



Neisha-Anne Green

Moving beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work

Leh me Reflect

As many of you know, the first time I shared these thoughts and opinions was at the International Writing Centers Association conference on November 11, 2017, in Chicago. It was an honor and a burden for me, as the first Black person to give the keynote address to that body. I spent countless days and nights obsessing and stressing over what I knew *I had to say* but didn't necessarily want to say.

I knew I had to talk about social and civic justice in the writing center. I knew I had to call it to everyone's attention that I, a 31-year-old immigrant from Barbados, was the first Black person to have the keynote platform in the 34-year history of the conference. I'mma say it again, slowly so ya'll get what I'm saying. I, Neisha-Anne, was the first Black

This keynote was delivered at the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) conference, in Chicago, IL, November 11, 2017.



person in the 34-year history of our organization to give the keynote address.

As I walked into the hall that morning, the heaviness and burden of what I was about to do weighed me down.

I was carrying the hope and realization of the people in the room who looked like me.

I was carrying the weight of the Black man who had walked up to me the night before to tell me he came to the conference because I was giving the keynote.

I was carrying the burden of having to, yet again, tell white folk it wasn't okay to intentionally or unintentionally leave people of color out of the fold.

I have never been so nervous and so self-aware than on that particular morning.

LARGE.

WOW—SO MANY CHAIRS.

WHAT AM I DOING?

WHERE ARE MY PEOPLE?

THUD . . . THUD . . .

I HEARD MY HEART BEAT IN TANDEM WITH MY FOOTSTEPS AGAINST THE CARPET.

OH, LOOK. THE CARPET.

DAMN IT. THE STAGE.

As I walked into the space, I saw and heard the whispers from folk as they finally figured out that I was the person on the promotional materials they had seen. As the program began, the weight got heavier and heavier. I felt for sure I had finally met my match and I wasn't going to make it through the next minute, much less the next hour. I remember trying to find a way to deal with it all on the spot. I eventually looked over at the cochair of the conference and pointed to two doors to the left of us and asked him what was on the other side. Ya'll! Had he let me, I was heading straight for those doors—I needed some time to shed some of that weight and regroup. I needed to stop the tears I could no longer fight. But I couldn't. Before I knew it, I was walking toward the stage, my laptop in hand, my heart tearing its way out my chest.

My burdens carried me to the stage that morning.

The weight of the responsibility of my platform glued me to the podium.

My tears became the fuel that kept my dark body from being torn asunder.

I stood on that stage and here's what I said:

Big Hail

I think I've already made it pretty clear that I'm not going to go through this without crying, and y'all are just going to have to deal with it. Before I begin, I have to give a huge shout out to the people I call *my village* because without them, I would not have been raised so well. This is for Sarah, for getting me started and keeping me going. For Brian and the tutors at FIT. For Frankie and Doug, who check in on me when I'm quiet for too long. For Vay, who makes sure I hear my own voice, especially when I don't think I am good enough. For Jessica, for advising me long after my graduation. And for my big little brother, the chemical engineer, who flew all the way here to hear his big sister talk about writing center stuff. For Lauri and Andrew for trusting me with the task of being the voice of the unheard at this keynote.²

When I first got the email from the chairs of the conference, asking me to be here with you all today, I thought something was wrong. Clearly they had made a mistake, and so I did not respond to it. I waited instead for a follow-up email clarifying this misunderstanding. But nothing came. Eventually I called Andrew, who reassured me that he had meant everything that was said in the email and that because I had taken so long, they thought I didn't want to do it. Now look ya'll, I . . . was . . . going . . . to give this speech, even if I had only done it in my head to a private audience of myself; I just wanted to be sure they had not made a mistake. I remember telling them I had nothing to say, but I'll leave that determination up to you today.

