

CHAPTER 4.

CRITIQUING THE “NETWORKED SUBJECT” OF ANTI-RACISM: TOWARD A MORE EMPOWERED AND INCLUSIVE “WE” IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

Erec Smith

York College of Pennsylvania

In *Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential through Secure Base Leadership*, George Kohlrieser defines a secure base as “a person, place, goal or object that provides a sense of protection, safety and caring *and* offers a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk taking and seeking challenge [emphasis added]” (2012, p. 8). This concept correlates to the emotional intelligence competencies of emotional self-control (Kohlrieser, 2017b), conflict management (Kohlrieser, 2017c), and mentoring (Kohlrieser, 2017a) and may be an implicit goal in most, if not all, intersectional social justice initiatives. Research showed that all involved in academia, especially students, need to “develop a sense of belonging” while on campus (Carter, 2021, p. 20). Acquiring a secure base for the historically downtrodden may be a more arduous task. So, once such a secure base is acquired, groups may try to protect and fortify it at all costs.

Marginalized and precarious populations throughout general society may tacitly seek this secure base while an apparently unaccepting hegemony looms. Academia is no different. This can explain the vitriolic backlash to perceived White supremacy in online spaces like the Writing Program Administrators Listserv (WPA-L)—now defunct—that served as an online community for administrators and scholars of rhetoric and composition. Many saw threads started by people who wanted to discuss the merits of viewpoint diversity or the efficacy of current anti-racism initiatives as “toxic,” and “harmful” to marginalized people (Baniya et al., 2019, pp. 206-209). Yet, if you were to talk to one of the most vocal of the “toxic” and “harmful” voices on this listserv, he would tell you that he was not supporting White supremacy but critiquing what he saw as a flawed methodology for anti-racism, one he felt embraced

a disempowered and anti-intellectual stance. (I know this because that voice was mine: an African American man invested in both academic integrity and the empowerment of people of color.) Disagreement with such a critique was not the issue. The problem was that the critique was treated as an attack on a hard-fought but precarious “secure base.”

What does it mean that experts in language, literacy, and rhetoric handle critique as they would a threat to their very safety? What does it mean when communication experts cannot communicate, resorting to fallacious reasoning, personal attacks, and misinformation to protect their ideas? What does it mean for rhetoric and composition administrators and their programs, their curriculum, and their initiatives? I believe it means that academia has not taken a turn toward social justice so much as social justice—in its manifestations as “identity politics”—has usurped academia, hijacking academic discourse for a monological agenda and a clear willingness to silence others rather than engage them. The one-sided nature Sweta Baniya et al.’s (2019) attempts to chronicle the events of the WPA-L without identifying the allegedly racist statements, exemplifies this.¹

I think cross-ideological communication in the anti-racism movement has failed because this movement is looking for a “secure base” more than a collaborative understanding of what can be done to actually create an anti-racist infrastructure within programs, within departments, and within the discipline. If such an infrastructure were the goal, dialogue would be welcomed, strategies would be discussed, and a broader “listening rhetoric” (Booth, 2004, pp. 46-50) would be a salient tool. This is not the case. I am not sure if a desire to feel safe has overtaken desires to be understood and productive or if a secure base is being mistaken for understanding and productivity. According to Kohlrieser, “A secure base simultaneously shuts down the brain’s focus on fear, threat and even survival *and* encourages curiosity and risk taking while inspiring exploration” (2012, p. 9). One can understand why such a condition is defended at the slightest provocation.

