

The Same Old Racist Stuff: White Fragility, Rhetorical Listening, and Affect in Online Writing Instruction

Lydia Wilkes, Idaho State University

This article mines two moments of dysconscious racism—one in an online writing course on the topic of race and public space, the other during and after the delivery of this paper at Computers and Writing 2016—to locate the cultural logics, emotions, and affects that drive each. Rooted in white supremacy and expressed as white fragility, these logics and dispositions underpin moments of dysconscious racism yet remain ripe for interruption, disruption, and reconfiguration. Listening from a stance of openness to how differently positioned bodies responded to these racial disturbances offers opportunities for reflexive self- and interpersonal work toward racial justice, work that is indispensable, however difficult it may be, when Black lives seem not to matter.

Despite late twentieth century beliefs that the internet would be a utopia capable of uniting all people equally, online spaces usually reinscribe and often exacerbate existing power differentials, such as patriarchy and white supremacy (Selfe, 1999, p. 294), both in visual representation and computer code (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). Cynthia Selfe (1999) noted a U.S. tendency to both hold optimistic beliefs about the potential of networked communication and behave conservatively so as to maintain the status quo. For example, the belief in an “un-gendered utopia” online masks the status quo of patriarchy, a narrative Selfe titled “the Same Old Gendered Stuff” (p. 307). Similarly, despite early twenty-first century pronouncements of a post-racial era after Barack Obama’s election, white supremacy remains the status quo: the Same Old Racist Stuff. And while scholarship in Computers and Writing has urged writing teachers to imagine interfaces not coded by colonizers (Selfe & Selfe, 1994, p. 500), imagining change remains easier than implementing it. As a result, interfaces most commonly used in higher education paradoxically open access to marginalized groups while also repeating the colonial demand to assimilate into the same old analog hierarchies (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). This article mines two moments of racial discord—one in an online writing course for first-year writers on the topic of race and public space, the other during and after the delivery of this paper at Computers and Writing 2016—to locate the cultural logics, emotions, and affects driving each. While these logics, emotions, and affects sustain a stubbornly status quo of white supremacy, those committed to racial justice must just as stubbornly persist in the fight.

Invisible Bodies

In a first-year writing (FYW) course taught online during the spring 2015 semester at a large, Midwestern research university on the topic of race and public space, computer mediation prevented students from seeing each other’s bodies, with their myriad cultural and communicative cues, during once-a-week synchronous meetings held in Adobe Connect. Meant to replicate face-to-face (f2f) meetings, these discussions were to have taken place over video chat where bodies would be visible. But since the platform (and I) handled multiple video feeds poorly and students were uncomfortable appearing on camera, they, like students in most online writing courses (OWCs), “saw” each other as disembodied names and lines of chat text.

Halfway through the semester, two White students took over class discussion to deny that race was a factor in the murder of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice by a Cleveland police officer. In doing this, they went from being “white people,” whom Damon Young (2015) described as “just people,” to “White People” for whom “their whiteness becomes their most prominent quality.” Young continued:

Basically, White People without historical, cultural and racial context are just white people. But it’s nearly impossible to remove that context, so when you’re dealing with a white person, there’s always the chance that those pesky White People might decide to appear, too.

For the two White students, whiteness overwhelmed humanity, and they argued the following: that Rice would have been killed if he had been white (because he had a toy gun), that he was responsible for his own death, that no one can know what the officer was thinking so he should not be judged as racist, and that racism does not motivate violence against Black people, whom the two students claimed are always judged “innocent” in public (contradicting all course materials). When one of the two Black students in the class appealed to her own experiences with racism, her White classmate, who could not and did not see a Black body speaking, dismissed her claim as not being “real.” Denial, defensiveness, dismissal, anger, silence (among other white students): these responses characterize white fragility. Robin DiAngelo (2011) defined white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” to “reinstate white racial equilibrium” (p. 54). As I detail later, the circulation of cultural logics about race and the emotions and affects tied to those logics in the OWC’s rhetorical ecology enabled this white fragile response for ten minutes.

