

Addressing The Barriers Between Us and that Future: (Feminist) Activist Coalition Building in Writing Studies

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Anna Sicari is an Assistant Professor in Writing Studies in the Writing, Literature, and Digital Humanities department at SIU. Her research interests are in feminist research methodologies and theories, writing program and center administration/work, and community engaged work. These interests can be seen in her articles published in *CCCs*, *College English*, *JAEPL*, *Praxis*, *Peitho*, *The Writing Center Journal*, and *Composition Studies*, as well as an edited collection from Utah State University Press titled *Our Body of Work: Embodied Writing Program Administration*. which just received honorable mention by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and multiple book chapters. She also serves as a co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal*, the official journal of the International Writing Centers Association, an affiliate with the National Council of the Teachers of English.

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Introduction

This Cluster Conversation emerged from a series of experiences each editor dealt with in 2022 as legislators in red states introduced bills restricting higher education and “banning” concepts like critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. This year the Supreme Court also decided to reverse affirmative action, and Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson eloquently pinned in her response to this decision: “With let-them-eat-cake obliviousness, the majority pulls the ripcord and announces ‘colorblindness for all’ by legal fiat. But deeming race irrelevant in law does not make it so in life” (Lithwick Slate.com). The repercussions of this decision—on top of the growing lists of states banning educational initiatives and programs that discuss race, gender, and identity—leave many academics and educators feeling that this will only get worse.

Intersectionality, as Kimberlé Crenshaw describes, is “a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren’t being appreciated by the courts” (Coaston Vox.com) Crenshaw brought to light the double discrimination Black women experienced by being both Black and women and highlighted legal cases wherein women were required to choose between bringing a case of racism or sexism and could not say they were discriminated against based on both being Black and being a woman. Considering the history of the American legal system, that the Supreme Court reversed affirmative action shortly after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* should come as no surprise. The day after overturning affirmative action, the Supreme Court also ruled that business owners now have the right to discriminate against same-sex couples if it conflicts with their religious identity.

This regressive backlash represents a continual pattern of silencing groups fighting against oppression. While many in our profession, particularly those with activist backgrounds, have entered higher education as a way to liberate ourselves and others through fostering agency, we must reckon with the history of our institutions, and the history of our writing spaces (our programs, our centers, our classrooms). Audre Lorde reminds us that the feminist activist movement will be successful when, “We are anchored in our own place and time, looking out and beyond to the future we are creating, and we are part of communities that interact. While we fortify ourselves with visions of the future, we must arm ourselves with accurate perceptions of the barriers between us and that future” (57). Antiracist, social justice and feminist pedagogies work to support writing practitioners in developing their response to racist agendas that impact our communities in and outside of academia, and to continue coalition building in spite of divisive laws, with a spirit of hope and clarity of vision.

This Cluster incorporates grounded examples of writing scholars and practitioners contending with regressive backlash, tensions, and obstacles and highlights the subversive and coalition-based tactics they have implemented in their contexts. Contributors reflect on their struggles and how they’re doing the work regardless of the barriers, with a focus on the histories we have

inherited, and an eye toward feminist methodologies and practices to move forward, in the hopes of real activist work in academia, of coalition-building, of true solidarity, rather than mutable support, highlighting our differences and celebrating what we learn when we work with difference. This introduction sets the scene for that work by providing each editor's own narrative account of the contexts that shaped this Cluster, the backlash they represent, and our approaches to resistance.

Turning Fear into Actionable Coalition

"Fear is the umbilical cord of rage"- Natasha Tinsley

Though we do not always wish to acknowledge or accept it, women are afraid; we are afraid. We are afraid for our children, our mothers and sisters, our friends and colleagues, our loved ones and strangers. Women are under attack. Black and Brown people are under attack. Queer and trans* people are under attack. We as academics and women and friends have seen (some have even experienced) how this fear can lead to a silence that stifles intellectual, cultural, and societal growth, preventing us from pushing back against these unjust attacks. Because as Audre Lorde writes in her piece "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," this silence comes from the "fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, or challenge, or annihilation. But most of all...fear [of] the invisibility...where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision...[that]...render[s] [one] invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (42). Because of this fear, it can make sense to allow parts of themselves to be silenced so they do not completely disappear. However, this silencing can lead to a concept Ibram X. Kendi wrote about called "uplift suasion." After slavery, "[t]he burden of race relations was placed squarely on the shoulders of Black Americans...If Black people behaved admirably...they would be undermining justifications for slavery and proving that notions of their inferiority were wrong" (124). Natasha is the living example of this kind of silencing.