In *The lure of disempowerment*, I present a confluence of empowerment theory and emotional intelligence as a kind of treatment for the apparent insecurity of anti-racist networks in rhetoric and composition (Smith & Abraham, 2022). Empowerment theory concludes that the fulfillment of three components

1 I believe Baniya et al.’s (2019) is not an accurate assessment of the goings-on on the WPA-L. Along with a neglect to mention that the primary “dissenter” was a Black man, a substantial number of voices, essentialized as racist, were left out. The necessary conversation, the one attempted on the listserv, seemed to be met with dismissal, not a desire to interact and converse. This information, if acknowledged, would change the narrative substantially. Please see the WPA-L archives for March 2019, specifically the thread with the subject heading “The Cs Chairs Address,” which can be found at <https://lists.asu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind1903&L=WPA-L>.

comprises empowerment. Psychologist Marc Zimmerman, one of the more prominent empowerment theorists, wrote

These three components of [empowerment] merge to form a picture of a person who believes that he or she has the capability to influence a given context (intrapersonal component) understand how the system works in that context (interactional component), and engages in behaviors to exert control in the context (behavioral component). . . . All three components must be measured to fully capture [psychological empowerment. (1995, p. 590)

Each component contains corresponding aspects of emotional intelligence necessary to its fulfillment. The intrapersonal necessitates self-awareness and self-management. The interactional necessitates social awareness and empathy. The behavioral component necessitates teamwork, listening skills, and conflict management. One can conclude, then, that to be empowered in this way is to enjoy an existential secure base. A secure base can be felt in several ways (e.g., it can be a person, a place, or even an object). So, shaping a space to obsequiously prioritize the marginalized, or creating a social machinery that necessarily lauds the marginalized while downplaying anyone deemed hegemonic, is not imperative; the base can be widened with empowerment theory and the emotional intelligence competencies therein.

If the foundation for anti-racist initiatives is one of empowerment, initiatives based on empowerment may go a long way in affecting societal change in ways that align with progressive social justice. Unfortunately, many group-based social justice initiatives are notorious for preferring to shut down, deplatform, or “cancel” those who say the wrong thing or hold differing viewpoints, instead of engaging in generative dialogue toward a better understanding of circumstances and effective strategies for progress. I believe this is because that potential dialogue is considered less likely to create and/or perpetuate the secure base sought by social justice advocates in the student body, the faculty, or the administration.

People pine so direly for this secure base that they have created a “Networked Subject,” a collective persona, who is ready to strike if threatened. Ultimately, I believe that anti-racism cannot be achieved with an exclusive and insular network dutifully intolerant of anything that does not present the Networked Subject as a victim upon which genuflection is the only acceptable treatment. The network has to be opened and cognizant of the innovative powers of dialectic in addressing several progressive viewpoints. That is, one person’s anti-racism may be different from another’s, but their confluence may produce ideas and present opportunities that, otherwise, may have gone undiscovered.

Empowerment theory is not meant to erase the realities of racism. It is meant to help us adequately address racism in productive ways. Throughout this essay, I will identify the network of anti-racism in rhetoric and composition, its dynamics, and its determinants before discussing how the confluence of network theory and empowerment theory can move us toward a broader and more generative network of social justice. I close this chapter with reflective questions that rhetoric and composition administrators might want to reflect upon and discuss in disciplinary spaces, program committees, and elsewhere.

THE POWER OF NETWORKS

One may wonder how an ideological minority, even if loud, is able to acquire enough power to present itself as a formidable presence. The answer to that question can be found by looking at that ideological minority through the lens of network theory, specifically as delineated by Miguel Castells. Castells (2011) defines a network as a multidimensional domain in which particular agents wield power. Networks are discourse communities made up of the material and immaterial agents that produce and reproduce them. Networks can be inclusive or exclusive, but exclusivity *seems* to enhance the structural integrity of a network, perpetuating a lifeworld built and utilized by particular agents. It is believed that social power “is primarily exercised by and through networks” (Castells, 2011, p. 774). Taking his cue from Castells, economist C. Otto Scharmer (2016) wrote of “the darker side of the networked society,” meaning “those who are not equipped with the *right kind of knowledge*, skills, and networks are socially excluded and polarized [emphasis added]” (p. 85). Networks create discourse which, in turn, legitimizes some ways of looking at the world while delegitimizing—sometimes quite purposefully—other ways. What is often called “deplatforming” or “cancelling” is an example of the social exclusion and polarization of which Scharmer speaks. People who have been deplatformed and cancelled did not have “the right kind of knowledge,” according to a particular network, even if they considered themselves allies and proponents of that network. It is in networking that paradigm shifting (or perpetuating) power is realized. But what is a networked society? We can come to an understanding of it through Castells (2011), who distinguishes four major concepts in network theory.

