

2021-2022 BWCP

Starting Off

As we head into our second discussion, we will draw on our thoughts, questions, and critiques from our first. Importantly, y'all (Love how WP thinks "y'all" is a misspelling) heard from two alumni of the program on Saturday. Aaron and Sebastian shared some important insights. For example, they acknowledged that the labor of the project is both rigorous and worthwhile, encouraging us to read, watch, and listen to the material as not just writing consultants but as professionals looking to deepen our understanding of the intersections among identity, ideology, power, and language. Also, our two alums emphasized persistence and hope. As Aaron noted, the scholarship informing antiracist and anti-oppression based approaches to writing can feel huge, overwhelming, and intimidating. But he encouraged us to keep engaging, to get lost, to depend on one another for support and spirit, and to rise above our fears and doubt to the occasion. Lastly, Aaron and Sebastian pointed out the importance of collaboration and compassion. Lorde (1981) describes this as a process of "heretical," "generative," and indefatigable willingness "to face each other's angers without denial or immobility or silence or guilt." She adds:

"It implies peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions which history has created around our difference. For it is those distortions which separate us. And we must ask ourselves: Who profits from all this?"

Indeed, who? Why? How? In writing center contexts, which extend across our campuses and into communities in which our universities operate, these questions acknowledge broader political and social currents across U.S. history. The currents create, to use Baldwin's deliberate hyperbole and sardonicism, institutional "innocents" whose collective racism and white supremacy, among other forms of oppression and gatekeeping, "set [racialized and marginalized writers] down in a ghetto in which, in fact, have intended that [they] perish." Alex Lockett (2019), a scholar whose work we will read and who will likely, for a second year, join us for a discussion, theorizes this very thing in her essay "Why I Call it the Academic Ghetto: A Critical Examination of Race, Place, and Writing Centers." Such critiques of historical and ongoing racism in contemporary practices and policies in higher education "testify," as Baldwin (1962) says, to our institutions' "inhumanity and fear." And yet, even as he insists "there is no reason for [the racialized and minoritized writer] to become like white men," Baldwin insists that there is "no other hope" than for racialized and minoritized writers to "accept [white men and by extension their institutions and institutional impositions] with love," even if many of them already "know better" but are not willing to "act" and so "be in danger" of losing their "identity" as affirmed by whiteness.

Lorde (1981) disagrees somewhat, arguing that *anger*, not love, when honed and deliberately wielded with "precision," offers "clarification." Defining "anger" as "a grief of distortions between peers, and its object of change," she asserts that "Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger at being silenced at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service." She goes on:

"I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives [...] Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change [...] It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment."

And this process is anything but civil or safe according to common approaches to antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on our campus:

"I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, no answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change, then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness."

In response to this barrier, Lorde insists that anger-as-inquiry "can transform difference through insight into power" and can "birth change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth." At the same time, she cautions that "Black women [and all racialized people for that matter] are expected to use [their] anger in the service of other people's salvation or learning. But that time is over." How do we writing center folks practice acknowledging that no racialized or minoritized person or community "is responsible for altering the psyche of [their] oppressor"? How do we "suckle the wolf's lip of anger and [use] it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there [is] no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter"? How might writing center practice "examine and redefine the terms upon which we will live and work, "envision and reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our [and writers'] choices"?

One way: by telling stories. Stories we tell ourselves about ourselves--individually, collectively. By recognizing whose stories are valued, which stories get told and where and why. By interrogating how certain stories get taken up as, to use Adichie's words, *the* "single story." At the same time, we can respond to her assumption that welcoming more than one story, more than one perspective, somehow naturally leads to a greater good, or clarity, or freedom, or agency. It is typical in these politically tumultuous days, to hear white supremacists demand that their stories be accepted as valuable and valid in public discourse in the name of rights, educational freedom, justice, etc. For example, recently a Texas school district administrator [ordered teachers to provide "opposing viewpoints"](#) of the Nazi Holocaust to students. When does a single story stand between harm and horrific fantasy, between what actually happened and revisionist accounts of what happened, between fact and fiction? All this is to say, how we tell the stories of writing centers, who tells them, why, and to what ends in what circumstances directly impacts the lives of writers--our own and the folks we work with every day.