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“Reading and Writing for Filth”: Community Literacies for Change Project

in Fort Worth

My work will focus on creating a community literacy writing collective in Fort Worth based initially on discussions of popular culture items, their relations to local social justice issues, and associating the applicable scholarly theory to compose action and activist pieces. In theory, this group will mostly function as a reading group, collectively reading titles that we identify as pertaining to the media and issues that we name. The title of the project (and possibly the collective) came from my mentor, Dr. Carmen Kynard, who is always telling me to read everything for filth, or in other words, read critically and call out people, problems, and ideas as needed.

Also, my mentor lives true to her words, and she asks me to consider the same questions that she poses in her article, “All I Need is One Mic”: A Black Feminist Community Meditation on the Work, the Job, and the Hustle) & Why So Many of Y’all Confuse This Stuff).” She asks us all to contemplate, especially as graduate students — “What does it mean to be a graduate student — right here and right now (not just the dissertation or the articles you will publish later)? What does it mean to be a community scholar/teacher/activist right here and right now? What do our research and scholarship —RIGHT NOW — challenge and remake (18)”? These questions fuel the development of this project from a theoretical perspective and guide my steps forward. I plan to continue working on crafting this project for submission to the 2023 Conference on Community Writing and possibly for a grant to flesh the project out and start it in the future.

This idea was originally sparked by a few pieces, and events, and I imagine it will only grow with time. Personally, I have envisioned my future work involving the community, but I haven’t created any possible projects until now. Being involved with the Big D Reads organization and handing out a book that the city was reading collectively in community book clubs sparked interest in creating some form of public-facing group. Then, after reading a few pieces in class, thoughts continued to bounce around in my head about the importance of community interaction and how to create and work in that space. Melina Abdullah’s words in “What the Black Lives Matter Movement Demands of Ethnic Studies Scholars” stick with me. Regarding being accountable and actionable scholars, she said, “I submit that all of us must commit three things to the movement: voice, body, and resources . . . Intellectual work entrenched in the movement means that we must participate with the folks on the front lines . . . This moment requires action research in partnership with fully engaged practitioners” (8-9). Her challenge to do something different as a scholar resonates deeply with me and pushes me to create something other than words on a paper.

After thinking about how to combine community groups, scholarship, and social justice issues, I remembered *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* by Adam Banks, specifically Chapter 2, “Mix: Roles, Relationships, and Rhetorical Strategies in Community Engagement, where he describes his thought process, his organizational planning, as well as the results of implementing a community engagement group in the city of Syracuse, New York. His methods and pedagogy are informed by the African griot storyteller figure alongside hip-hop music terms like scratch, mix, remix, mixtape, and fade. He doesn’t offer his experience as a template for how to do the work since every community and its needs are different, but it is helpful to see a process from start to finish. He does provide an effective approach to public pedagogy that he describes as, “The blend that I present attempts to speak to the difficult terrain one chooses to tread when a scholar is fundamentally committed to social justice and societal transformation, works collaboratively with local communities, teaches in the idiom of the communities he or she seeks to serve, and uses technologies toward the ends of building and serving community” 36-37). Given the griot’s possession of storytelling, history, and wisdom (which could be stretched to scholarship), I think combining that with popular culture and local issues is a perfect organizing equation for my project.

One last piece that informs my community group organization comes from Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young’s edited collection, *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication.* In the essay by Diab, Ferrel and Godbee, “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable” they speak to the health of collectives, “Effective and sustained work-with-others tends to the tenets and the goals of all parties involved. The absence of such attention risks foiling the condition of togetherness that enables a dialogic process in the pursuit of racial justice. This is why it is crucial to complement cognitive, critical reflection with affective and relational resources that we can use to support one another” (32-33). This is another aspect that is important for me in the creation of community collectives. Especially, as a white woman in social justice spaces, I want to bring any resources for support that I can but also be aware of the need for togetherness and coalition building for overall success.

Moving on from my development influences stage of the project, I began to focus more on the artifact that created the connection for me between popular culture and the scholarship potential of the collective. I will use Kara Walker’s charcoal on paper piece, “Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First” as my first artifact in our collective meeting, which I have referred to as a lesson plan in previous places but would function as a conversation starter. I feel that this piece speaks to so much scholarship that we covered in class this semester, and could therefore, center many conversations in our collective reading group. I believe this piece could easily connect to Treva B. Lindsey’s book, *America, Goddam*, especially her first chapter, “Say Her Name: Policing is Violence” as the artifact shows the intersections of abuse the Black woman faces from her apparent lover, the police, and the violence of having a child ripped from her body. Lindsey states, “The designation of Black women and girls as animalistic and monstrous was embedded in laws, and subsequently, law enforcement during the early eighteenth century” (44-45). Given the need for current ongoing campaigns like “Say Her Name”, and existing in a city where we are currently witnessing the trial of the policeman who shot and killed Atatiana Jefferson, this subject needs to be publicly embraced and reckoned with. As Dr. Kynard asks directly in response to scholarly action after Jefferson’s murder — “How does the public nature of Atatiana’s execution shape the counter-publics that we build now — with and in our communities” (16)? If we don’t use our talents and resources to build these organizations and wield the weapons that we have, what are we doing?

I also want to bring Moya Bailey’s book, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* into my project’s conversation. Lindsey’s work mentions the term that Bailey defined, misogynoir, which is also present in Kara Walker’s print. Bailey describes misogynoir as, “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (1). She goes on to dissect the word as “a portmanteau of ‘misogyny,’ the hatred of women, and ‘noir,’ the French word for ‘black’” (1). This term is very important because the community is aware of this problem but may not know the term created to discuss it. And it definitely comes into play when we cultivate conversations that breech topics depicted in Walker’s print and that live in our community, such as the police brutality against citizens like Atatiana Jefferson.

Another piece that ties into the conversation around Walker’s print is the book, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* by Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie. The discussion in their book about abolition of policing and of the prison industrial complex is crucial to our community collective. As I’ve mentioned previously in this review, our metroplex has dealt with police brutality against Black women in the case of Jefferson’s murder, as well as a highly viewed social media video of a policeman slamming a Black teenage girl to the ground in McKinney, and another video of a policeman sitting on a Black teenage girl in Forney. Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie all say that reform isn’t possible due to the racist, supremacist, and oppressive foundations that police and prisons were created upon. These conversations are imperative in communities like ours where daily life depends on changes that we dare to demand.

Finally, since the police violence that is enacted upon Black people is mostly committed by white officers, I hope there may be a public pedagogy function in my project that addresses Anti-Blackness in the white population. I believe it is imperative for change to force people to engage in self-reflection and really sit with events that happen around them. Although she isn’t my go-to person on whiteness, I believe that Robin Diangelo’s work on the subject might be the easiest to introduce to white groups. I find use in the chapter on Antiblackness in her book, *White Fragility,* specifically her section discussing where the sentiments stem from and why it is so hard to confront, and therefore, overcome. She states, “perhaps, most fundamentally, anti-blackness comes from deep guilt about what we have done and continue to do; the unbearable knowledge of our complicity with the profound torture of black people from past to present” (94). While the purpose of my project is not self-help for white people, I do plan to discuss the problem of whiteness and how it plays into social justice reform.

I realize there are many more sources that I could have included here, and I plan on incorporating more as I progress with this project. I believe Megan Eaton’s book, *Ecologies of Harm: Rhetorics of Violence in the United States* and the essay from Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffretta, “On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary” will both also the important pieces as I move forward. I am both nervous and excited as I embark on my first public-facing project and I hope that this will lay a great foundation for this work to build upon.

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