

Michelle Petty Grue  
Assistant Teaching Professor  
Writing and Literature  
University of California, Santa Barbara

"TheFeministsAreComing: But Are They Anti-Racist?"

Well, it's been a particularly heavy two-weeks to be Black, hasn't it? It's not that I don't see the pains and burdens borne by our disabled siblings, our siblings of color, and our queer siblings, but I'm going to focus on us for a moment. It's been a hard two-weeks to be Black. When we consider that much of the attention our discipline is paying to anti-racism coming on the heels of George Floyd's murder by the very police force his taxes paid for, it is worth calling attention to this. His prosecution spent far more time than should have been necessary emphasizing that Floyd wasn't super-human. He was a man, and he was vulnerable to the anxieties and need to breathe that white folks have. The Black men and women in our discipline are not supermen or superwomen. We're strong because we don't have a choice not to be, but that doesn't mean we don't have weakness or feel pain. We do this work because we must, and yet there is never real rest for us. We do our best, but the world won't let us forget that we live in a land where our labor is considered valuable, but our lives don't matter. I say all this to remind you of the stakes. This is not just a conference presentation to me or a line on my CV.

The calls for anti-racism in Writing Studies, such as the NCTE/CCCC Black Linguistic Justice Demands, Inoue's CCCC address, etc.) can feel overwhelming, but please remember that your feelings of overwhelm pale in comparison to the feeling of moving through a world that never ceases to remind you that it wasn't built for you, that never ceases to remind you that we should feel "grateful" for being allowed in these spaces. Y'all, that is not anti-racism. I know that there is often unpaid labor in conference organization and we lack of a clear model of what an anti-racist conference space, physical or digital, should look like. In this talk, I use a specific Writing Studies organization - The Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and

Composition - as an example of both positive efforts they make with intersectional feminism in digital spaces, but also the valuable critiques of their in-person conferences and the varied ways the organization has, over time, responded to those criticisms. By using this particular group as a focus, I am able to take generalized anti-racist Writing Studies calls and show how they can be applied to a particular organization, so folks can stop saying “I don’t know how to do this” as an excuse to not do the work.

This talk will outline ways to meet the concerns lobbied against the Coalition, but also highlight positive moves taken by other Writing Studies organizations for conferences and conference-like gatherings, such as the Naylor Symposium and Digital Black Lit and Composition (DBLAC), namely their intentional and substantive looping in and support of Black and other people of color in their event communities and their structural inclusion of graduate students and scholars of color. By both addressing critiques and spotlighting moves in an anti-racist direction, I hope attendees of my talk will be better equipped to engage in interactive anti-racist conference work, growing and changing such that they are more inclusive and more intersectional over time and in all their spaces.

### **Intersectional digital spaces - The Coalition**

The Coalition has a “Social Media Plan,” parts of which I include here with permission from one of their social media specialists. The Coalition has five specific goals for its social media presence: “1) Represent intersectional feminist perspectives, voices, images, and concerns both in and beyond university; 2) Share professional opportunities; 3) Invite dialogue on a range of feminist topics; 4) Celebrate and amplify members’ accomplishments; 5) Promote feminist research in rhet/comp” (CFSHRC “Social Media Plan”). This first goal is not otherwise mentioned with specificity in the Coalition's official mission statement and “about” sections, but the social media platforms do work toward this goal.

The Coalition's Twitter page meets the organizations' goals through multiple literacy forms, including sharing feminist news and articles, sharing Calls for Proposals (CFPs),

celebrating feminist and member achievements, occasionally encouraging members of the digital public square to join the official organization or submit to *Peitho*, share the Coalition's blog posts, and amplify calls for the Coalition's award nominations (CFSHRC "Social Media Plan"). The topics are frequently intersectional, with race, gender, class, and disability most likely to appear. Occasionally, for the sake of levity in trying times, the Coalition will post fun or motivational images; cat videos and memes are frequent among these. Accessibility measures listed in their plan include capitalizing the first letter of each word in a hashtag, including their own on-brand hashtags, like #TheFeministsAreComing and #WomenInTC. They also add descriptive captions of posts in which images are the main message (not when they are simply illustrations of the text). That said, the critiques that I paraphrase below point to the tensions between the Coalition's social media and the conference.

### **Critiques and Possibilities**

I've organized this section into critiques and possibilities in large part because we are entering territory in which none of us are experts; we are creating new things. Thus, we are doing something that is more like the speculative fiction I teach in my Afrofuturism courses than the usual scholarly conference presentation. We are engaging in possibilities, in potential futures. One might say we are speculating the academic future. The critiques I highlight below are as follows: defensiveness, accessibility, cost of attendance, and the prevailing whiteness and white feminism of the conference spaces and population

#### ***Defensiveness at the townhall***

- **Critique:** The leaders of the conference, and the Coalition more broadly, were too caught up in justifying to actually invite up and listen to non-leadership participants in their public. The word defensiveness was brought up multiple times
- **Possibilities:**