Since her current university is teaching focused, she thought she could just do that; teach. However, "research shows that African American female faculty...tend to be overburdened with service work... [because they are] looked at as diversity experts..." (Fossett). And research ran her over as not too long after she was hired, members of administration asked her to head up different diversity programs. She did try, creating workshops, compiling reading lists, and gathering reading materials on race, discrimination, and inclusion. But she was not/is not an expert. She did not want to be the Ferryman, leading people across a river of uncertainty. So, she reached out and asked what people felt they needed as it relates to diversity. But around this time there was a change in university administration and the world around us. She sent out a survey to the email gatekeeper (not actual name) to be sent to her colleagues asking for their advice and received the following response, "I am still waiting on a response for approval." That approval never came and that survey was never sent. The life of an academic took over and she silently moved on. And

though she claimed to be relieved to no longer be tasked to do this work, the words sat tasteless on the back of her throat. To be pushed through the diversity door to only have the room suddenly snatched from around her without so much as a whisper felt disrespectful, devaluing, a reminder that Black voices have a specific purpose with an undisclosed expiration date. But just as Lorde and Kendi describe, she allowed herself to be silenced out of fear, for her job, for her position, of non-existence.

Now this collection demonstrates how this fear can fester and grow into an emotion that creates an icy heat that burns underneath the skin until it needs to be released. An emotion paramount to rage that is so strong that only action can cool it down. Understand this is not a chaotic, uncontrolled rage, leaving only destruction in its wake. This rage is intelligent, calculated, and channeled, targeted at those who believe that their way of thinking and living is the only way, the only right way.

This collection consists of experiences that demonstrate how this flame can be used to build collaborations and solidarity, hoping to increase this flame so it soon burns beyond those who already understand the battle being waged. While Natasha does not look to speak for the contributors, for they have definitely demonstrated they are talented enough and capable enough to speak for themselves, her interpretation of fear and rage lives and thrives through all of the pieces included in this collection. But everyone involved did not allow their fear to be a debilitating force that lulled them into submission. Like nutrients from a mother, they let this fear nourish their minds and grow into a necessary anger that will hopefully burn into the minds of those who really need it.

The Political is (Necessarily) Personal

Regressive legislation and political maneuvering, or “shock-and-awe campaigns,” as Dr. Kynard refers to them in this issue, have been difficult for some to see past this year. As our editorial team started receiving proposals, the 2023 Texas Legislative session began. By the time we received drafts, the session was coming to an end, and it was clear that Senate Bill 17 and other “anti-woke” bills would pass. When Texas legislators released the state’s finalized budget for the next two years, they included \$700 million extra in state funding for the state’s public universities. These funds were contingent upon two pieces of legislation becoming law: Senate Bill 17, which bans diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and programs in Texas higher education, and Senate Bill 18, the proposal to ban or overhaul tenure. Those bills passed, and public universities have access to those funds only if they demonstrate that they are complying with those new laws. The strings that those funds came with felt more like shackles, especially in underfunded public

institutions that operate from a place of fear.

While reading and writing about coalition-building in the face of regressive, anti-woke politicking, and structures of racial and gender domination, Hillary began to feel the urgency around coalitional work in her own institution skyrocket. As Dr. Kynard's essay-ish (referencing Ahmed) highlights, "DEI on our campuses has never meant radical access and educational transformation," but in small, regional, public institutions, the majority of an institution's support for culturally-relevant programming, inclusive pedagogies, and student leadership development may come from a single DEI office.