I still haven't decided if I have anything to say, but I'll pretend we are at the bar chillin'. I have a Manhattan. I don't know what you have, but my Manhattan has extra vermouth and extra cherries in it for anyone taking notes for later. Since we're at the bar and we're chilling, let me tell you a li'l bit 'bout what's been on my mind. Now, if you can't tell already, this isn't the typical keynote address. I find these things way too uptight, way too early in the morning, and that's just not me. I'm an honest, testifying type ah gal, so I encourage you to interact with me while I'm up here. It is totally acceptable for you to clap, for you to holla "Girl, you betta preach!" and for you to gimme da church finger and excuse yourself to the side of the room so you've got space to move—if I see you moving to da side I'll give you a moment to catch da spirit. But! That's only if I've said something.

2 Lauri Dietz and Andrew Jeter were the 2017 IWCA conference cochairs.

Alright, like my girl Erykah Badu said:

I'mma test this out! But keep in mind that I'm an artist, and I'm sensitive about my shit

. . . So ya'll be nice . . .

As ya'll determine whether I've said anything or not.

My topic for this morning's talk is "Moving beyond Alright: And the Emotional Toll of This, My Life Matters Too, in the Writing Center Work." I've been dreaming about this keynote for a few weeks now. This wasn't a goal of mine. I had actually never thought of doing this, but I was literally going to sleep and dreaming about it. The next 45 minutes have happened to me so many times I'm just waiting to figure out which version of *déjà vu* actually happens. I know it's not the one where I completely miss the keynote cause I am here. And so far, it's not the dream where the mic stops working.

Writing this was emotionally draining, but I finally had to give in and let it just write itself. I wasted so much time trying to draft something that was supposed to feel right instead of just letting it be. On my way to letting it be, I shared this on Facebook:

I do not ever choose a path for the writing I produce, most of the time I prefer to not even be the vessel, but as emotional as it is to write what is gifted to me it is even more emotionally satisfying to deliver it, I'm looking forward to IWCA.

[brief pause]

Now look, even before the wake of our current political climate, some of us have been struggling to determine who among us actually matters, both in life and in death. The movement Black Lives Matter was born as an affirmation and signal to all that Black lives should be valued, and I would add included, and represented fairly in all spaces. But what some folk chose to hear instead was that **ONLY Black Lives Matter** and accused us of being racist—as though we would be selfish and leave you out of the injustice, as if we would not invite you to bury your young daughters and sons well before their time. As a direct response to the myth that only **Black Lives Matter** came the Blue Lives Matter movement; now look, didn't nobody say the lives of police officers weren't valued, so guess what, I'm not going to even talk about that. Cause **we said what we said**, I said what I said, and what I said was **BLACK LIVES MATTER**, and what you should have heard was **BLACK LIVES MATTER, TOO**. But yet again Black folk were left feeling forced to justify their existence in spaces, yet again Black people were forced to justify why it is not okay to shoot us dead and not be punished for it.

[brief pause]

We're still explaining why throwing rotten bananas at us isn't okay. And I see some people's faces—yes, this shit happened. Just last year on my campus, two Black females were walking around, minding their own business, and some white students threw rotten bananas at them, and then people had the audacity to not understand why that was wrong. It wasn't so long ago that we were still exhibits in the Bronx Zoo. OTA BENGA. Google him.

You might even argue that we're still on exhibit.

We are still explaining why assaulting us with "Make America Great Again" signs isn't okay. On campus again, Black students walked out of their dorm rooms to find their doors plastered in Trump paraphernalia. The school's response was quite different from my response because my response was, I'mma dare somebody to try that shit at my door cause it ain't gon end like that.

[brief pause]

You know, I've had students walk up to me and say, "I've never seen a writing center person look like you do this work." I have had white students ask for help, demand to see the director, and when I appear, *[brief pause]* say that I was wrong, because I could not be the director, right?

We're still explaining why hanging Black and Brown dolls from nooses is not okay. Just a few weeks ago on my campus, as we were unveiling the plan for the Anti-Racist Research and Education Center, somebody took it upon themselves to plaster confederate flags with cotton on them all around campus. *[brief pause]* I'm still explaining why that is not okay.

I'm still explaining why hanging bananas from nooses on the trees around campus is not okay.

Oh, this one here is one of my favorites: How about the sign on the door that said "N***** don't belong here"?