First, “Networking Power” is “the power of actors and organizations included in the networks,” such as the power wielded by those privileged enough to be included in the network (Castells, 2011, p. 774). Of course, these “actors and organizations” have dominion over those who want to be included or be in contact with the empowered network. Regarding anti-racism in rhetoric and composition, examples of these “actors and organizations” include the following:

WPA-L Reimagining Working Group tasked with making the WPA-L a more secure base; the nextGen Start-Up Team responsible for starting a separate list-serve geared toward creating a secure base for graduate students (Baniya et al., 2019); the burgeoning Institute of Race, Rhetoric, and Literacy (Beavers et al., 2021); and Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee for Change (CCCC, Committee for Change, 2022b) and The Committee on Accessing Whiteness for Equity, Understanding, and Change within CCCC/NCTE (CCCC, Committee on Accessing Whiteness, 2022a), the Social Justice At The Convention Committee (CCCC, Social Justice, 2022d) charged with eradicating apparent White supremacy and unethical behavior at the conference; and the CCCC Officers & Executive Committee Members, specifically from 2018–2023 (CCCC, Officers and Executive Committee, 2022c). These “actors and organizations” interlink to create a “Networked Subject.”

Second, “Network Power” is “the power of the standards of the network over its components” (Castells, 2011, p. 775). That is, the power of discourse to define and interpellate identity, define activities, and project value. Network power “ultimately favors the interests of both a specific set of social actors at the source of network formation and also of the establishment of the standards (protocols of communication)” (Castells, 2011, p. 775). Those social actors are imperative in establishing standards—easily construed as the components of a narrative—that veritably cast people in particular roles.

Third, “Networked Power” is the “relational capacity to impose an actor’s will over another actor’s will on the basis of the structural capacity of domination embedded in the institutions of society” (Castells, 2011, p. 775). Networked Power is given by the social machinery that empowers some actors over others and gives some actors “Networking Power” while denying it to others. Put metaphorically, these are the casting directors that give roles to players based on their fit in the discourse community. Again, that social machinery, the standards and components of the narrative, will determine who is and who is not worthy of wielding or benefiting from power.

Last, “Network-Making Power” consists of two subcategories of power: “the ability to constitute network(s) and to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network”; and “the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation” (Castells, 2011, p. 776). The ability to make networks is the ability to gain power through numbers. Although these forms of power are relevant to explaining the concept of networks and its importance in empowering ideological movements, “network-making power” may be the most salient form for the purposes of this essay. This salience is gleaned from what Castells calls the “holders” of

the aforementioned subcategories of power. The holders of the first subcategory, the ability to constitute and program/reprogram networks, are called, appropriately enough, “programmers” (Castells, 2011, p. 775). Holders of the second category, the ability to connect and influence cooperation of various other networks based on common aspirations and resources, are called “switchers” (Castells, 2011, p. 775).

Programmers set up the goals of a network (e.g., anti-racism and decolonialism) and the social machinery—network and networked power—to perpetuate it. According to Castells (2011), a network society mostly embeds the “ideas, visions, projects, frames” in particularly electronic processes of communication, to better ensure input from a variety of origins (p. 776). Controlling networks of communication, then, is an important act of programmers. They can identify the processes of communication to which potentially useful constituents are most exposed and disseminate ideas, visions, etc. Social media, listservs, and backchannel email correspondences are ideal. The CCCC Committee for Change, for example, was put together, “programmed,” by such programmers and used the WPA-L and, presumably, other virtual and non-virtual spaces to gather committee members and disseminate information.