An eerily similar thing happened when I presented this paper at Computers and Writing 2016. After I framed the moment and before I provided details, a white woman raised her hand, five fingers splayed as though she was timing me, and I, confused, acknowledged her. “I don’t think that’s racist,” she said. Flustered, I assured her the racist part was coming. As I also detail later, her statement cast a pall of negative affect over the room: yet again, a white person became a White Person and a fragile reaction to race talk dominated the Q&A of one of the most diverse panels at the conference. This is the Same Old Racist Stuff; we can and should refuse it.

At the time and for months afterward, this moment seemed strange to me because, as an inhabitant of racially privileged body, I rarely witness such overt denials of racism. But these denials are in fact “ordinary and frustrating” for those not in racially privileged bodies (Condon & Young, 2016, p. 6). Frankie Condon and Vershawn A. Young (2016) noted:

Structural inequality seems more entrenched than ever and the denial of white Americans both more inexplicable and more intractable. However, the evidence of ongoing racism seems insufficient either to convince white Americans that racism is both real and matters or to compel them to address racism in any systemic way. (p. 3)

Condon and Young (2016) categorized the myriad manifestations of racism in academe—the “unexamined curricula, careless, ill-considered or unreflective teaching practice”—as “dysconscious racism,” a term coined by Joyce E. King (1991) to describe “an uncritical habit of mind...that justifies inequity and exploitation” by “tacitly accept[ing] dominant White norms and privileges” (Condon & Young, 2016, p. 3). This uncritical habit of dysconscious racism can be lethal, benign, or beneficial, depending on one’s body. Sustaining it are cultural logics of race and the affective and emotional dimensions of white fragility.

I remain struck by how closely the white audience member’s interruption matched the white students’ resistance. But where the students were traditionally-aged first-years from whom every teacher of writing expects failures, even epic ones, the audience member was a colleague with a faculty position. And while I argued then that my FYW students’ inability to see the racial differences in the virtual room hindered their ability to hear arguments based in Black students’ experiences, no such barrier existed at the conference. Hence, although an OWC with a synchronous meeting space meant to replicate f2f discussion likely operates best when students can see each other’s bodies (through video introductions, vlogs, photos, etc.), visibility does not guarantee a successful response to intensely affective moments. Rather, *making a teaching moment is a collective feat enabled or constrained by each person’s willingness or refusal to engage with disturbances to existing belief systems using the (more or less effective) communicative affordances of a space.* In the rest of this article, I outline the cultural logics of race underpinning these moments of dysconscious racism and listen to how differentially positioned bodies responded to disturbances, which offers opportunities for reflexive self-work (Diab, Ferrel, & Godbee, 2016, p. 25–26) when encountered from a stance of openness (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 1).

Cultural Logics of Race

Cultural logics of race are *shared ways of reasoning* that inform thought, belief, and action (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 10). Krista Ratcliffe (2005) identified several cultural logics of race that inform common sense attitudes in the U.S., noting first that race is a “fictional category possessed of all-too-realistic consequences,” rooted in mistaken beliefs about biology and the conflation of ethnicity (culture) with character and intelligence. The most detrimental cultural logic of race, white supremacy, rests on this fallacious belief in essential biological differences (p. 13). Cultural logics of race, then, always proceed from fallacious assumptions, though this does nothing to curb their prevalence.

Nonetheless, their prevalence makes them ripe for interruption and disturbance (and resistance to interruption and disturbance), since they “take their meaning from the symbolic systems in which they function” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 14) and these systems are constantly in flux. The cultural logics most pertinent to this article are white supremacy, colorblindness, multiculturalism (Ratcliffe, 2005), and zero-sum game (Norton & Sommers, 2011). While I sketch each one discretely, they circulate simultaneously and inform claims in complex, sometimes contradictory ways.