[brief pause]

How many of you take for granted, when you leave your office and you walk to your car, that it is in the same state in which you left it? This sign was left on a Black student's car, just October 12th of this year: "I'm so glad that you are leaving soon, one less n***** the school has to deal with. You have spoken up too much, you will change nothing, shut up, or I will shut you up."

[brief pause]

This Black Lives Matter work is exhausting. Those fighting on the front lines struggle a great deal with emotional turmoil and anguish. I know one too many people of color in higher ed who have PTSD and depression disorders from fighting this war at "home." *[brief pause]* I get

worried about my own mental state, and that of my friends, especially when I read stories like the one about Jedidiah Brown.

Jedidiah Brown is a pastor here in Chicago, and he's been an active Black Lives Matter activist, and he's been on the front lines doing all this work. But he had reached a point where he was so exhausted that he took a gun, got live on Facebook, and was ready to kill himself. *[brief pause]* So, I ask myself, now if he had all those resources with him, if he had the community that I don't have in writing centers, how the hell did he get to that point? And if he got to that point, where's my point? But like Kendrick said, "If God got us then we gon be alright."

I question that word, "alright"—but not yet.

Because of the emotional turmoil we face from doing this work, reminders of just how far we have come as a people became important to continue the fight. So, t-shirts like "I AM MY ANCESTOR'S WILDEST DREAMS" popped up. Now I don't know what my ancestors thought was possible once they got out of slavery, but I'd like to think I am not their wildest dreams. *[brief pause]* I'd like to think they knew all along that success was possible. So! I may have been my way, way, way, way back ancestors' dream, but in the words of JAY-Z, "Allow me to reintroduce myself." I am Neisha-Anne Green, and I know for a fact that

I AM MY GRANDMOTHER'S "I TOLD YOU SO."

I have this recurring dream of my Granny. In it she calls me to her and she says, "Come here Doo Doo darling." And I go, and when I go, she takes my hands and she makes a cup like this and she drops a fistful of money in it. For the longest time I did not understand what that dream meant. One, my grandmother was not just gon to give people money like that. She once sent us to the store to buy a pack ah biscuits. She gave us a dollar, and we knew we were only supposed to spend \$.75 because that was the cost of the biscuits. But we went back to the house because the cost of the biscuits had gone up and now it was a dollar. We go back to ask permission to buy the biscuits at this increased price. Ya'll, when we told my grandmother exactly how much the biscuits cost, her response was, "Stupes, I'd radda eat de dollah." She wasn't just gonna give me money like that. I realize now that that dream was her passing on her greatness to me. She knew I could be successful—she didn't know what I was going to do, but she knew I could do it.

But success has not been easy.

I have never had a job where I wasn't made aware of my Blackness.

I have never had a higher ed job where I wasn't made aware of my lack of my whiteness.

I have never had a job in writing center administration

where I wasn't the first Black woman.

I'm going to let that sink in. And I'm going to say it again. I have never had a job in writing center administration where I wasn't the first Black woman.

I'm fully aware of my blackness and the lack of my whiteness as I stand in front of you here today as the first black person to give the keynote at IWCA—and I better not be the last.

I started volunteering in a writing center as a tutor, as Andrew mentioned. I then became a graduate assistant, a tutor coordinator, an assistant director, an associate director, and now director. It was actually during my first time at NCPTW right here in Chicago that I realized that I could be more than a tutor and that I could do this work for real. But it wasn't until I was a *fistful of tears* deep into thinking about this keynote that I realized that on my journey, I had figured out not how to fill these positions but how to fill them as myself.