Switchers have the power of connecting relatively disparate networks in ways that will prove strategic to each. Switchers see the potential “power in numbers” of collaboration and work to identify modes of communication and synthesize interests to create coalitions stronger than the previously separated entities. These networks, through the switching process, must be able “to communicate with each other, inducing synergy and limiting contradiction” (Castells, 2011, p. 777). The WPA-L Reimagining Working Group and nextGen Start-Up Team are good examples of Switchers and exemplify this relationship in Baniya et al. in which both groups’ dialogue about their common interpretations of dissenting voices and their common desire to counteract them (2019). This is what Scharmer, referencing Henry Mintzberg, referred to as “adhocracy”: a “mutual adjustment in networked relationships” which depends “on the quality of the relationships among key players” (2016, p. 300) and *not the quality of empirical justifications for policy changes*.

Here is where Castells (2011) sees potential for danger. After explaining switchers and their power, he wrote,

This is why it is so important that media tycoons do not become political leaders, or that governments do not have total control over the media. The more that switchers become crude expressions of single purpose domination, the more that power relationships in the network society suffocate the dynamism and initiative of its multiple sources of social structuration and change. (p. 777)

Castells’ warning suggests that viewpoint diversity is imperative. Even if connections are made to achieve certain common goals, the diversity of viewpoints each network has can stay intact, suggesting that people dedicated to anti-racism while supporting different ideologies of anti-racism can co-exist. Working together can be a synergy, not necessarily a synthesis.

I believe that the danger of current academic networks of racial justice is the possibility of significant overlap between the programmers and the switchers, which can be gleaned from visiting the websites of the aforementioned organizations. Programmers and switchers, as Castells (2011) wrote, “are not single actors . . . as the exercise of power in the network society requires a complex set of joint action that goes beyond alliances to become a new form of subject—a networked subject” (p. 776). The programmers of anti-racist networks and the switchers that connect networks with comparable goals come together to create “The Networked Subject”—the same people, saying the same things, are co-writing, editing essay collections, and administering ad hoc committees for change. The programmers and the switchers, who collectively constitute “The Networked Subject,” are working to revise modes of communication in spaces within the field of rhetoric and composition, such as through WPA-L and CCCC. For this to truly succeed—that is, for the programmers’ and switchers’ narrative and ideology to become executive—insularity is imperative. Those who sing a different tune but still want in (i.e., those who care about anti-racism but do not approve of the favored methodologies) may be seen as threats that can weaken the network and, therefore, the power derived from the network. “The Networked Subject” may become relatively one-dimensional.

THE DETRIMENTS OF A SECURE BASE NETWORK

In “Whom do Activists of Color Speak For,” Eboo Patel (2019) gives a hypothetical account of a person of color expressing disdain over anti-racist leadership:

[A]n activist will find him or herself in a classroom or at a conference using the well-worn formulation, “People of color feel . . .” Perhaps a group of well-meaning liberal White people will lean in to listen more closely. But this time some person of color in the audience will decide that she has had enough. She will interrupt the activist who is claiming to speak for her and say, “Please don’t pretend that what you are about to say represents me. I am perfectly capable of forming my own thoughts and representing myself.” (para. 14)

Patel ends the hypothetical situation there, but I have a good idea of how the rest of the story would pan out. Our dissenter of color would be seen as a threat to the anti-racism network from which the activists speak. The “well-meaning liberal White people” will side with the activists, joining them in an erasure of the dissenter’s voice. If initial erasures do not work, all involved will work to demonize, mob, and ignore the explanations of the dissenter. Rumors will be spread, words will be misrepresented, ad hominem insults toward the dissenter will be considered “solid arguments.” The necessary “framing of individual and collective minds” that ensures successful intimidation and silencing tactics are established in this network (Castells, 2011, p. 779). This may sound like a decidedly negative speculation on my part, but I am speaking from experience. I was such a dissenter in a rhetoric and composition listserv in the Spring of 2019.

On the WPA-L, a debate about the methodologies of anti-racist tactics and initiatives had been taking place since the 2019 CCCC call for papers in March of 2018 (Young, n.d.), which involved a heated discussion about the use of code-meshed English as either triumph or, in my words, rhetorical “Blaxploitation.” To speak for myself, I expected and welcomed pushback. Academia is a field driven by polemic and dialectic; I thought conversation could shed light on different viewpoints and bring everybody to a more thorough understanding of the issues that arise in anti-racist activism, especially the idea that one person or one group of people can speak for an entire race or ethnicity.