- vulnerable, transparent self-reflection regarding anti-racism from leadership and other key figures
- invite up and listen to non-leadership participants practice Royster's responsivity (2013 Watson Symposium)
  - "a rhetoric of transformative action" (p. 281)
  - Inviting people to bring their "knowledge, experiences, skills, expertise and values to bear in addressing interests, concerns, issues, and problems" (p.286)
  - As Royster says, "if we are to build with each other more positive cross-cultural relationships ... we must take just as seriously the obligation of listening to others with care and respect and developing more consciously and deliberately a workable set of sense-abilities for how we will talk back, i.e., how we will choose to be responsive"
  - Move past the traditional "I talk, you talk" fashion of conversation and instead apply Krista Ratcliffe's articulation of rhetorical listening
    - Actually develop skills in listening, not just speaking, develop the "habit of paying attention to context, stakeholders, and the stakes of an interaction; to take into account the multiple discourses that are embedded in and surrounding our conversations; and to develop personal and professional accountability for reasonable action" (p. 288).

## ***Accessibility***

Despite the clearly articulated accessibility measures in the “Social Media Plan,” accessibility measures at the conference were referred to as an extra expense, particularly the CART services that were requested by some conference attendees. While such accommodations do cost money, the Coalition, like any organization that posits to be intersectional and inclusive, must decide if people are worth the expense, if people are the priority at such events. As a discipline, there is an understanding that “public discourse puts a premium on accessibility. But there is no infinitely accessible language...” (Warner, 2002, p. 77). Thus, if one wants to include disabled scholars - and a feminist coalition should want to - then the accommodations necessary to do so must be considered not an “extra” cost, but a prioritized measure to ensure that all scholars seeking to join their public are able to do so.

### ***Cost of Attendance***

- **Critique:** The cost of attendance was mentioned frequently in tweeted complaints about the conference, before, during, and afterward. Key issues were the location, which was far from any major airport and thus required extra expenses to reach the conference; the cost of registration, which even with a discount for graduate students was considered so expensive that last-minute donations for graduate student attendees were collected; and the feeling that expenses were wasted on the trappings of fancy meals.
- **Possibilities:**
  - While the rural university should not always be excluded, the price of travel from a non-regional airport to the conference site should be a significant consideration when deciding the location.
  - Provide a genuinely reasonable graduate student registration fee
  - Be intentional about where money is best spent or saved. Intentionally invite working-class and first-gen scholars into that conversation.

## ***Whiteness and White Feminism:***

### ○ **Critique:**

- This problem has been brought up multiple times, including at and after both the 2017 and 2019 Feminism and Rhetorics conference.
- The disproportionate number of White attendees belied spoken goals toward diversity and inclusion. Many possible causes for that imbalance were discussed in the digital public.
- Another concern was the plantation aesthetic of James Madison University<sup>14</sup>, along with the large pictures of slave-owners on the walls of hotel bedrooms<sup>15</sup>. If you were the descendant of slaves, I cannot imagine you would get a good night's sleep in such a room. These are the sorts of things that local conference organizers should vet spaces for.
- An issue that received less attention and yet is still worth mentioning is access to food at the conference. While the complaints about food being “too white” and undercooked, especially the vegan and vegetarian meals offered to attendees who requested them, were tongue-in-cheek, the most recent conference's location in the South meant that the conference planners had access to food from a variety of cultures, including vegan and vegetarian food that was offered for religious, cultural, and medical dietary accommodations.
- Common words to describe the white feminism of the conference were “self-congratulatory,” “comfortable,” “out of touch,” “safe,” and “play by the rules feminism.”

### ○ **Possibilities:**

- foreground feminist work done by non-white scholars,
- intentionality with acceptances sent to white scholars and scholars of color,
- intentionality with scheduling (not predominantly in the last day/last hour or when a popular White scholar is presenting, or all at the same time bands)
- take risks with CFPs, keynote speakers, and conference activities

### ***Progress***

The Coalition has not ignored its critiques. As noted on the Coalition's website, they have canceled the 2021 Feminism and Rhetorics conference both out of the COVID-related issues with travel and the ongoing conversations about the future of the conference. The Coalition has been using the time since making that decision and now to make substantive changes. The panel tomorrow, hosted by members of the Coalition, will discuss their steps more in-depth, but I would like to highlight two changes in particular.

### **Graduate student access**

#### **Summer 2020 - "Grad Student Engagement Taskforce"**

- Members: Jane Greer (chair), Lydia McDermott, Raquel Corona, Cory Geraths, and Gavin Johnson
- Examined Coalition policies and spaces for graduate student as well as policies and spaces for graduate students in related organizations. They submitted their findings to the advisory board, and their proposals were considered during the CFSHRC business meeting at CCCC.
- Results: The Advisory Board of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition voted at its annual meeting to

accept the recommendations of the taskforce regarding grad students' participation in CFSHRC's governance. **A grad student will be added to the executive board; two grad students will be elected to the advisory board via a partitioned ballot; and there will be an official committee dedicated to the needs and interests of grad students within the CFSHRC."**