I first figured out how to be a Black tutor. I'll tell you how I did that. I don't think I was fully aware that this is what I was doing at the time, but as tutors at Lehman College (CUNY) we had been thinking about code-meshing and what it meant to see value in the language that students bring from home, and almost instantly I was sold. I just didn't know how to do it. And so I'm trying to figure this stuff out, and I'm doing little things in my tutoring sessions hoping that I'm doing the right thing and that I'm figuring this work out, but giving myself enough space to fuck it up in order to get it right. And one day, this student walks in. I've never seen her before, but I go through the regular questions: What are we going to be working on today? Tell me about your assignment? How do you like your class? I'm trying to get things started, trying to get her going. And all I get is the *I don't know*s, and the *ugh*s and the *ums*, and so I'm feeling stuck. I look at the text the student was reading, and honest to God, I don't remember what the text was, but I do remember her and the braids she wore, I remember her complexion, and I do remember what I said to her. So, I looked at the text and I asked her to read *this* paragraph and to "tell me about it in your own words, what you think the author is saying?" and again she's got nothing. I try it again, rephrase the question. Still nothing. And so needing to move the session along, I finally said to her, "Do you mind if I give it a try?" She said okay. So, I made a mental shift and I told her, "I'm going to say it to you like this. I'm going to pretend like we're on the corner of Kingsbridge, waiting for the 4 train to go by, and we're just chit-chatting, we're just shooting the shit." And so, I read the paragraph the way that it was written, and then I gave it to her in my best. When I was done, she looked up at me and she said, "Well, why couldn't they just say that?" My response took a while. I stopped, I paused,

I fidgeted a little bit, and then eventually I said, “I need to say something to you and I probably shouldn’t say it but—I’m going to say it anyway.” And I leaned forward and I said, “They didn’t say it like that because this shit wasn’t written for you.” She stopped and she looked at me and was like, “What?” and so I said it again. “This shit wasn’t written for you.” And I explained to her what I meant. I said, “Now look, when this stuff was written, as is most stuff, we weren’t ever in the intended audience, especially this piece. Now let’s not get it twisted. We were never expected to learn how to read, much less go to college, but you’re here. And so even though shit isn’t written for you, what you need to do is to take what you know, take what makes you *you*, take all that stuff and apply it to this work and make it yours. Help yourself figure this stuff out because it wasn’t written for us.”

[brief pause]

Now that I look back at my time with that student, I realize it wasn’t the fact that I had realized that shit wasn’t written for me and then understood that fact to be true enough—it was the fact that I had realized that shit wasn’t written for me and then understood that enough to say it to somebody else that really mattered.

[brief pause]

I then figured out how to be a Black writer. *[brief pause]* It wasn’t until halfway through my thesis that I figured out the way I was writing did not actually include me. I had written the words, but there was no Neisha-Anne in it. And so I had been thinking about how we used students’ languages in the writing center. I was thinking about how to code-mesh, how to do all this stuff, and I was hitting a roadblock. *[brief pause]* It wasn’t until my favorite writing center director put me in her car, drove me to the conference where Vershawn Young was giving the keynote, and said, “You need to go talk to him.” I walked up to him and I said, “Look I have a love/hate relationship with you.” And he stopped and looked at me and he was like, “Why?” And I said, “I love the things that you are saying but I struggle with it and I have nobody to help me figure it out.” *[brief pause]* Y’all he looked at me dead in my face, and he said, “So then why didn’t you just call?”

It was hard but it was through back and forth going on email with Vay, back and forth running from Sarah’s office to my advisor’s office, and literally again writing from the place I call my “fuck-it spot” and just letting the words just come to the page, that I figured out 1. why code-meshing made sense; and 2. how to do it all at the same time. It meant I graduated a semester late because I took some time to figure this stuff out, but by the end I wasn’t just a writer anymore, I was a Black writer. I was writing, and Neisha-Anne was all over the page. My rhetorical traditions, my cultures,

my sass and attitude were all on the page and they coexisted with the ever-fluid “standard.”

[brief pause]

So, I figured out how to be a tutor, then a Black tutor. I figured out how to be a writer, and then a Black writer. But the jury is still out on this Black writing center director thing.

The struggle is real—the struggle is real on me. It’s real hurtful. It’s real damn hurtful.

For a long time, I still got Kendrick Lamar’s “We Gon Be Alright” playing in the back of my head. Kendrick said, “If God got us, then we gon be alright.” But every time I hear that, I wonder, who is this we? Now somebody tell me exactly who is going to be alright because for the life of me, I can’t tell. Say what you want but I want more than just alright—and right now, I’m not alright, because y’all keep trying me.