White supremacist logic “imagines *race* as biological differences, positing a hierarchical racial chain of being.” Colorblind logic “draws on assumptions from equal-rights philosophy to demand that all people be treated equally in the present moment” but ignores “history or cultural factors that may privilege or constrain people in the present moment.” Colorblind logic does not see “how *equal treatment* sometimes resonates as *not just*” or inequitable (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 14–15). Meanwhile, multiculturalist logic counters white supremacist and colorblind logics to argue that race should be replaced by ethnicity or cultural heritage (e.g., Shoshoni, Irish, Afghan). Multiculturalism admirably “demands that all ethnicities be valued for their differences and commonalities, and concurrently, that each person be seen as an individual whose identity is informed by ethnicity but not reduced *solely* to ethnicity.” However, it still elides or ignores systemic racism (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 15). Finally, zero-sum game logic, often expressed as “reverse racism,” perceives gains by Blacks as losses by Whites, or as then-senator Jeff Sessions put it, “Empathy for one party is always prejudice against another” (Norton & Sommers, 2011, p. 215). By this logic, less anti-Black racism results in more anti-White racism; increased equity and equality threaten white privilege and therefore white supremacy. These cultural logics intermingle and complicate one another as they circulate simultaneously, informing our ongoing everyday discursive exchanges and their material results.

Emotions and Affects of White Fragility

While Ratcliffe’s (2005) cultural logics help account for shared beliefs about race, they do not account for the intense emotions and affective dispositions that accompany talk about race. Robin DiAngelo’s (2011) “white fragility” compellingly accounted for emotions (p. 54), which have narrativized content shaped by culture, as well as affects, which are pre-narrative bodily energies and intensities (Rice, 2008, p. 201). White fragility results from “the interruption of what is racially familiar” to whites (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57)—a disturbance of the Same Old Racist Stuff that benefits both white people and White People. Disturbances to this status quo range widely, such as when a person of color holds a position of authority, when people of color share (or refuse to share) their racial experiences, when people of color play non-stereotypical lead roles in entertainment, or “multicultural education” itself. Barack Obama’s presidency, the Black Lives Matter movement, a Black lead in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*: all challenge white authority and centrality (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57), resulting in a high, keening wail of white fragility. It manifests most often for whites as diffuse dysconscious racism, that uncritical habit of mind accepting of the white privilege and power that flow from the white supremacist status quo.

The race and public space FYW OWC, functioning as a multicultural education course, challenged all students to read, think, and write analytically about information by and about Black people, such as Brent Staples’ article “Black Men and Public Space” (1986) and director Ava DuVernay’s film *Selma* (2014),

both of which students analyzed prior to the disruption. Looking back, I am surprised that this semester-long challenge to white centrality and authority yielded only one pedagogical problem in class. Surely, many others occurred. While certainly a problem for me, the students of color, and many other white students in the virtual room, the two White students' resistance shows their engagement with what probably felt like an assault on their colorblind, zero-sum beliefs about race. Their resistance is understandable—not strange, as it seemed to me at the time, but all too ordinary and frustrating, because I have also been a white person struggling through White Person defensive reactions to race talk who had to overcome white fragility by building stamina.

One way to build stamina for race talk is to use rhetorical listening, which is listening from “a stance of openness” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 25). A tactic for rhetorical listening, listening pedagogically, involves “recognizing, analyzing, and resisting” student and teacher resistance (p. 136). Common types of resistance include denial, dismissal, defensiveness, overidentification, adherence to gender- and/or colorblindness, and speaking or writing block (p. 138–39). In the OWC, student resistance took the forms of overidentification, denial, and adherence to colorblind logic among the two White students and speaking block among at least one other white student. My resistance to the students' resistance insisted on recognizing systemic racism from an accountability logic in which “all people necessarily have a stake in each other's quality of life” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 31). But the two White students did not hear a call for accountability; rather, they overidentified with the police officer who killed Rice and heard themselves implicated in an unproductive guilt/blame logic. Next, I listen to this resistance for cultural logics of race as well as emotions and affects of white fragility, and consider how online writing instruction might more productively deal with disturbances.