While SB 17 was still being deliberated, the primary DEI office at Hillary's institution was making plans for filling the massive gaps that would be left from their office's changes. Following the law's passing, the office conducted surveys and focus groups to help redefine their office's mission and goals in ways that would comply with the new law. Meanwhile, the institution was scrubbing DEI-related words and phrases from their website and all public-facing texts well in advance of the January 1st deadline. This felt like an abrupt shift from the recently established "Core Values" statements which emphasized diversity, equity, and inclusion, which had also been prioritized in various formal processes including tenure applications, annual report forms, and assessment plans. Also at play in this institutional context are rumors that the university is facing the possibility of declaring financial exigency, not to mention the explicit announcements regarding impending reductions in force. Despite these threats, a small coalition of faculty and staff from across campus continued to devise ways to engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion work and to recruit others into the unpaid, misunderstood, apparently risky labor of best practices in higher education without access to basic institutional resources like reserving meeting spaces, using institutional emails and postmasters, and meetings during staff working hours. Without those resources, the work was, by necessity, both interpersonal and deeply personal. Our informal conversations became our most important workspaces, and it was in those un(der)documented, unofficial interactions that we discovered access to underutilized resources and sources of support. The work in this cluster has been immediately relevant, insightful, and instructive to circumstances like Hillary's (and so many others), both in terms of illuminating ways to build subversive coalitions within and across oppressive institutions and in terms of addressing the barriers that have thwarted coalition and solidarity among us. As the institutions and organizations from which we earn our paychecks, our credentials, our status, and many of our resources continue to create barriers (expectedly) between us and the future we envision, we cannot ignore or neglect our greatest strength and resource: each other.

Whiplash from Backlash

At the "Addressing the Barriers Between Us and That Future: Feminist Activist Coalition

Building in Writing Studies” panel discussion at the 2023 Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition Deconference many of the authors gathered in person and via Zoom in this Cluster were able to gather in person for the first time and via Zoom, to discuss how we continue to show up and implement feminists methodologies and coalition building despite the regressive laws that have been passed in the states where we live.

One of the moderators, Lisa, began the discussion with words she had been trying to pen for weeks as we finished the editors’ introduction. As we approached the final weeks before the deconference, she knew she needed to write, yet, Lisa just didn’t want to revisit the feelings she had back in 2022, when all that we had worked for felt like it was being stripped away. Each time Lisa sat down to write her portion of our introduction, she could see in our shared document that her co-editors addressed the reality of the regressive laws and their current impact on our teaching, writing classrooms and spaces, and social organizations. When Lisa sat before the blank white screen, she could still vividly see the shock in one of her co-editors’, then writing center director, eyes staring back at her from the Zoom box as she explained she had been instructed to remove the Black Lives Statement from the writing center’s website.

To open our deconference session, Lisa was honest with our audience, she was, and still is, digesting her feelings. When Lisa joined the writing center in 2018, there weren’t many Black faces, but she was welcomed into a writing community whose commitment to social justice was visible. During her tenure, under the direction of Dr. Anna Sicari and alongside her colleagues Hillary Coenen, Fehintola Folarin, and Natasha Tinsley at Oklahoma State University (OSU) they co-founded the Talking Justice Workshop. It was an interactive workshop that taught antiracist strategies for tutors and faculty.

As assistant directors (graduate students) and directors (pre-tenure professionals), we sought to challenge white supremacy’s prevalence and norms in our writing spaces by building tutor and faculty anti racist training programs that instead of replicating coziness (Camarillo, 2019) exposed antiblackness. Our gears were turning to create writing spaces that intentionally did more than hire more tutors of color (Kynard 2019, Jordan 2021), and while we were aware of the HB 1775 law being passed, this call comes about because we did not fully realize what it would mean for us at our own institutions or institutions across the country who were feeling the impact of similar laws.

