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Talk

The Complicity/Complexity Problem of Anti-Racism Work in The Academy

Natasha N. Jones

This talk was given on April 16, 2021 as my contribution for the anti-racism panel “Undoing BIPOC Erasure in the Academy: A Conversation about Race and Anti-Racism.” The panel was hosted by the University of California Merced. What follows is a transcript of this talk that incorporates some minor edits for print and publication in the *Community Literacy Journal*.

I’m going to talk about The Complicity/Complexity Problem of Anti-Racism Work in The Academy.

I draw on how Dr. Cecilia Shelton (2019) takes up Dr. Bianca Williams’s (2016) concept of “radical honesty” in the technical communication classroom as I share with y’all today. Shelton demonstrates how a Black Feminist pedagogy approach creates a space for radical honesty that “allows for teachers (literal and figurative) to be whole humans with emotions who practice self-care; centers the significance of emotional labor and cost of transformative work; mitigates racial battle fatigue; and contextualizes and historicizes emotion, allowing for an analysis of power rather than a subjective truth” (22). So, here is my radical honesty.

So, when I was initially asked to participate in this panel, I had an idea of what I wanted to talk about. I thought originally that I might talk about mentorship and anti-racism in the university and in higher ed contexts. But, after this week, I’ve changed my mind because as a Black woman scholar, grief and rage are weighing heavily on me right now. And, because I am a Black woman scholar, I cannot and I refuse to separate who I am from what I have to say about anti-racism and the work that I do. As a Black woman academic, I can couch what I need to say in “scholarly” terms, but know that I’m not here for the performance of anti-racist work as it is understood by the academy.

I’m angry. I’m grieving. I’m enraged. As a Black woman I can say that I’m mad as hell. . .and I say that without any irony whatsoever. So, when I say that I wrote this presentation in anger and rage, you can clearly understand that my work is informed by who I am ... always.

On the heels of more murders at the hands of the police, Duante Wright, Adam Toledo, I am honestly in no position to mince words. And, even as I grieve, yet again this week with Black folks across the nation, I found myself seething that I had to log onto my computer, answer emails, RSVP for committee meetings, field questions from students, work on research presentations, and engage with all of the things that

require my energy and attention in order for me to be called Dr. Natasha N. Jones, Associate Professor.

It's not the showing up to my job that I was enraged about. I love my job. I love the folks I work with. That's not the issue. It's the expectation that Black folk carry on, unphased, when our murders are played on a loop for the world to see. And, I know, I know that being Black in America means that I'm expected to swallow my grief, my anger, my sadness, my fear, and smile in the next department meeting. But my God, what kind of strength do y'all expect us to have? And, to be clear, it's not the being Black that is the problem. It's the pervasive refusal of this nation and its institutions to grapple with the continued oppression and attempted genocide of people who look like me that is the problem. It's the refusal of the nation and its institutions to account for and address its racially driven necro-politics.

As I told one of my white friends a few years back, think about this: On your hardest day--The day that nothing goes right. The day that you get the diagnosis from the doctor. The day you get the call from your kid's school. The day you get the rejection letter in the mail. The day your bills are due, your money is short, and you are just so tired. The day you see the flash of blue lights in your rearview mirror as you drive home alone.... On that day, your hardest day, try figuring out how to survive that day in Black skin, in a Black body, as a Black person.

In the context of this talk, I ask you ... try surviving the academy in Black skin, in a Black body, as a Black person. What do you think that looks like on a daily basis ... when we are answering emails, when we are responding to students, when we are serving on a mundane committee, and in the background, we are hearing the news reports of another state-sanctioned murder of a Black person?

I wholeheartedly acknowledge that yes, even our presence in the academy is resistance, but our resistance is labor and work ... Always.

And, it wasn't until sometime later, after I asked my friend to imagine her surviving her worst day as Black person that it occurred to me that survival and survivance is inextricably and intricately tied up in what it means to be Black. The academy is no different. . .

Just like the police that profile us in the streets, the academy expects complicity in exchange for the possibility (not the promise) of survival. And, when we think about the rhetoric of complicity as it relates to Black folks and other marginalized identities, it necessarily shifts how we think about diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and initiatives from within academic institutions.

The focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and initiatives and inclusion work in the academy is not focused on resistance at all. The focus is always on complicity. So, how do you work within a system, with the expectation of complicity, to change and resist the very system that you are working within? How exactly does that work?

Patricia Hill Collins provides us with a very useful conceptualization of power that allows us to see how DEI programs, initiatives, and inclusion work that originate and operate within academic institutions fall short.

In our 2019 book, *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action*, Drs. Rebecca Walton, Kristen Moore, and I draw on Collins' work to understand power and the role of coalitions. Collins (1990) conceives of power through the matrix of domination. For Collins, power operates across four levels:

- Structural
- Disciplinary
- Hegemonic
- Interpersonal

Each domain of power provides insight into one way that power is enacted. But they are all connected!