Listening to Student Resistance

Since writing is, among other things, an embodied performance of identities and ideologies (Scott, 2015, p. 50), it feels intensely personal, even when it's as ephemeral as speech. The White students' resistance began with ephemeral writing in response to a *Washington Post* opinion piece on the City of Cleveland's decision to “blame the 12-year-old [...] for his own death,” accusing him of “failure...to exercise due care to avoid injury” (Capehart, 2015). The article concludes bitterly: “it's Tamir's fault that he was not seen as a child” because “black children don't get to be children.” Students were asked to read the article, go to the collaborative writing space Etherpad (whose ethereal name suggests how permanent this writing was to be), and identify a lens from a course reading that best explained the city's move.

Though students were practicing a challenging cognitive task, the best lens was obvious: white paranoia in Judith Butler's (1993) “Endangered/Endangering,” which students read for the meeting. They easily matched descriptions of Rice as “menacing” and “a 12-year-old in an adult body” (Capehart, 2015) with Butler's description of how a California jury read Rodney King's body as a threat to the LAPD officers who beat him (p. 17). As students finished the task, I noticed one student who completed it and resisted it. Before I reconvened the class in Connect, this student brought her complaint into the chat area, akin to sharing it with the class with no prompting. Had this occurred in a f2f setting, other students would have contested it and a lively discussion probably would have ensued.

Instead, another white student who tended to retweet many of the first student's comments joined in, and ten minutes of angry, defensive denial ensued. While a few other students and I attempted to reason with them, they refused to listen and their claims grew more outlandish. Their claims relied on zero-sum and colorblind logics. The colorblind claim was advanced that anyone playing with a realistic toy gun in a park would be harmed by police and, implicitly, would have deserved it. In the moment, this claim seemed astonishingly disconnected from reality faced by Black people—and it was, as the students were White. Listening to this claim from a distance, it sounds like a defense of police officers who risk their lives daily: anyone playing with a gun in a park poses too great a threat even to police and, implicitly, deserves harm. This logic repeats the violence done to Rice by refusing to recognize him as part of “the public”—as a human with rights to be protected—instead dehumanizing him as a monster (Prasad, 2015, p. 50–52). Indeed, while no slogans were used, the incident could be distilled in zero-sum terms to Blue

Lives Matter vs. Black Lives Matter, a false dilemma grounded in a misreading of the latter phrase as “*only* Black Lives Matter” when it in fact avers, as did the course, that “Black Lives Matter, *too*.”

Anger and defensiveness stemming from zero-sum logic likely motivated the White students’ denial of racism. Other students, including both Black students, and I attempted to respond to their claims in registers of exasperation, pleas for reason, anger, and horror. The student who contributed most often to class discussion was uncharacteristically silent. During the discussion, this student sent me a direct message apologizing for her silence and stating that she was uncomfortable. Asked about the cause of this discomfort, she said she did not know how to respond to her peers. A helpful term for her affective response is “can’t even,” which implies an inability at the level of physical energy to respond. Silence and withdrawal from the situation are common manifestations of white fragility and reveal the need to build stamina (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 67) so that discomfort and disturbance can become productive sites for committing to racial justice (Diab, Ferrel, & Godbee, 2016, p. 25). But progress, like learning, is messy, uneven, and often motivated by failure: “like scrambling across rocky terrain” (Estrem, 2015, p. 93) in pursuit of the mountaintop.