In early 2019, a spirited discussion began about the place of viewpoint diversity in the field of rhetoric and composition. Many people took the term “viewpoint diversity” to be a “dog whistle” for extreme right wing and racist opinions, which is not an uncommon conclusion within social justice circles (Murray, 2019, p. 135). Personally, I saw this as a genetic fallacy; people associated the term with unsavory characters who had used it in the past; few seemed to be open to discussing the actual meaning of viewpoint diversity as it was being used in the present context of WPA-L. Many, as can be gleaned from the content of Baniya et al. (2019), saw viewpoint diversity as a toxic and harmful concept for reasons never fully explained in the essay.

Then, in March 2019, Asao Inoue gave a keynote speech at the 2019 CCCC titled *How Do We Language so People Stop Killing Each Other, or What Do We Do about White Language Supremacy?* In the speech, Inoue discusses the intricacies of racism in the field and insists that White people decenter themselves not only to make room for minority voices, but to best handle the fact that White people embody racism, that their very presence is inherently oppressive to people of color (p. 362).

For many reasons, I will not rehash the intricacies of the WPA-L thread that followed, but I do invite people to visit the archives of March 2019,

especially the thread titled, “The Cs Chairs Address,” on the 19th of that month (Writing Program Administrators Listserv, 2019), which Baniya et al. wrote “disproportionately harmed marginalized people” (2019, pp. 203-204). Within this thread, dissenting voices, especially mine, were considered bullies. This label was decidedly erroneous for reasons put forth by Aurora Matzke et al. (2019) who distinguish academic bullying from general disagreement in their chapter within *Defining, Locating, and Addressing Bullying in the WPA Workplace*:

Academic bullying relies on intention, severity, scope, and the ways power is present in the interaction, whereas dissonance and conflict may occur sporadically or be part of the larger rhythms present in the cultural web. . . . While disagreements and conflicts might include unprofessional behavior, they are not synonymous with academic bullying—even though the behavior may seem uncomfortable, unfair, or unwarranted (p. 52).

One can see from this description of bullying that it is not synonymous with mere contention.

I believe bullying took place on a larger scale from the Networked Subject, itself.

From activity on WPA-L and Twitter regarding Inoue’s speech,² one can see what theorists Brian Martin and Florencia Peña Saint Martin (2014) call “mobbing.” According to their research, mobbing

can be defined as a group systematically attacking a person’s reputation for a long period of time, using negative communication as a weapon. The intention is to destroy the target’s value as a reliable individual, initially causing them to lose power and prestige, with the long-term goal of achieving their dismissal, resignation or general ostracism. (2014, para 1)

I was slandered as a troll, a stalker, a fascist, a coward, and anti-Black racist

2 While scrolling through Twitter, a platform networked to WPA-L, I saw more interpretations of my initial email that did not align with my own understanding, and the unquestioning praise of the graduate student’s speech; my response to the graduate student’s email was still going unacknowledged and false descriptions of my words and me continued to be used. (I no longer have direct citations of these tweets, but they are referenced in the “Cs Chair’s Address” thread on WPA-L in the March 2019 archives.) I decided to try and address this by engaging in conversation. Using a handle that doesn’t have my actual name was, in hindsight, a mistake. At the time, I was on Twitter about one month out of the year for the annual College Composition and Communication Conference and did not really think about the importance of a Twitter handle.

to eliminate me as a threat to the secure base fortified by the programmers and switcher of this network.³

Martin and Saint Martin go on to explain the typical kind of context most conducive to the phenomenon of mobbing. Given the extensive existing research on workplace mobbing, it seems sensible to see whether the same sorts of frameworks can be applied to mobbing in the public sphere, including social media. Martin and Saint Martin, strongly referencing Kenneth Westhues work, break mobbing into component parts and give the following characteristic features. These chronological features may define the Networked Subject's behavior as defender of the network and bringer of a secure base. According to Martin and Saint Martin (2014), mobbing includes:

- Groups with shared interests.
- Individuals (possible targets) who threaten those groups in some way.
- The group with shared interests ganging up against that person. The group thus becomes the mobbing perpetrator team.
- Usually a main instigator or a small group of instigators among the perpetrator team.
- A shift of focus from what targets said or did that threaten the group, to devaluing targets as persons as a strategy to suppress them, taking away their power.
- An aim to discredit and/or destroy the target's reputation, often persistently monitoring them to find ever more information for this purpose.
- Coordination of the group's activities against targets.
- Persistent attacks by the perpetrator team against targets to continually devalue them.