Choosing Love Amidst Fear

Anna’s experience with the state bill HB1775 (please read Wonderful Faison’s article to learn more about this bill) and facing institutional demand to end anti-racist initiatives in the writing center she directed in Oklahoma was illuminating in recognizing the successful strategies and tactics right wing ideologues are using to isolate individuals and create cultures of fear and lone-

liness. In *all about love*, bell hooks writes, “Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience...Fear is the primary force of upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire to not be known” (125). Reflecting on these lines is painful and poignant to Anna, as she experienced this type of fear hooks (and my fellow co-editors) describe, a wish to not be known or seen or recognized for the type of activist work she was attempting to do. It was not until she spoke about these experiences with her colleagues, recognizing that silence can only exacerbate fear, did she better understand the need to share these stories across state lines. Through talking with her colleagues and working with different communities, she recognized the importance of resiliency and strength; in talking with her co-editors, her colleagues and friends in doing this work, she was encouraged to choose love. “The choice to love is a choice to connect--to find ourselves in the other” (hooks 125).

This Cluster is born from love; love the co-editors have for one another, because of our differences and learning from one another, and love for the authors contributing to this issue, recognizing we're all doing this work together. The pieces this conversation showcases illuminate a wide range of issues we need to address as a field, and emphasize the importance of feminist work--exposing and posing problems to build more sustainable, just futures. We have articles that discuss explicitly ways in which these state laws have impacted what we can do as educators, and we also have pieces that implicitly show the barriers that exist, have always existed, and how coalition-building with intention across state lines is necessary.

Coalition-building is rooted in love; and we write this with love to our readers and we write this with hope that you will love the issue. Lorde quote: “How do we use each other's differences in our common battles for a livable future?” We see these pieces using each other's differences to build livable futures and we recognize this issue is BIG. Big in size and in scope and big in hope. We made the decision to have this issue be big, as that is what it will take to address the barriers and create new futures--coalition building is difficult, it can be messy, and it forces us to acknowledge and honor differences. We believe this Cluster reflects and represents what coalition building can look like in the field, and allows readers to envision potential futures of resilience and hope. We thank the authors for the work they are doing in their communities and institutions, and we look forward to the resulting dialogue and work that comes from their work.

Organizational & Institutional Analysis & Critique

When done well, coalition work helps contributors realize and understand how the organizations and institutions we engage with create barriers to equity and perpetuate injustice. In the first section titled “Organizational & Institutional Analysis & Critique,” authors take a critical eye to organizations and the practices, programs, and policies that have shaped feminist activism and

intersectional coalition-building either through their regressive policies or through their attempts to become more equitable. Don Unger's reflection on his experience with a women's rights group in the 1990s grapples with definitions of coalition and how different approaches to and understandings of coalition influence the nature of those relationships, and in doing so, he outlines principles that offer guidance for building coalitions that can help establish coalitional subjectivity. Carmen Kynard's *essay-ish* asserts that "campaigns of white supremacy are meant to scare and scar us into inaction," and it illuminates the continued "attacks on Black/queer/feminist thought and praxis," highlighting how this white supremacist dominance goes well beyond the "shock-and-awe campaigns," and is embedded in our white-washed, neoliberal institutions in everyday ways that demand "deep sightings" in order to be recognized and uprooted. Authors Holly Hassel and Kate Pantelides chronicle the history of feminist coalition building of the Feminist Caucus from the early 1970s and expose the challenges faced by advocates for feminist issues related to the forming of the women's committees, the use of sexist language, and access to child-care during conferences. Liz Rohan's article focuses on her feminist activist efforts as a tenured faculty member where austerity measures specifically harm students from low-income backgrounds, as she details the experience of the writing center budget being cut and her efforts to collaborate with students, contingent faculty, and campus organizations to advocate for more resources. Walker Smith's discussion on his work in the archives of the Southern Baptist Convention reveals how institutional ethnography can disrupt, unsettle, and delegitimize the meaning-making power of a broad range of organizations, including religious and educational institutions.

