

How to Respond When You're BIPOC and Your Organization Is Called Out for Racism¹

Patti Poblete

In the original version of my blog post, I included an illustration: a web comic by James Stewart of @dinosandcomics. It's a simple, four-square strip featuring two cartoonish dinosaurs, one blue and one orange. In the first panel, Blue tells its companion, "You've got to be in it to win it." Orange replies, "I've no interest in winning it." For a space, they simply stare at each other. Then Blue breaks the news to its friend: "You've got to be in it anyway." Whether I want to or not, I've got to be in this anyway.

I asked a colleague whether I could make this statement in all memes. Can I get away with making pointed jokes? That would actually be well within my wheelhouse.

But I guess not, so here we go. Please note: I am not speaking on behalf of the CWPA, the Executive Board, or on behalf of my colleagues. This is just me, having feelings.

For the record, I am Filipina and cis-female, and I can only speak from my own standpoint and experiences. I have been a member of the CWPA for almost a decade now (except for that one time I forgot to renew my membership for a couple of years; that was pretty awkward). I was a member of WPA-GO, the graduate student branch of the CWPA, for four years. I have been on the Executive Board of CWPA for the past two years. I have been part of a task force to consider anti-racist initiatives the organization could develop. (This is separate from the task force that was working to revise the Outcomes statement; we've got a lot of tasks, guys.) So, again, while I am not speaking for the organization, I do want to establish that, like, I know of what I speak.

A while back, the Outcomes task force did share a draft of what they were working on. We discussed it during an Executive Board meeting. I was one of the people who expressed reservations about it—not so much about the work itself, but rather that I wasn't sure what the document was supposed to *do*. (I'd been smack-dab in the middle of teaching proposals in all my classes; I could recite genre conventions in my sleep.) I'm still not sure what it's supposed to do, except that I'm also now realizing I don't know what *any* statement is supposed to do.

Who are we talking to?

I was also in the most recent meeting with the Outcomes task force. And I want to be absolutely, 100% clear on this: Asao's recounting of the

events of the meeting is accurate (“Why I Left”), based on my memories of the discussion. That is what I saw happen, though of course my experience of the meeting was quite different from his. I’m also certain my experience of the meeting was vastly different from what some of my colleagues on the board experienced. I choose to believe everybody was acting in good faith, but also not accounting for the centuries of context that come with discussions about anti-racist work.

He’s right about the horrific silence as well: I was responding to folks in the chat box, certainly, but I could have said something so that everybody heard it. I should have. Honestly, I couldn’t sleep that night because I kept thinking over what I could have said. (My hindsight self is so eloquent.) My best (and very weak) defense is that I still feel very much like a junior scholar and I usually hesitate to wade in when folks who have, like, twenty years of publication on me are having it out.

And, well. Let me quote, of all folks, Lemony Snicket:

When somebody is a little bit wrong—say, when a waiter puts nonfat milk in your espresso macchiato, instead of lowfat milk—it is often quite easy to explain to them how and why they are wrong. But if somebody is surprisingly wrong—say, when a waiter bites your nose instead of taking your order—you can often be so surprised that you are unable to say anything at all. Paralyzed by how wrong the waiter is, your mouth would hang slightly open and your eyes would blink over and over, but you would be unable to say a word.

I didn’t say anything at the time and that’s a failure on my part. Not because I am BIPOC—we should not have to always do the heavy lifting in anti-racist work—but because I was elected to the Executive Board. I failed in my *role*, not my identity.

Speaking from that intersection of viewpoints, though, I *personally* find this ongoing situation to be frustrating. In 2016, Asao’s plenary address to the CWPA conference, “Racism in Writing Programs and the CWPA,” had many of the same points and received the same response. In 2019, Asao’s talk at the opening session of CCCC, “How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, Or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy,” had many of the same points and received the same response. A couple of days before he made his announcement, I mentioned this to a friend and said—literally, for real—“If I were him, I’d have stopped trying by now.”

If we acknowledge that the American educational system is built on white supremacy—and it is—and that writing programs, in particular, reinforce white supremacy—and they do—then it shouldn’t be a surprise

if we get called out for saying things that reflect white supremacy. **Because we do.** It's what we're trained to do. It's what we've been doing. It's the air we breathe and the water we wade through.

That doesn't make it right, obv's. It's frustrating as hell. But if someone says you've said something racist, the response of someone who claims to be an ally should *not* be an explanation of why it isn't. If someone says you've said something racist (or sexist or ableist or classist), they're probably right. They're the ones getting stepped on, not you. Take the hit and *do the work* to figure out how to avoid doing it again.

(So what can we do, if the very foundation of what we do, what we believe, what we profess is inextricable from white supremacy? Burn it all down? I agree with folks that change will happen incrementally, largely because we lack the power to do anything in big, broad sweeps. But can't we commit to the promise of rebuilding it all, even if it seems impossible? How many of y'all stanned for Bernie Sanders?)

The Council of Writing Program Administrators is a racist organization in the baseline definition of the word: Systemic or institutionalized racism "refers to how ideas of white superiority are captured in everyday thinking at a systems level: taking in the big picture of how society operates, rather than looking at one-on-one interactions" (O'Dowd). Sometimes it manifests on a personal level, but racism is actually a big picture problem. And hey, we're *the Council of Writing Program Administrators*. Except for "the" and "of," every word in that title is inherently exclusionary. (Wait, "the" is a definite article. Only "of" got out of this unblemished, I guess.)

I'm not quitting, though. I get the call to boycott, I really do. And if you feel that's the best course for you, well, rock on. I support you. I also believe that *I, personally* am in a position to maybe get something done. I'm on the Executive Board. I'm going to be an editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administrators*. I'm good at social media, I'm good at conversation, I'm good at what I do. I am good at making noise.

It's my responsibility to make noise.

Also, don't take my word for it—what do I know, other than myself? These might be helpful, if you're interested:

- Kendall, Frances E. "How to Be an Ally If You Are a Person with Privilege." *Seattle Community Network*, 2003, www.scn.org/friends/ally.html. Accessed 21 April 2021.
- Real Talk: WOC and Allies. "Holy Shit, Being an Ally Isn't about Me!" *Medium*, 10 June 2017, medium.com/@realtalkwocandallies/holy-shit-being-an-ally-isnt-about-me-ae2de5c47514. Accessed 21 April 2021.

- “White Allyship 101: Resources to Get to Work.” Dismantle *Collective*, n.d., www.dismantlecollective.org/resources/. Accessed 21 April 2021.

All right. Time to hit “publish.”

NOTE

1. A version of this essay was originally published in Patti Poblete’s blog on April 21, 2021.

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