### **The 2023 Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference**

"The Advisory Board of the Coalition recently passed the following resolution: That the Coalition delay of the re-release of the call for 2023 Feminisms and Rhetorics site hosts until the spring of 2021 and require within this call that potential site hosts front themes of anti-racist activism and center the work of feminists of color. This decision was made in response to several factors, including ongoing task force efforts to improve the workflows, formats, and processes associated with the conference and the COVID-related uncertainty regarding the possibility of holding a large gathering in the near future. Additionally, the Advisory Board felt that identifying this specific focus for the 2023 meeting is an essential part of larger Coalition efforts to amplify voices of scholars of color, interrogate white privilege, and promote anti-racist organizational change. While many members and supporters of the Coalition have critiqued white supremacy and engaged in racial justice work in the past, current events and the enduring, centuries-long oppressions and injustices that inform them make it undeniably clear that this anti-racist emphasis for the next FemRhet gathering is not just reactive but is necessary to promote the Coalition's mission." <https://cfshrc.org/femrhet-conference-call-for-hosts/>

I would simply add that needing to include the partial sentence to explain that some members and supporters of the Coalition have been doing the work, and not adding that there have been genuine critiques of the Coalition and this CFP is not simply reactionary to those remarks but instead responsive to them might have been a less defensive or passive aggressive way to communicate that information. Frankly, the Coalition needs to just be about



the work and let that be its defense.

### ***Learning from other organizations***

#### **Naylor**

##### ***Inviting in:***

- Part of our time together at the Naylor Symposium included a riveting presentation and talk with Ophelia Chambliss, a local York, PA Black artist whose work “Casting Shadows: A Visual Exhibition and Celebration of York’s Black American History” showcased a side of the emancipatory, civil rights, and present day issues that are too often overlooked in a part of the country that highlights Revolutionary War and Colonial history. For her to be deliberately invited and given the opportunity to take up space in our gathering showed the value the Symposium organizers placed on the Black community in York.

##### ***Going out:***

- We also spent an afternoon on a walking tour of York that included time in a house that was on the Underground Railroad and was built by one of the wealthiest formerly enslaved people in the area and looking at Chambliss’ murals around town. The tour wasn’t all serious, but I appreciated the deliberateness of weaving in both the Black and White sides of York during our short time there.

##### ***Food***

- The Naylor Symposium, located in largely rural York, Pennsylvania, achieved this by intentionally reaching out to the Black and Latinx restaurant owners in the community to cater the Symposium’s meals (DelliCarpini, personal communication, 2018).
- Grad student inclusion: Graduate students were equal participants in the co-creation and synthesis of knowledge about undergraduate research in Writing Studies that was the

focus of the Symposium. Just as importantly, we were invited to participate in turning our work into chapters of the now published *Naylor Report*.

## **DBLAC**

The in-person writing spaces at conferences are fairly simple. DBLAC works with the conference organizers to reserve a room for several hours on at least one, sometimes more than one, day of the conference. The space is open to anyone interested in using it; non-members are welcome and encouraged to join the quiet writing time. DBLAC uses donations from members and supporters to provide snacks, beverages, and ample seating/plug-ins for writing. Music plays softly in the background, and while generative discussions do take place, they are kept to a minimum. DBLAC organizes sponsored panels at major disciplinary conferences, but it also highlights and advertises conference presentations of DBLAC members on Twitter, amplifying their sessions in what can often be an overwhelming amount of possible sessions to choose from for conference attendees. DBLAC also hosts fun conference activities, such as the Old School New School Hip Hop Party at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication.

While DBLAC's writing retreat is separate from their events at conferences, designed as a space away from regular academic life, the retreat, along with the in-person writing spaces at conferences made me think about how helpful it might be to re-envision what we use conferences for. Yes, of course, they can still be places where people present their research, network, meet editors, etc. But what many academics need is time and space. If academics are going to pay the money for conference fees, for travel to staying at a conference, sometimes arranging child or adult care in the process, why not dedicate spaces and structures at these conferences for miniature writing retreats? Attendees can decide for themselves if they want to use their mornings for writing and their afternoons for regular conference work, or the other way around.

DBLAC's first writing retreat, held in October 2018 in Pittsburgh, PA, had 14 participants

from 7 universities. There were three professional development workshops, five dedicated opportunities for networking, and over fifteen hours of focused writing time. The “Scholar in Residence” was Dr. Beverly Moss, Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. Dr. Moss is a compositionist who is active in both publishing and service within the discipline. She elected to fulfill the same role at the second retreat, as well. There was also an invited speaker, Jonah Mixon-Webster, who is a “poet-educator and conceptual/sound artist from Flint, MI” (Inaugural Writing Retreat Report, 2018); his work has been featured in multiple venues and won awards in both 2017 and 2018. The retreat was financially inclusive, providing travel support for graduate student participants from faculty member donations. Other sponsors included East Carolina University, the University of Pittsburgh’s Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, and Pitt Community Engagement Center: Homewood (Inaugural Writing Retreat Report, 2018).

Of course, not every conference can incorporate all of these possibilities, but I hope they give you all something to speculate about and act upon.