackness is structured into the very buildings and physical campus of the university.

Now, what is white supremacy, particularly as it concerns academic institutions? It’s the idea of white superiority, as upheld by social systems such as policing, governance, religion, parenting, insurance, and education. As Charles Mills (2014) wrote in *The Racial Contract*, “White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.” As Rivkin and Ryan (2017) explain, historically, the very “cultural category of whiteness came into being as a response to the presence of feared ethnic others such as African Americans in the United States” (p. 1104), and thus as a gatekeeping mechanism restricting BIPOC people from resources and power in the U.S. Mills (2011) explained the ubiquity and influence of white supremacy in “White Supremacy and Racial Justice, Here and Now,” observing that “white racial domination—white supremacy—has been central to U.S. history” (p. 326) and that it operates through “at least six dimensions: economic, juridico-political, somatic, cultural, cognitive-evaluative, and ‘ontological’” (p. 329). In other words, it is “a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties” (Mills, 2014, pp.1, 3). Moreover, white supremacy works as it “denies subpersons not merely moral and cognitive but also aesthetic parity” (Mills, 2014, p. 120). It is taken for granted; “it is the background against which other systems, which we *are* to see as political, are highlighted” (Mills, 2014, 2), and thus assumed to be neutral. Likewise, as George Lipsitz (2006) explains, “Whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (p. 1). It is treated as the standard for all measures of value, and it is thus equated with humanity. It is informed by negative conceptions of Blackness. This relates to issues within technical and professional communication that treat standardized white American professional discourse as “neutral” and the goal for “good” writing. Moreover, such perceptions of this style of writing are contingent on negative

conceptions of Black language and culture as purportedly “unprofessional.” To use the term “white supremacy,” then, is to upend it by visibilizing asymmetrical power relations on the basis of race by making whiteness visible and thus not-neutral (Mills, 2003).

White supremacy that is considered by and large socially unacceptable for most people would include hate crimes, Blackface, the N-word and other racial slurs. Covert white supremacy, which is by and large considered socially acceptable for most people, include white silence, Eurocentric curricula, the white savior complex, respectability politics, tone policing, paternalism, hiring discrimination, bootstrap theory, “rugged individualism,” prioritizing white voices as experts, tokenism, English-only initiatives, considering AAVE “uneducated” or “unprofessional,” and Eurocentric beauty or design standards. I share these examples to further show the scope and scale of the problem and the extent to which it is naturalized for many people. White supremacy is obviously not a simple problem with a simple solution, and there are many domains of program administration where I believe anti-Blackness and white supremacy need to be redressed, including curriculum, pedagogy, assessment practices, recruitment, marketing, and professional development and programming.

To visibilize whiteness and thus to address a few of the ways in which white supremacy is infused through our own program, I came to the meeting having done research on our Professional and Technical Writing program enrollments and having looked at our student demographics to see who’s missing or numerically underrepresented. Although quantitative measures are limited and often used to cover over qualitative forms of systemic racism, it is also one important measure and starting point for addressing the most basic element of inclusion. As of June 2020, only three of our 156 majors identified as Black students. Four identified as mixed race where Black was one of the options selected. Ten identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 15 as Asian, none as Native American or Hawaiian, and 12 as other mixed race. One hundred twelve or 71% of majors identified as white. When compared to the student demographics at our university more generally, our program is whiter than the university at large, which at the time was 65% white. I also gathered data regarding our faculty demographics. As many of us may have experienced, it is not uncommon for even minority-majority institutions to employ faculty who are predominantly white. Based on an unofficial estimate, as of Fall 2020, we had ten full-time tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty teaching in our major. Eight were white, and two were Asian. We can see here that our faculty codes as even whiter than our student body (80%). Again, this pattern is not at all uncommon in many higher education settings.