Beyond Listening: Making Actionable Commitments

Mapping the unstated cultural logics, emotions and affects, and communicative affordances of space for a moment of resistance to antiracist education can help us understand how and why it occurs. However, critique alone is not enough. Rather, we must make “actionable commitments” to racial justice out of critiques and confessional narratives like this one (Diab, Ferrel, & Godbee, 2016, p. 20). A “willingness to be disturbed” and a great deal of “self-work,” such as “cultivating emotional intelligence” and building stamina, are required for actionable commitments to racial justice (p. 20). Racial injustice—mass incarceration alongside dysconscious racism, to name only two of its forms—is so thoroughly ingrained in the U.S., so stubbornly ordinary and frustrating that resisting it and promoting justice demand constant engagement, which is exhausting. Further, Whites enmeshed in zero-sum logic believe they are losing the game and have no cause to change their attitudes and beliefs about people of color. Yet this struggle for racial justice is vital. It occurs every day across spaces of higher education, from classroom to boardroom, virtually and face-to-face. Listening from a stance of openness to bodies marked and privileged in different ways is one step toward building stamina and acting on commitments to racial justice.

Making these commitments begins at home. In this case, it begins, or rather, continues, in the scholarly home of Computers and Writing, a field with a tradition of attending to asymmetrical power relations (Selfe & Selfe, 1994). Yet even in this space, the struggle is constant, setbacks are common, and results rarely immediate. To wit: the Q&A session of the panel.

While I listened to three energizing, thought-provoking presentations on Black Queer digital literacy narratives (Johnson, 2016), hip-hop feminists’ digital counterstories (Duthely, 2016), and collaborative, multimodal Queer making in documentary film (Miles, 2016), I worried that two white people were about to enact the racist practice of making a diverse panel all about White People and Their Problems. Though I resolved to refuse this practice, white privilege and white fragility, manifestations of a white supremacist status quo, dominated the time for questions anyway.

After one question for another panelist, the audience member reiterated her claim that the student discussion was not racist and suggested that I struggled to understand racism (Poblete, 2016). I was so affected that I do not clearly recall all of the Q&A. Thanks to the tradition of live tweeting and the presence and labor of two top tweeters, Patti Poblete (@voleuseCK) and Vyshali Manivannan (@vymanivannan), many of the details, including the moment of peak white fragility, were recorded (Figure 1). Someone asked the audience member how she would have responded to the resistance I encountered. Poblete (2016) tweeted her response: “The person who interrupted Wilkes’s talk thinks she would react to the student with, ‘oh, sweetie,’ & make a teaching moment.” Casey Miles, a fellow panelist, tweeted “Is ‘oh, sweetie’ the sound of #whitefragility?” and responded verbally that “We, as teachers, have to model how to engage with difficult discussions about racis[m]. (And if white, don’t rely

on [people of color].)” (Poblete, 2016). The conversation should have ended here, to be continued but not then, as it had already taken a third of the Q&A time.