Ya’ll Keep Trying Me

I am—quite shy by nature.

As I think about what I need to say to you my chest is pounding
and I am

Willing myself not to stutter.

I don’t even know if I be making sense these days, but

I do know that I have to keep trying things ’til I get it right cause
I refuse to go crazy.

When I am not pushing myself to give terrifying presentations,

When I am not in self-care,

self-defense, or

“Oh Lord not me today” mode—

When I am safe

I am quick to smile and quick to offer my last.

As ah matter ah fact, my boy JG usually says

“NeNe you so sweet.”

But

Nowadays I wake up with venom on my lips

Glad to be awake, but

cursing the fact that my day is not my own.

I wake up cursing the fact that microaggressions have been
tattooed on my soul and branded in my mind so that

I am forced to relive the day you asked me for my help—which
I gladly gave cause

I’m so sweet

Only to have you then ask what my qualifications were for
doing this work. Just for you to conclude that I am more qual-

ified than you. *[brief pause]*

In my mind I threw you the bird, popped my gum and said, “No shit, Sherlock.”

On the outside though, I SMILED.

I wake up cursing the fact that

I am forced to relive the way you yelled at me in the meeting your department called cause *your* graduate students can't write.

On the outside I pushed back while you smiled in enjoyment. On the inside I cringed when I realized that I had been mind raped.

I wake up cursing the fact that

I am forced to relive the day you watched me park my Volvo only to then demand to know if I had any business on campus.

On the inside my blood boiled so hot that my tears dried up before I could shed them.

On the outside though, I SMILED.

I wake up cursing the fact that

I am forced to relive the day you told me that the reason the white kid in the class I taught called me by the name of the only other Black woman in the department was cause my hair looked like hers.

I will never forget the fact that you insisted, citing that “unless she had changed her hair since you saw her last week this was in fact the truth.”

On the outside I politely tried to get away from the conversation as you followed me.

On the inside though I cursed your lineage.

I wake up cursing the fact that

I am forced to relive the day I found out that you curiously searched my desk, but then told me I was disrespectful.

On the outside I was calm,

on the inside though I wrote my resignation letter.

I wake up cursing the fact that

I am forced to relive the day that I had truly had enough and walked out of a meeting only to pen my now famous

“given the current climate in the Center, I will be working from home today as this space is no longer safe for me.”

I wake up cursing the fact that

I am forced to relive the conversations with EAP providers [Employee Assistance Program] cause your anxieties have

now rubbed into my skin better than shea butter.

[brief pause]

How come ya'll get to be passionate in meetings and I get to be angry? Even when I'm silent I'm pissed off and fired up cause you think it so.

[brief pause]

I was prepared to be a writing center director, and that was evident from my first job away from home. And in some of the day-to-day aspects of running a writing center, I was prepared a bit too well. I often left my new job frustrated with the lacking that was so evident to me. When I first started, there were times I would put my "Sarah hat" on to solve a problem. I eventually realized that hat, while perfect for Sarah, would always have limitations for me.

See, I learned everything I knew in the beginning about writing centers from a white woman—but let me slow this down and be deliberate here; yes, of course, facing problems with putting my Sarah hat on would always have its limitations, but as a starting point even just to get me thinking, it worked for the logistical things. It worked for the simple how-to, "how do I"? types of questions, but it did not work for the "what the fuck just happened?" situations, or the "but wait did they just make a comment about my hair?" situation, or the "let me ask folk to comment on Neisha-Anne's behavior cuz she told me no" situation.

[brief pause]

AUDIENCE: {You gotta preach!}

NEISHA-ANNE: I'm trying.

When I made the decision to do this work, I was prepared to be a writing center director, but I was not prepared to be a Black writing center director. In spite of the difficulties I have met, I have made the choice to do this writing center work, but only as myself. In writing centers, we call ourselves *safe spaces* and now *brave spaces*. We've even thought of ourselves as home. As I attend conferences and summer institutes,

I'm acutely aware of the lack of people who look like me.

How the hell can this space be home, if I am always alone?