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After discussing this context and coming to a better understanding of the problem we had come together to address, we began to talk about what we, a working group of thirteen dedicated faculty and graduate students, could do to address anti-Blackness and white supremacy in our program. We moved into step two, cluster formation, as we formed four smaller groups based on our own priorities and individual interests: one on pedagogy, one on mentoring, one on recruitment, and one on programmatic culture. In other words, what guided these areas of focus was not their efficacy or the level of importance per se, but rather the interests and concerns of working group members. I believe it important to be responsive to the interests of the group because anti-racist institutional transformation is expansive, long-term, ongoing work that requires collective action, and because I believe that when people are able to contribute to the direction of the work they are doing, that builds their investment in that work. In addition, I believe when people are interested and invested in the work they are doing, they will do their best, most creative work, in part because they may feel most equipped to do that work. The work needed to be manageable given all of our other responsibilities that were not lessened or rerouted as a result of our efforts on this working group.

As a collective, we had conversations about how we wanted to work—whether there would be any kind of structure within the group. We wanted to keep things egalitarian where all members' voices are valued. At the same time, I expressed that it is important to bear in mind that *not* assigning roles too often results in ambiguity and additional invisible labor, usually for those who are already minoritized. So, within each cluster, there was at least one person who agreed to manage the work of the cluster, i.e., call meetings, do any necessary agenda setting, and report back in larger group meetings, etc. In addition, the working group became a way to diffuse and infuse throughout the program conversations about anti-Blackness and white supremacy. The working group became a way of building up conversations and momentum locally in the service of anti-racist institutional change.

Some considerations for those who might be interested in doing something similar at their own institution: I believe it is helpful to think about challenges that might be anticipated while doing this work, including any kind of resistance from faculty or students. This is not to say that if there is resistance, don't do it, but more that it helps to be prepared to address any challenges that might arise. In addition, what resources are needed, and do we have access to those resources? Will we need to look to other parts of the department or university for those resources? There are almost always other people and units within the larger institution who are working toward similar efforts, and it is important to consider how we might work together.

How do we work with sustainable anti-racist institutional transformation in mind? I think the events of summer 2020 inspired in many of us an especially strong sense of urgency to do antiracist work. It felt like the timing was right and substantial change might be possible. But as the discussion of anti-Blackness and white supremacy shows, anti-racist institutional transformation is a long game, to borrow the words of Dr. Adam Banks, and trying to do it all in one summer is a sure recipe for burnout.

For this reason, we decided that each cluster would work to identify and carry out *one* thing that they would accomplish that summer. The pedagogy cluster worked on a statement and anti-racist teaching workshop series; the mentoring cluster worked on a guide to best practices for mentoring; the recruitment cluster worked to gather information about recruitment practices in the university and what was possible for our program, given that we are one among three undergraduate programs within our department, and with the university's branding guidelines in mind; and the programmatic culture cluster decided to work on a bibliography of works by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color scholars in technical and professional communication. In addition, as a group, we agreed that it would be great to have some guest speakers visit with our program, and we brainstormed names of who we might invite. This made a lot of sense for our local context given that non-tenure track faculty have long requested professional development opportunities in the program. Below I describe two of these efforts that are currently publicly available.

[The Bibliography of Works by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in Technical and Professional Communication](#) is available online on a Google Doc. The goals of the bibliography were to affect program culture by supporting teachers who want to attend to citation politics as they build syllabi and by serving as a resource for researchers who want to attend to citation politics in their research and writing. For these reasons, we decided to organize the bibliography around themes. Again, for non-tenure-track faculty who are already tasked with so much, programmatic support is absolutely necessary to provide teachers with the tools they need to draw on concepts and ideas in ways that make the most sense to them and their pedagogy. The bibliography also amplifies BIPOC perspectives and voices in the field more generally, and I can say that I myself used the bibliography when designing my technical communication grad course in the Fall.