One can see clear parallels between Martin and Saint Martin's description of mobbing and what took place on the WPA-L listserv. The anti-racist network in rhetoric and composition, with its Networked Power, is surely a group with shared interests. When their achieved or sought-after secure base was threatened, the network transformed from academics engaged in discussion to "mobbing perpetrator teams" determined to "change the focus from the issues to the people expressing contrary views, transforming routine interpersonal interactions into damaging forms of attack" (Martin & Saint Martin, 2014, para. 12). (This

3 Hate speech can be defined as an "incitement to hatred"—primarily against a group of persons defined in terms of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation and the like" (Fisch, 2002, p. 463) or more generally "any form of expression through which speakers primarily intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against other targets" (Ward, 1998). I think the operative word in each definition, unsurprisingly, is hatred.

is apparent in the “Cs Chair Address” thread of the listserv, in which references to the Twitter interaction can be found.) An aim to “denounce and/or destroy” reputations is clear.

In the anti-racism network in rhetoric and composition, what constitutes violence and injury has broadened to include general critical inquiry toward and disagreement with the victim-based, us-against-them narrative. Ideologies that present the marginalized student or scholar as one who always feels “suffocated” by the presence of White people (Inoue, 2019a, p. 361) are favored; thoughts and inquiries that counter this narrative are demonized or silenced. (Many people of color do not feel suffocated by the presence of White people.) Personally, my words and inquiries, even if mercurial at times—for the same reasons Inoue puts forth to justify his purposefully agitating rhetoric (Corrigan, 2019)—were not examples of hate speech, but were clearly taken as such. My critiques of anti-racist methodologies were critiques, not hateful, violent attacks. Also, my target was not individual personalities, but a set of ideas and behaviors I deemed detrimental and disempowering to real progress in anti-racism. Nevertheless, within the network’s logic, my critique was seen as a kind of violence or, at best, a slippery slope toward violence.

GRAND SCHOLAR WIZARD

Perhaps the biggest catalyst for adhocracy and publications by Baniya et al. (2019) was the following email, sent, anonymously, to WPA-L:

Listers, think about this:

The stakes in this field aren’t that high in the big scheme of things.

Sit with this for a moment.

The stakes in this field aren’t that high.

Just a moment longer.

Composition and writing studies—and the great experiment of higher education more generally—are on the down tick.

We all know that we feel it. Look around. Be real. Don’t kid yourself.

When each are finished and gone, you’ll still be able to passionately talk about, or bitch and moan about, or mentally masturbate all over others’ ideas, their shitty analyses, embodiment, identity politics, and any other thing your heart desires.

But there will be nobody there to listen to you.

Be kind to each other in the meantime.

Each of you are all that we have.

Peace.

Grand Scholar Wizard (Writing Program Administrators
listserv, 2019).

The content of this person's email was not at issue. What was at issue was the writer's sign-off: Grand Scholar Wizard. To most people on WPA-L, this was a purposeful allusion to "Grand Wizard," the moniker given to the leader of a Klu Klux Klan chapter. In anti-racist networks, otherwise innocuous incidents are manipulated to fit a grand narrative. This is not to say that the Grand Scholar Wizard email was nothing to ponder, but within this particular network, it was tantamount to a declaration of war against the secure base. It sparked an adhoc-racy indicative of a space managed by ideologically homogenous programmers and switchers.