I used to wonder what it would have meant for my career if I'd seen people who look like me do the work I'm interested in; I used to wonder what it would have meant to have a Black writing center mentor to turn to the first time I experienced racism from a supervisor—I still wonder what it would mean if I could learn how to avoid the emotional and mental turmoil. I do not pretend to know all the answers to these questions, but I do know that I exist and I do know that I'm doing this work. I'm doing this work as myself, but

it's my deliberate lack of whiteness that seems to agitate

**folks the most,
my hair is too natural, sometimes too red,
my African American vernacular and my Bajan dialect are
too loud, too nonstandard.
My attitude is too stank.
My use of the word *no* makes you uncomfortable.
My matter of fact approach is too rude,
my truth is never relevant,
and my rhetoric is all wrong—
but Kendrick Lamar said, “If God got us then we gon be
alright.”**

I still don't like that word, *alright*, but Granny said, “The Lord help those who help themselves,” so I got up, and even though you keep throwing obstacles in my way, I'm working on figuring out how to be a Black writing center director. I'm working on being more than alright.

So, we've got the tutor, we've got the writing thing down pat, jury still kinda out on this writing center director thing, but I realize that in order to become a Black writing center director, I have to become a detective. More important, a blues detective. Now here's why—we need to enter this scene on our own terms, and without being the first ones to die. According to Stephen Soitos,

The formulas of classical and hardboiled detective fiction have created a tradition of detective writing. African Americans have from the beginning fearlessly altered these formulas in their own way . . . black authors were interested in using detective fiction to present African American social and political viewpoints and worldviews (1996, p. 27).

1. The black detectives operate just as the standard detectives do, “except they apply African American consciousness in solving their cases” (p. 31). I read that and figured that if I am to be successful at this Black writing center director thing, then I have to apply the cultural identities and awarenesses that make me who I am: Bajan and African American.
2. “The blues detective recognizes his or her own blackness as well as what blackness means to the characters in the text” (p. 31). If I am to be successful at this job, I have to be confident in my blackness and what my blackness doesn't mean to those around me.
3. Last, “These detectives are complex, multitalented, and possessed of a social consciousness” (p. 31). I read that and heard BE WOKE.

[brief pause]

The blues detective uses four tropes to help themselves. Those tropes are black vernaculars, black detective personas, hoodoo, and double consciousness to make a way for themselves.

To all my people of color, I suggest that we, as my Granny would say, tek ah leaf out de blues detectives' book, and we help ourselves by using the tropes that make the blues detective special and unique.

Let's run through these tropes and how I choose to use them real quick:

Detective Personas: "Black writers created their own versions of the detective persona"; they took what worked from the already accepted "classical and hardboiled traditions, but more importantly they forged new images of the detective based on African American needs" (p. 29). Aight, so check. I take what already works and is already accepted in writing centers but I make it my own and reshape it in my own image and needs!!!

Black Vernaculars: I said I was going to do this work and do it as me. I bring my languages with me every day. I bring my Bajan dialect, my African American Vernacular, my writing center discourse, my hair . . . I bring it all, and more importantly, I USE THEM ALL.

Hoodoo: There aren't many Black or African American WC directors for me to turn to, so I often evoke the likes of Auntie Fannie Lou for times when I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. And on days like today when I feel like I have to testify, I evoke Grandma Truth cause hell, ain't I a WC director, too? I used to think that I was good at choosing which fucks to give, but I realized I was still always mad and affected. So now, I choose when to give a fuck and sometimes I have to evoke cousin Michelle and go high when you go low.

About this double-consciousness though . . . In his *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois asked the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" He then told the story of the first time he was conscious that being himself was a problem. I said, Du Bois recounted the first time as a Black man he realized that being himself was a problem. Every time I read that, and even though I know the answer, I wonder, "Being myself is a problem to who exactly?" This is why I don't like double-consciousness.

W. E. B. Du Bois defines double-consciousness as:

a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone

keeps it from being torn asunder (as cited in Soitos, 1996, p. 33).