Second, we organized a virtual panel on Black Technical and Professional Communication that fall, featuring Kimberly Harper, Constance Haywood, Natasha Jones, Temptuous Mckoy, Donnie Johnson Sackey, Cecilia Shelton, and Ja'La Wourman, members of the CCCC Black Technical and Professional Writing Task Force created under the leadership of CCCC Chair Vershawn Ashanti Young. The

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goals of the event were to affect program culture, recruitment, and pedagogy by serving as a professional development opportunity for teachers in the program, highlighting emerging scholarship that presents new ways of thinking about research, teaching, and service in technical communication. The panelists spoke about topics such as Black UX design, Black entrepreneurship, Black rhetorics of health communication, Black activists as technical communicators, Black experience and expertise in regulatory, policy, and legal communication, Black research methodologies, methods, and ethics, and Black TPC as community. As a result, the panel amplifies important perspectives and voices in the field that we should all be listening to. There was a huge turnout for this event, with more than 300 unique participants attending the virtual panel, and I received several messages from people who expressed how much they enjoyed and learned from the panelists.

A few considerations for planning an event like this: first, it is important to compensate Black scholars for their labor and for the intellectual contributions we are asking them to make for our institutions. I initially had a budget of \$1500 to spend on this event, which, when divided among the seven panelists, came down to a little over \$200 per panelist; however, my colleague Dr. Sheila Carter-Tod brilliantly suggested that I try to get sponsorship from other units within the university including the Center for Communicating Science and the Engineering Communications Program. So that's what I did. I reached out to some ten units on campus and almost all of them agreed to provide support including funding to go toward the speakers' honoraria. Aside from making connections amplifying this work within our university, we were able to increase the speakers' honoraria so that they would each receive \$1150. What Carter-Tod taught me was that yes, we are often constrained by limited budgets, but it is important to think of creative ways to supplement those budgets.

As a way of continuing to build a momentum around these conversations and a community of anti-racist practitioners in our program, I invited participation among working group members, as well as others who might be interested in this work, to help moderate the panel and livetweet the event. This also became a way of providing professional development opportunities for graduate students. And to enhance accessibility for this event, we ordered live captioning services, recruited live tweeters, and made public the video and transcript for the talk, which is now available on our open institutional repository, [VTechWorks](#).

Angela Haas (2020) asked in her call to action that we “REPORT out [our] tangible anti-racist actions...not to seek affirmation, [but] rather to participate in anti-racist skill sharing...to inform and drive more productive action.” So, I'm going to share some challenges that we encountered while engaging in these efforts. One of

the biggest challenges was that the working group was composed of volunteers who were primarily people in precarious positions within our university, including graduate students and pre-tenure and non-tenure-track faculty. Among the 13 people who volunteered for the working group, only one other person and I were tenured faculty—however, it is perhaps worth noting that we are the only two tenured professors active within the program—and the other person ended up needing to step back due to other demands at the time. This makeup for the group became a problem because of legitimate administrative concerns about service during the pandemic, and, in my humble opinion, less legitimate concerns about “duplicated efforts” within the department, as opposed to what should be the given that *all* units should be working to address anti-Blackness and white supremacy. What do we do when those who are seemingly most invested in and able to make anti-racist institutional transformation are in positions where such work is not valued? How do we negotiate the desire to respect each individual’s agency while not overloading or disadvantaging those who are already in precarious positions?

Finally, a couple of pedagogical implications. Although I’ve focused on programmatic actions, I believe what I’ve shared does have pedagogical implications. First, institutional structures affect who is in our classes and what happens in our classes, and I believe that these two deliverables—the bibliography and the recording of the Black TPC event—are useful resources for teachers. In addition, I believe that a similar approach toward anti-racist institutional transformation may be adapted for a classroom context. How can we work collaboratively with students, with their interests and expertise in mind, to make our institutions less racist? How do we teach them to pace themselves while also understanding the urgency of addressing anti-Black racism? How do we teach them to strategize in ways that are attentive to the power structures embedded within institutions? How do we teach them that they can and should make a difference?

Coda

In the last year, as we’ve seen a growth in online webinars and Zoom events, and as I have received unprecedented requests to speak about anti-Asian racism specifically and Asian American experience more generally in these events, I have corresponded with a number of event organizers about the problem of white supremacy in event planning, with varied results. Yet, I want to highlight a few of the issues I’ve seen enacted, even among justice-oriented anti-racist and feminist scholars—not to drag

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anyone but rather in the hopes of moving us all toward more equitable institutional practices in programming and event organizing.

