

# Afterword

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## Moments and Reflections from WPA Scholars on Race

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*Recollections from an Uncommon Time: 4C20 Documentarian Tales* is a window into a historical moment of human precarity, unforeseeable disruptions to everyday life, and concentrated efforts to make sense of how the realities of a pandemic disrupt our concepts of time, work, and community. As readers of this collection, we learned how colleagues managed the vicissitudes of the pandemic, wrestled with existential dread, and modified their everyday movements while feeling interrupted. We learned how they assessed and mitigated risks, said goodbye to students, left their offices with no clear date to return, scrambled to make plans for self care, and rethought what was essential to their identities and practices as teachers. We found their recollections echoing our own experiences as we ourselves came to terms with the pandemic as teachers and academics.

The CCCC Convention has been a common place for us as long-time collaborators, Black teacher-scholars committed to doing race work, and as narrators who have situated our stories within the broader context of scholarship on critical race studies and writing program administration. The conference as both a moment and a practice of professional development is part of that broader context. In fact, while writing this afterword, we also realized that our individual and shared conference experiences could be characterized as autoethnographic investigations of how race matters experientially, ideologically and theoretically in our field. In our first collaboration, “Troubling the Boundaries: (De)Constructing WPA Identities at the Intersections of Race and Gender,” we too explored the questions that similarly serve as the impetus for this collection, but through a racial lens. Our questions read something like this: What is a conference to a Black scholar in the field? How do I respond to racist antagonism to Black scholarship at a conference? Why is a predominately white conference viable for me to

attend as a Black scholar doing race work? When we documented our own conference accounts, we shared revealing stories about racial and gender microaggressions we experienced as graduate students while training to do WPA work. We wrote about how this work resonated as an embodied experience and shared it with colleagues at a CCCC's affiliated conference. Our storytelling was our space for sense making. It was our method for seeking answers to these questions as we would come to understand conferences as a rhetorical production of our discipline, as well as performative sites where we learned how to perform disciplinary identities. Sharing these stories was not void of risk. At the time of publication, neither of us were tenured and we were very early in our careers.

When the time came to contribute to *WPA: Writing Program Administration's* special symposium on whiteness and race studies, we courageously took on another opportunity to share new revelations about racial microaggressions after moving into tenure track positions ("Boundaries Revisited"). But given the limited amount of space of the symposium, we knew we needed to tackle racial issues in relation to WPA with a larger book project. Hence, *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center* was born.

In our first chapter, we reflected on the larger sociopolitical space in which we were "documenting" and situating our work. Like several contributors to *Recollections from an Uncommon Time: 4C20 Documentarian Tales*, we reflected on the very space and moments of composing our first chapter. At the time, we noted "the news of Castile's killing appeared in the media at the very moment when we were drafting this book chapter! Given these current events, there couldn't be a more kairotic moment to consider how they inform the rhetorical situation of Blackness in twenty-first century higher education" (2). Similarly, several contributors to *Recollections* reflect on the mass murderings of Black citizens and the political unrest surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. As we said in our symposium contribution to whiteness studies, "the more things change, they still the same" ("Boundaries Revisited").

But things aren't the same. Perhaps things will never be the same. While themes identified in *Recollections* like aspirations, access, home, family, labor, and community identity certainly existed when reflecting on academic work pre-COVID-19 pandemic, and while these themes are often documented through stories, and in particular, "stor[ies] of diversity" (Introduction), it is critical that our field not only considers

these stories as they document particular moments in time, as often grounded in broader sociopolitical contexts, but also, and more importantly, as a field, we must begin using our expertise in the method of “documentation,” so that the stories we reveal and document, become some of the best models for higher education to adopt as it reaches disciplines and fields much broader than and different from our own. If there was ever a field to become the leading voice of what documentation should look like, it’s definitely our own.

While every contribution to this collection reveals many common themes about academic life and work/life balances, for us, *Recollections* identified a few additional themes for how we as a field move forward with our disciplinary and scholarly lives in higher education post-COVID-19. For us, we need to reexamine themes of globalism and transnationalism, particularly in the ways in which they affect members of our scholarly and professional communities. If CCCC is indeed the largest organization dedicated to the teaching of post-secondary writing in the world, we can no longer treat globalization as an afterthought, not only during a pandemic, but also post-pandemic.

The documented accounts of student life in *Recollections* also call for us as a field to interrogate how we center student grit as a prime social and psychological variable to investigate when making sense of how students sustain their academic interests and successfully achieve their academic goals. Grit is a fairly new concept of study by education theorists that has been used to identify one of the many predictors that impact student learning and academic achievement. Within the context of writing studies, investigating grit translates into how we come to understand ways students maintain the rights to their own language in the face of white language supremacist pedagogies. It translates into how student writers maintain and affirm their preexisting and multiply literate identities while being asked to adopt the language of the university. It is reflected in how they persist in completing complex writing projects while physically removed from vital learning communities, holed up in their bedrooms, sheltering in place and waiting for a signal to return to their normal lives. And let’s be real, grit is often used as a variable to measure the academic success of students from low income and underrepresented minority groups (Duckworth 2016, Kundu 2020). Instead of naming and focusing on the specific identity groups that we seek to address, “grit” becomes a coded term that scapegoats inequity and replaces its focus with merit and hardwork.

*Recollections* reflects the lived experiences of students finding ways to maintain focus, manage major adjustments to their learning environments, and persisting through a pandemic. These are students who navigate spotty internet connections while distance learning from home, some are essential workers at their local grocery stores who courageously maintain their jobs, others are using technologically savvy ways to stay connected to their support systems. And what of their writing lives? They reorient themselves to new and foreign writing situations. They form group chats and study groups on Whatsapp and text peers in their writing courses to finalize plans for peer reviewing writing drafts. They write pandemic narratives that connect in-school literacies with their out-of-school literacies.