The Grand Scholar Wizard email served as a prompt to create guidelines for communication and behavior for both WPA-L and the CCCC. But besides the sign-off of the Grand Scholar Wizard email—one email sent anonymously—what language etiquette was violated, and what behaviors were beyond the pale? Again, words got heated, but did they constitute hate speech? In the context of this anti-racist network, it would seem so. Through the terministic screen of the Networked Subject who served as the collective protagonist against White supremacy, mere critical inquiry was seen as an attack. Any resulting codes of conduct within rhetoric and composition spaces, such as listservs and conferences, will likely shun critical inquiry and the verbalizing of any stance that counters the preferred one. These revised guidelines could simply be the banning of anything that comes close to threatening the secure base of this field's anti-racist network. Outside of the network, this would look like censorship and the squelching of academic discourse and freedom; within the network, this would look like justice.

TOWARD A WIDER SECURE BASE NETWORK

The network of anti-racism has been established as a secure base that abides by a discourse intolerant of dissenting views, even if those views still lie within the general goal of social justice. Those with Network-Making Power perpetuated the Network Power of narrative, particularly one in which marginalized people—in this case, racially marginalized people—are cast as a collective Networked Subject, the protagonist of a redemption narrative against White supremacy. To be clear, my views were not against anti-racism, but the particular

brand of anti-racism that seemed to be favored among anti-racists in the field. However, my standpoint constituted a role that did not exist in the available *dramatis personae* of this narrative, so I was assigned one of the remaining, though inaccurate, roles.

The role of “Black man who sees anti-racist initiatives as misguided and wants to do something about it to better ensure the empowerment of marginalized students” is not a possibility within this network, so I was erased and replaced with one of the available roles: Uncle Tom, Coon, Sambo, etc. Because these were the available roles, anything I said would be interpreted negatively. Any opinion that went against the apparent infallibility of scholars of color were taken as the words of someone “dismissive of, inhospitable to, and aggressive towards” antiracism and its proponents (Baniya et al., 2019, p. 205). Standing one’s ground after research, experience, and time has led one to a conclusion that prompts a revision—not a dismissal—of a favored ideology considered “toxic” and “harmful” (Baniya et al., 2019, p. 206). Asking colleagues to elaborate and engage in a conversation about all of the above is considered a kind of violence. Judith B. Lee, a social worker who utilizes empowerment theory akin to that put forth by Zimmerman,⁴ cited the empowerment approach to social work as the building of a “Beloved Community” as “both the process and the hoped for outcome” of empowerment (Lee, 2001, p. 1). What Lee adds to empowerment theory is the necessity for what she calls the multifocal vision of empowerment, a vision that works well with social justice initiatives.

The multifocal vision of empowerment, along with the aforementioned components of the intrapersonal, the interactive, and the behavioral (what Lee calls the political), consists of seven “views”:

1. Historical view
2. Ecological View
3. Ethclass perspective
4. Cultural/Multicultural perspective
5. Feminist perspective
6. Global perspective
7. Critical perspective (2001, pp. 49-50)

Length of oppression—the Historical view—is utilized when considering the very real systemic aspects of oppression. As I wrote in my book, *A Critique of Anti-racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*, (2019),

⁴ Lee (2001) renders the components of empowerment “Personal,” “Interpersonal,” and “Political,” which align with Zimmerman’s “Intrapersonal,” “Interactive,” and “Behavioral,” respectively. Because Zimmerman’s take seems to be the most common, I use his renderings throughout my work.

Length of oppression is considered when considering the very real systemic aspects of oppression. The ecological view takes into consideration the material influences of the world on behavior and outlook. ‘Ethclass’ is synonymous with intersectionality and takes into consideration the various demographics one person can embody. The feminist component focuses on the political aspect of seemingly personal tribulations, that is, the personal is political. The critical denotes a challenge to hegemonic forces. The cultural and global recognizes how certain forces affect both our local considerations and those of other cultures and countries. (p. 33)

Lee’s “Beloved Community” utilized a multifocal approach to progress, while engaging the three components of empowerment, and create a wider and more inclusive secure base. In essence, Lee’s seven views should be considered, seen, simultaneously. Regarding her specific role as a social worker, but also relevant to our purposes as scholars and activists, Lee wrote,

The social worker should maintain holistic vision in situations of oppression. The development of multifocal vision is needed to maintain a holistic view. We should be able to see both the forest and the trees, the wider scene and the individual picture—and attend to both with our clients. (2001, p. 60)

In theory, this would necessitate a look beyond any kind of network to get a better idea of the world and its players and, perhaps, a different narrative with a more dynamic *dramatis personae*.