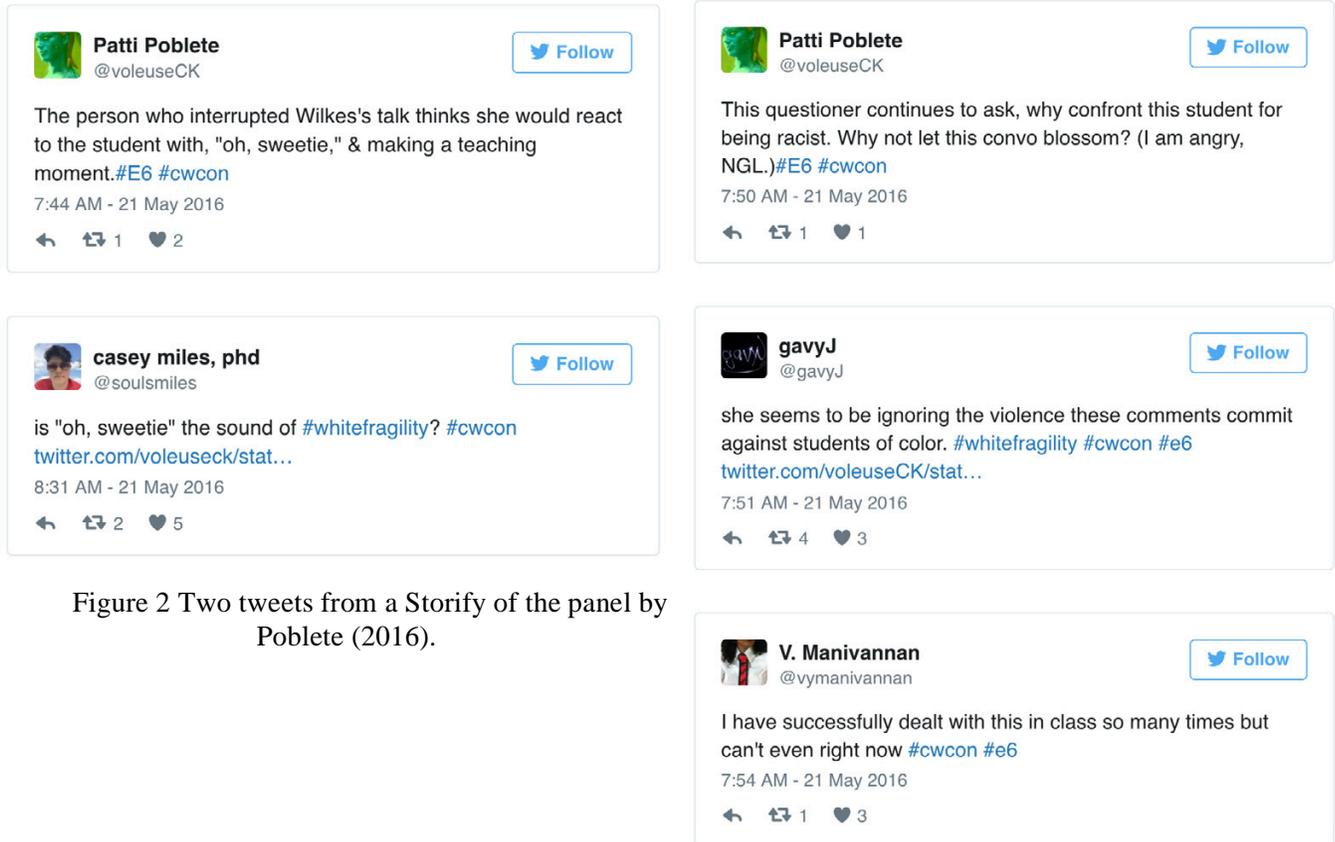


Figure 2 Two tweets from a Storify of the panel by Poblete (2016).

Figure 1: Some of the affective responses to sustained white fragility (Poblete, 2016).

But just as the two White students in the OWC refused to listen, the White audience member, seemingly unaware of her privilege, persisted in questioning (Figure 2). “This questioner continues to ask, why confront this student for being racist. Why not let this convo blossom? (I am angry, [not gonna lie].),” tweeted Poblete (2016). Gavin Johnson, whose presentation on Black Queer literacy narratives should have received more discussion, tweeted in response to Poblete, “she seems to be ignoring the violence these comments commit against students of color. #whitefragility.” Meanwhile, Manivannan captured a sentiment likely shared by others in the room: “I have successfully dealt with this in class so many times but can’t even right now.” Manivannan expressed my affective state with “can’t even,” a phrase indicating an incapacity to engage because of an intense affective response. In this case, for me at least, the dull weight of colorblind logic proved too heavy, the interlocutor too unwilling to listen from a stance of openness. Like my presentation, the discussion trailed off more than it concluded, leaving many in the room angry, withdrawn, disgusted, disappointed, and so weary of the Same Old Racist Stuff.

All of this points to the need to counter white fragility by building stamina among white people for uncomfortable, disruptive talks about race, lest White People emerge. Like designing a decolonial interface, antiracist writing assessment, and decolonial writing instruction, building stamina is easier said than done. But a time when Black men, women, and children are murdered in public by agents of the state, then blamed for their deaths by whites who are disconnected from the reality of race in the U.S., building the capacity to change cultural logics, emotions, and affects requires stubborn persistence. Like traversing a rocky mountainside, this messy, uneven process entails slipping back as much as it does

scrambling forward. But the goal of racial justice shines brightly, lighting the path and urging us to embrace the struggle.

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