Lemme be real honest, I ain't got time fuh dat! I refuse to be forced to see myself through the eyes of anyone else but my own. I refuse to be forced to measure my soul by anyone's tape measure but my own. Pity me all you want, but I am choosing not to have any warring ideals in my one dark body cause it's my dogged strength alone that will keep me together.

How many of us have read or heard of "We Wear the Mask," by Paul Laurence Dunbar? This poem wasn't originally in the speech, but as I was thinking about presenting this to you, something beckoned me to share it:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while

We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!

I don't know 'bout you, but I'm done wearing a mask.

Just as Black detective fiction became an example of the reinterpretation of a Black existence in the midst of white civilization and white spaces by African Americans for their own use, so I am calling for the continued emergence of the writing center director of color. Let's revisit the idea of the writing center. Let's go back to that space in the middle and push at its boundaries. Let's go back to the spaces that weren't imagined with us in mind and create a space for ourselves. Let's add some funk, soca, reggae, and hip-hop literacies. Let's add some sass and spice. I look at all my underrepresented brothas and sistas in this room today, and I say to you, let's add our cultural expressions and value systems to this "safe space," this "brave space," this white-as-hell space. Let's add some color. Let's bring the real swag and paint the walls, the conferences, and the journals with our Englishes. Let's go beyond the "safe space" and design a "brave space" where BLACK LIVES MATTER TOO. Let's truly make these spaces inclusive of our experiences and learning.

We gotta help ourselves. If you doubt what I'm saying, remember that Zora Neale Hurston said the African American "lives and moves in the midst of white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country" (as cited in Soitos, 1996, p. 28).

So, to the white folk in the room, since y'all keep asking how to help, here's how:

Stop being an ally; instead be an accomplice.

I woke up on the day after the presidential election of 2016 and carried on with my normal routine. I cussed morning, as if it had somehow personified, and made my way to work cussing the bad drivers of DC as they panicked at the sight of the roundabout that was there yesterday. As I walked into the library, I could instantly feel a difference that was unlike any other difference. The library itself seemed to be mourning, and its inhabitants, what little she housed that day, were in full-on mourning themselves. I walked past tear-stained faces and heads hung way too low for long-term comfort, quickly learning to avoid posing the normal "How you doing today?" greeting as I unlocked the writing center and began my work for the day. Not much had changed for me. I was still who I was, the world was still who it was, turning on its regular axis with the same injustices occurring as before. I still looked like me and still expected to be treated the same way, not seen the same way and sometimes not heard just the same as any other day. I carried about my day as I normally would have except for one small detail. I made one change to my email signature and added three extra lines in a bold and sassy orange hue to make sure it would be seen. These lines read

Allies are satisfied to quietly help and support.

Accomplices support and help through word and deed.

Accomplices actively demonstrate allyship.

So, how do you help? None of that safety-pin rhetoric around here. When you see me struggling, get up and do something. When you see your colleague yelling at me in a meeting because their graduate students can't write, you say something so I don't have to. When you see people harassing me in the parking lot, wondering whether or not I have the right to park there, how about you defend me so I don't have to defend myself? And please, please do not see things happening, then don't say anything, then come to me afterwards to tell me you're sorry. Cause I'm going to look at you and say you didn't do anything while it was happening.

Be my accomplice.

Take the risk. Give up some of the privilege you hold so dearly so that I can have some.

[brief pause]

... and so while this space wasn't built for me,
never evolved to include me,
I exist in it,
I fight in it,
I get hurt in it,
I excel in it,
Shit, I give keynotes in it.

In Retrospect

In Chicago the need to push through my tears kept my dark body from being torn asunder. The weight of the responsibility I felt was hard to carry. Today though, the promise I made to people of color keeps me going. The responsibility I carry no longer feels like too much. I asked you to get in this work and stay in it, so I am doing the same. I asked you to revisit our traditional views of “double-consciousness” and find a way to see and trust your own true consciousness, your own vision of yourself through the haze. So, since removing my mask, I have destroyed it.