First, representation and quantitative inclusivity still matter, and it is imperative that event organizers plan with intersectionality in mind. As Jones, Gonzales, and Haas (2021) wrote, new social justice initiatives “must be pro-Black and intersectional” (p. 33). In other words, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, event organizers need to keep in mind how intersecting oppressive arrangements affect people differently on the basis of not only race and ethnicity, but also gender, sexuality, disability, colorism, and other factors. It is fine to have a narrow focus for events, but that focus needs to be explicitly stated as such. For example, if the goal of an event is truly to focus on and further prioritize white male perspectives about some topic, then the name of the event should be indicative of that narrow perspective. Gender still matters, and there is a difference between men of color and people of color. And if your anti-racist initiative is disproportionately cis male, with only a token woman or genderqueer person of color, that needs to be reflected upon. If you find that women of color and genderqueer persons of color are declining your invitations, ask yourself why that is. What messages are you sending that are giving people the very real impression that your event is not worth their time, whether for reasons of inadequate compensation, or because they do not trust that their experiences will not be minimized, or for some other reason? It is also important to think about inclusion of people from a variety of institutions and who hold a range of positions within academia.

Second, promotional materials for events, too, should be designed with equity in mind. Visual rhetoric matters to anti-racism, and organizers should examine their promotional materials for what is being communicated in and through their design. For instance, the ordering or visual prioritization of names—whether through font styles or size or placement—should be thoughtfully arranged so that racially and otherwise minoritized speakers are not undermined. In general, all other things being equal, speakers should be listed in alphabetical order. If there are reasons to adjust the order, whether because certain speakers are listed as keynotes and thus should be highlighted as such, or for other reasons, those reasons should be apparent to readers. Designers should also be thoughtful about how particular kinds of work are represented, i.e., how they position certain speakers as intellectuals and “real researchers” and others—usually minoritized speakers—as “mere practitioners.”

Third, event organizers should fairly compensate speakers who would otherwise be doing uncompensated additional labor on behalf of their organization,

especially if they are being asked to speak on emotionally challenging topics related to experiences with racism. Exposure, even for emerging scholars, is not enough.

Finally, if someone—and especially a person of color—takes the time to raise issues of white supremacy in your event, I urge that white scholars please save the defensiveness for their therapists. At times, when I've drawn attention to issues of representation, even in private email conversations, organizers have, instead of addressing the bigger problem of white supremacy as reflected in their event, chosen to correct minor errors in my calculations that really did not change the fact that BIPOC scholars were underrepresented within their program. I have also been told that it is unreasonable to compare the program make-up to the racial demographics of the U.S. rather than to the demographics of the very white hosting organization—even as the the event was disproportionately white by the latter criterion. Further, such responses neglect to account for the long history of exclusion of Black perspectives, and how that history might figure into our current thinking about what perspectives should be uplifted and prioritized in our current numbers. A more appropriate response to such critiques would have been to thank the person for the time and energy they really didn't need to take to educate and improve your event and practices, to take their concerns seriously, to not deny and defend but rather to sit and reflect, before making the changes needed to address the issues raised—even if that means taking on the work to fundraise to highlight the work of women, genderqueer, and disabled scholars of color—because we truly don't need more events that pretend to value diversity or advance social justice while actually further prioritizing majoritarian white, heteropatriarchal perspective, enacting anti-Blackness, and sustaining white supremacy.

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Sano-Franchini

About the Author

Jennifer Sano-Franchini (she/her) is the Gaziano Family Legacy professor of rhetoric and writing and associate professor of English at West Virginia University. Her research and teaching interests are in the cultural politics of design, user experience, and Asian American rhetoric. Her work can be found in *College Composition and Communication*, *Technical Communication*, and *Enculturation*, among other journals and edited collections. She previously served as director of professional and technical writing and associate professor of English at Virginia Tech.

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