Mentorship and Interpersonal Advocacy

When Jacqueline Jones Royster was asked what advice she had for newer faculty in a recent conference session titled "Radical Self-Care as a Rhetoric of Resistance for Women of Color in the Academy," she urged listeners to "find your people." Aligning with Royster's advice and this Cluster's theme of love and hope, the largest section in this Cluster, "Mentorship and Interpersonal Advocacy," highlights how we demonstrate care and advocacy for ourselves and others. Kendra N. Bryant Aya's brilliant poem draws support from and celebrates her coalition with "family members, mentors, teachers, and literary figures" to illuminate her experiences as a Black lesbian pushing back on "heteronormative capitalist patriarchy" even in her writing spaces at HBCUs, which she illustrates are also influenced by "anti-Black racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and ageism." Also acknowledging that institution does not love us, Wonderful Faison offers readers poignant examples of how HBCUs, who have oftentimes made due with less, can demonstrate and exemplify the impact of institutional support and solidarity for "subvert[ing] anti-CRT legislation" by having campus leaders willing to assert their intent to "defy, dissent, disavow, and disobey" current or new legislative restrictions on CRT or DEI. Eunjeong Lee, Soyeon Lee, and Minjung Kang describe "their effective labor against colonial and anti-Asian barriers," which builds upon decolonial feminist methodologies and works toward affective connectivity and relationality.

Continuing this thread of intentional coalition-building, Jennifer Burke Reifman, Loren Torres, and Mik Penarroyo deploy Black intersectional feminist theory and alternative modes of mentorship and collaboration to argue that concepts of expertise and/or legitimacy exist to keep diverse student voices out of institutional conversations surrounding assessment, curriculum, and retention in order to reify white, patriarchal practices. Natalie Shellenberger and Nataly Dickson explore burnout as the exigence for their focus on creating intentional co-mentoring practices for graduate students, particularly graduate students from marginalized communities, and narrate their relational experiences to provide strategies and tactics for feminist mentoring practices in the future. Drawing upon counterstories, Amanda Hawks and Bethany Meadows highlight the necessity to denounce the ideas that Writing Centers are inclusive “safe spaces” and call them out on the gatekeeping practices, advocating that Black Feminism and transformative justice can bring grievances to light and give further evidence of the white supremacy oppression that still thrives to this day.

Subversive Classroom Practices

Bringing coalition building and feminist activist work into the writing classroom, the section on “Subversive Classroom Practices” highlights how we can address regressive backlash and work toward solidarity through teaching. Romeo García and Gesa Kirsch share pedagogical narratives and assignments to show what a commitment to “being-with” others looks like and showcase two stories-so-far and possibilities of new stories from student authors Valeria Guevara Fernandez and Nicole Salazar. While creating equitable environments sometimes feels impossible, Callie Kostelich and Michelle Cowan demonstrate how they sought to resist institutional harms by collaborating with first-year writing instructors in a labor-based grading contract initiative at their institution. In another dialogue, Shewonda Leger and Chantalle Verna reveal how the pedagogical strategies they deploy in Florida draw upon their lived experiences as Haitian women and incorporate decolonizing and Black feminist principles. Elitza Kotzeva, Sona Gevorgyan, Lilit Khachatryan, and Nairy Bzdigian conversational piece discusses their unique experiences with gender-based oppression and activism in Armenia. Galen Bunting reminds us of the value of inclusive, intentional, and practical teaching practices like those he describes employing in classrooms in Oklahoma, despite backlash.

Lisa, Natasha, Hillary, and Anna invite you to join in this conversation by reading this BIG and excellent collection of feminist, womanist, and queer scholars in the field of writing studies doing the work. In her remarks at the opening keynote during the 2023 National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Kimberlé Crenshaw reminded the audience the “war against diversity, equity and inclusion started as a backlash and now has metastasized to the college board basically taking Black feminism, Black queer studies, intersectionality, structural racism out of Black studies.” This collection comes at what Crenshaw labels a “critical moment. It’s a question

of how much the knowledge that has been produced over the last three-quarters of the century can sustain an organized effort, not only to silence and suppress but to completely rip out of even our own histories the knowledge that our experiences have produced.” With that in mind, please share these conversations widely--as they offer both strategies and tactics for coalition-building, as well as telling stories that help us break down and move away from fear and isolation and choose action and love.

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