I spent too much time dealing with the emotional labor embedded in this keynote that I couldn't make the ending work the way that perhaps it should have. To be honest, I was so annoyed that I felt obligated to highlight and speak on the lack of representation and inclusion that other topics weren't even an option I felt I had. As I was struggling to find the words I wanted my people to be proud of, I was also annoyed that those with more privilege had been asking me what message I had for them. I wanted to remind them that they had had 33 other messages. I wanted to remind them that the disadvantaged had been telling them how to help and that it just wasn't fair to keep expecting us to.

I wanted to tell them I was annoyed because their privilege means more to them than others' suffering and reeducation. I wanted to tell them I was annoyed because ya'll be trying me. I wanted to bring it to their attention that we live in chronic discomfort, and that when it's their turn to experience discomfort, they can't handle the pressure; your fragility is real! I wanted to close with, “And look, this really ain't my problem, this racism mess is your burden to carry.” I wanted to tell them that I have spent more than enough time with my thoughts and my experiences in the academy to say for sure that allyship hasn't worked in my favor and it hasn't done anything to alleviate the chronic discomfort I experience daily.

I have been on this journey for a while, and even after I had submitted my first article for publication, I had already decided that the ending no longer satisfied my own longings. The new ideas I had of an ally ruined

that article for me. But I finally have the language and understanding to be able to try to explain what I've been feeling about the idea of allies, the lack of tangible and visible action with being an ally, and allyship in general. I purposely use the word *idea* to describe it all because I'm yet to see this fantasy that folk have created and professed became reality with any true substance or positive result.

Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones gave us six rules for being what she called an *ally*; I share excerpts of five rules here. I find the word *ally* problematic, but not the rules, cause what I hear her really asking is for us to be accomplices. I wanted to make posters with Dr. Joni Jones' rules on them and plaster them everywhere.

Listen to what she says, and tell me what you really hear:

Rule 1. "Allies know that it is not sufficient to be liberal. In fact the liberal position is actually a walk backwards. . . . We [must] move toward a radical rather than liberal position. . . . Allies must be willing to be warriors."

Rule 2. "Be loud and crazy so Black folks won't have to be! . . . This does not mean be reckless, strategizing is always important. . . . Speaking up does mean being able to relinquish some piece of privilege in order to create justice."

Rule 3. "Do not tell anyone in any oppressed group to be patient. Doing so is a sign of your privilege." Justice delayed is justice denied.

Rule 4. "Recognize the new racism, the new sexism, the old homophobia. It is institutional and structural."

Rule 5. "When called out about your racism, sexism, or homophobia, don't cower in embarrassment, don't cry and don't silently think that 'she's crazy' and vow never to interact with her again. . . . Be grateful that someone took the time to expose yours."

Tell me ya'll ain't hear her say take risks in each one of those rules. I see risks as being important to actually getting this work done. Minorities spend so much time checking ourselves to see if we're good enough to fit in and get in to do the work. I've long decided I was giving you back this problem of racism cause it isn't of my invention, or that of my foreparents, so since I'm giving you your problem back to fix, I've got a checklist for you—if you can't acknowledge the following then I got no time for you and you should keep out my way . . . cause I'll know you're an accomplice when

1. you can acknowledge your privilege—confession is good for the soul . . . and the movement;

2. you can take a back seat and let the voices of the marginalized be heard loud and clear;
3. you have stopped expecting others to educate you on these issues—that's lazy and annoying;
4. you don't have to give yourself a title. Titles are overrated. If you have to say that you're against oppression, then chances are you're probably really not. If you have to announce that you're an accomplice, then I already don't trust you. All I really wanna see is that WERK.

Acknowledgments

For my mom.

You couldn't make it to Chicago and you were gone before New York. Yet even though you never got to hear me speak these words, I know it was you who raised me with the conviction and strength to write and stand by them. I'll be waiting for you "before de turning."

Your daughter.

A special thank you to my entire village for helping me through the hardest moments. Thank you to Sarah Blazer, Brian Fallon, and my brother Neville Green. My sincerest gratitude to the reviewers and to the editors for their patience and guidance. Additionally, I'd like to thank all of you who have been encouraged by this piece—always your accomplice.

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