- The structural focuses on infrastructure
- The disciplinary focuses on rules, regulations, policies
- The hegemonic focuses on ideology, culture, and consciousness
- The interpersonal focuses on individual actions

Collins cautions us to think *across*, not just within, domains and embrace complexity in our justice work in order to resist complicity in oppression.

If racism is structural, systemic, and interpersonal, then why isn't our anti-racism work also structural, systemic, and interpersonal.

In fact, most DEI work within the academy never rises to address the structural domain of power at all. Sometimes, we address the disciplinary, sometimes the hegemonic, often we address the interpersonal. But we need structural change so we need to engage the infrastructural power domain. This is almost never done, simply because addressing the structural domain of power means that we would necessarily threaten the very institution itself. Instead, DEI work focuses on the other domains of power, and most often, only on the interpersonal domain. So we end up asking questions like:

- How do we address race in our individual classrooms?
- Should we revise our syllabus to include more marginalized scholars?
- How can we recruit graduate students from marginalized populations into our programs?
- Who can we get to serve on this diversity committee?

My university implemented DEI training in which we were expected to view instructional modules about how to respond to racism and microaggressions. It was all focused on the interpersonal. Not to mention, the "instruction" centered largely on how the microaggressed should respond to the microaggressor ... How those victimized must engage with the folks who were "insensitive" "unaware" or "uneducated." What should we say when we hear someone using a slur or acting "uncivilly"?

Now, this is all well and good. We SHOULD be doing these things and asking these questions. BUT ... when will we ask the right folks questions about how they resist complicity embedded in the infrastructure of our academic institutions?

How do I enact anti-racist work in my classrooms or scholarship? Do you mean how do I show up as a Black woman and bring my whole self into my classroom? Or as Shelton notes: how do I center emotional labor and the cost of transformative work? How do I mitigate my racial battle fatigue? How do I contextualize and historicize my emotions and the emotions of folks that look like me? How do I do anti-racist work or how do I make it as a Black woman in the academy, where my complicity is expected in exchange for the possibility of survival? Collins reminds us that this resistance work is not *just* about institutional transformation, especially in the context of Black Feminist Thought. This work IS about survival for us. Collins tells us to remember that Black Feminist Thought is always oppositional and should remain so. So, who are we asking questions about anti-racist work and resistance? And from whom are we expecting answers? Those of us trying to survive? Or those of us who expect complicity?

Resisting complicity and embracing complexity means our DEI programs and initiatives would do fundamentally different work:

- We would diversify our syllabus AND question the very founding of how we teach and why we teach, like the work of April Baker-Bell on linguistic justice.
- We would recruit marginalized graduate students AND dismantle our programs that see these students as add-ons, instead of shaping our programs around their needs.
- We would support our faculty of color in their work, but also support our faculty in protests, walk-outs, unionizing, financial compensation, leaves, and other aspects that recognize ALL of our faculty as fully human.
- We would draft anti-racist statements and hold our deans, provosts, university presidents accountable when they refuse to push back against wealthy donors.

Our complicity will never do the anti-racist work that we think it will do. So, what now? What's next? We embrace that our anti-racist work is complex and oppositional and it should always be.

In her 2016 essay "Black Feminist Thought as Oppositional Knowledge," Collins asks "how might Black Feminist Thought remain oppositional, reflexive, resistant, and visionary in the context of contemporary intellectual and political challenges?" Collins talks about how, given the visibility of Black women, Black feminist work, and the political impulse toward surface level diversity that is now evident in our institutions, "visibility should not be mistaken for access, equality, or empowerment" (134). Instead, Collins calls for work that "aims to dismantle unjust intellectual and political structures" (134). Collins asks us to move past the "identifying and lamenting" in order to collectively create and innovate (136). In this way, complicity won't serve us and only offers us a short-lived illusion of inclusion.

I'll end here and say also that acknowledging the grief and trauma experienced by Black folks right now is something that we should demand from our institutions. And not, surface level acknowledgements; I mean material, tangible acknowledge-

ments because the collective grief, trauma and rage that we feel impacts us in material and tangible ways. As my friend and colleague, Dr. Laura Gonzales reminded me: You can't have our discourse and our knowledge without acknowledging what we have to navigate in order to survive on a daily basis. Do better.

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Author Bio

Natasha N. Jones is a technical communication scholar and co-author of the book *Technical Communication after the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action* (winner of the 2021 CCCC Best Book in Technical or Scientific Communication). Her research interests include social justice and narrative. She holds herself especially accountable to Black women and marginalized genders and other systemically marginalized communities. As such, she strives to conscientiously center the narratives and experiences of those at the margins in her scholarship. Her work has been published in a number of journals and she has received national recognition for her contributions, being awarded the CCCC Best Article in Technical and Scientific Communication (2020, 2018, and 2014) and the Nell Ann Pickett Award (2017). She is the Vice President for the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) and is an Associate Professor at Michigan State University.