In *Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges*, Scharmer calls this holistic look beyond the confines of a network “presencing”: “to sense, tune in, and act from one’s highest future potential,” insisting that “the future depends on us to bring it into being” (2016, pp. 7-8). What Zimmerman and Lee would call empowerment theory, Scharmer would call the “Primacy of Praxis”: “[a]ll real learning is grounded in real-world praxis. There are three kinds of praxis: *professional praxis*—striving for performance excellence; *personal praxis*—striving for self-leadership; and *relational praxis*—striving to improve the quality of thinking, conversing, and acting together” (2016, pp. 225-226). This aligns with the empowerment components of the behavioral, the intrapersonal, and the interactional, respectively. Scharmer’s claim that learning is situated in real-world performance, similar to Lee’s argument that “The sharing of experience must always be understood within a social praxis” (2001, p. 57), speaks to Scharmer’s point that looking beyond the boundaries of our respective networks is the key to innovation and generative change. Presencing

is going beyond the status quo, beyond the emphasis on difference, and even beyond productive and innovative dialogue. Presencing and its inherent primacy of praxis, is stepping even beyond oneself and seeing the world, including oneself, as a vast and living organism. Here, there is no us against them; there is only “we.” From this “we,” we can “learn from the future as it emerges.” That is, when we let go of familiar and preferred narratives and see from a bird’s eye view, or from Lee’s seven views, a more inclusive and more elaborately networked narrative emerges. This narrative is always evolving and always inclusive.

So, when applying a synthesis of these theories of empowerment to current antiracist initiatives by rhetoric and composition administrators or by the field, more broadly, another story emerges. More accurate roles are available for me and others in the emerging narrative. Dialogue toward a generative future brings forth a world in which different ideologies can merge into new and contextually sound ideas. With a broader network, broader meanings can come into play. Terministic screens widen, distinctions between protagonist and antagonist dissolve, diversity of viewpoint is not an inherently negative term, and no one is essentialized. This is easier said than done, but it can be done.

Rhetoric and composition administrators might want to examine, personally or professionally, the types of dialogue they are participating in and the types of dialogue they want to encourage in their programs and elsewhere. Here are some reflection questions readers might want to explore within their roles as administrators:

- How might systems and networks in your program, your department, and/or your institution encourage or push-back against the secure base?
- How might you encourage a multifocal vision of empowerment in your administrative work, the courses you teach, the committees you are on, and the conversations you have?
- How might you encourage more polyvocality rather than a monolithic perspective? How might you encourage dissenting views in your programs and elsewhere, even if those views go against popular social justice perspectives but still lie within the general goal of social justice?
- What social actors do you see in your home institutions that cast people in particular roles? How might you use your administrative work—archiving, document (re)design, curriculum development, assessment, etc.—to recast people in more accurate, inclusive roles?
- How might you incorporate Lee’s seven views and/or Castells four major concepts in your administrative, teaching, and/or scholarly work to encourage a more inclusive networked narrative?

I believe that empowerment theory combined with understandings of network dynamics can assist us in overcoming the contention currently engulfing social justice in the field of rhetoric and composition, especially as it pertains to anti-racism. I believe it can help us develop a secure base, or what Lee would call a “Beloved Community,” in which all can feel safe and heard. We all must take the courageous steps to opening up to all involved in the endeavor: perceived friends, perceived protagonists, perceived antagonists, and several different roles a more holistic viewpoint can allow. Although I have been critical of Baniya et al.’s essay, I couldn’t agree more with its final sentiment: “We rise together” (2019, p. 210). I just want to see a broader and more inclusive “we.”

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