In our own pandemic experiences as teachers and administrators, students sought us out for help with a range of challenges unrelated to our class curriculum: from history projects students were completing in other classes when they failed to chase down the elusive professor for guidance; or for career advice when their overworked academic advisor seemingly resigned to leave their student advisees to fend for themselves. These students leveraged their grit when their institutions failed them. But what we see in these *Recollections* is a counter narrative of necessary adjustments and revised pedagogies in a critical moment of crisis: culturally and contextually relevant teaching approaches, writing teachers building spaces for classroom dialog for students to decompress and speak about nonacademic topics, offered information about COVID-19 related campus resources, personal phone calls to disappearing students from a concerned professor—all empathetic and humanizing teaching practices. And choosing empathy and humanity was just that: a choice. For some, it challenged us to make hard choices about how we teach writing in our courses, how we show up for our students, how we empathize with their lived experiences, and if we could choose their humanity over our rigid, inflexible teaching philosophies. Perhaps the rhetoric of the pandemic created a mirror by which we were asked to drastically look at ourselves as writing teachers, and to search and find humanity in our own teaching practices—to quickly come to terms with the reality that a humanizing pedagogical practice could be a matter of life and death for our students. What we experience in *Recollections* is a repertoire of situated literacy practices for this historical moment: locating and reading information for financial aid relief, using the right search terms while browsing the

internet to find food pantries, following instructions for accessing Zoom rooms, learning how to craft the right email to non-responsive teachers, learning the measures for social distancing and how to properly wear a mask, or where to locate Wi-Fi hotspots in the city if you didn't have reliable internet at home.

More critically, what the pandemic taught us if you failed at learning these literacies while Black, Brown, or Native is that the inevitabilities of death and dying are higher. When reading across these documented recollections, we realized the necessary work of protecting student grit. We realized that writing teachers can and must build learning environments that foster students' collective agency. And this means creating a range of contingency strategies for classroom engagement, learning new technologies, performing innovative, and flexible pedagogies that are sensitive, affirming and inviting to students' lived experiences. It means expanding literacies that reach beyond the boundaries of writing assignments and classroom practices and leans into the contours and conditions of students' everyday lives. It means leveraging our institutional networks and community resources as gatekeepers, mentors, "othermothers" (Panton, Chapter 21) and department chairs in order to build learning environments that bridge out-of-school and in-school literacies.

*Recollections* reminds us that creating and expanding opportunities that contribute to academic success is a viable approach for cultivating the agency that students would need to adapt to the rhetorical situation of the pandemic. So this is our point: perhaps we might use these "recollections" as rubrics for theorizing how we can protect student grit. Perhaps we should more actively interrogate ways that we ask students to exploit their grit when they face structural, institutional, or existential challenges. How might we shift the gaze away from student grit and shift our focus towards cultivating and fortifying the structural elements that foster students' collective agency? We must materialize equitable, social justice oriented supportive systems within our writing classroom, departments, and discipline that allow our students to achieve the collective agency to claim their rights to their own language, to center and leverage their non-normative literacies in the writing classroom, and to affirm their stories and counter stories as viable sites of knowledge making and theory building.

Another theme this collection takes up is the concept of professional and faculty development, a topic that is also near and dear to

our hearts as WPA scholars and faculty developers. This collection reveals that it's time that we start equipping our discipline and institutions with sufficient professional development, not only as it pertains to teaching, learning, and writing pedagogy. We also need to develop stronger faculty development programs that help us navigate healthy professional lives, working conditions, and working relationships. As scholars trained in humanist fields, we need to affirm scholarship to provide us with opportunities to remain fully human: to celebrate victories however large or small, and to confront challenges, failures and grief without guilt. Many of the stories in this collection afford us with such an opportunity: It is a gift we need to receive and keep.

*Recollections from an Uncommon Time: 4C20 Documentarian Tales* calls for us to revisit our teaching philosophies, to identify the gaps, and ask new pedagogical questions. It asks for us to interrogate how and where we have been limited in our imaginations in how we build and sustain writing communities and write in community. Perhaps this is a moment where we reimagine the viability of our pedagogies, our writing departments, our conferences, our office hours, our race and equity task forces, our academic journals, our theories, and our field missions to “cultivate interdependence and collective responsibility, interrelationality, resistance, antiracism, care, mutuality, and healing,” especially for the sake of our students (Albracht ch. 7)—especially in a historical moment when our democratic processes, voting rights, and race-based curriculums are under siege by conservative political projects. Rachel Panton’s meditations on an Africana womanist pedagogical outlook on care in the classroom calls for us to center engaged pedagogy as a viable approach for ways of seeing our students, “what they might be waking up to, what thoughts and scenes they might encounter” (ch. 21) and how we might acknowledge their pandemic related circumstances as intricately connected to their well-being, not just as individual humans enduring an unprecedented challenge, but as fully embodied learners.

Finally, this collection provides us with the opportunity to identify professional development opportunities for leadership development. As WPAs and academic leaders, we need to identify and apply organizational strategies that confront crisis management, decision making, and risk management. This collection offers one of the firmest reminders that how we handle crises and decisions can have life and death consequences. Our field needs to look carefully at public-facing documents to ensure that we live up to the values by which we purport

to live. We need to think more critically about how we communicate and document decisions beyond the typical institutional lip service and damage control rhetorical strategies by which institutional public relations spokespersons are skillfully trained. Again, this collection offers us a model for how we connect with readers, how we document with accuracy, and how we become transparent. In short, this collection needs to be reading material not only for our field, but more importantly, for higher education more broadly, including its academic leaders. As readers, we have connected strongly with this collection, and look forward to unpacking its broader impact on how we navigate “uncommon times” in the future.

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