



Kendra L. Mitchell and Robert E. Randolph, Jr.

## A Page from Our Book: Social Justice Lessons from the HBCU Writing Center

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Ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.

—Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

*Kendra L. Mitchell*

### A Recentering of Our Gaze: The Occasion

I begin this talk with a poem, “Manual for Hunting White-Tailed Deer: A Found Poem for Trayvon Martin,” by my friend and colleague Yolanda J. Franklin, from her first book of poems, *Blood Vinyls* (see the appendix for the full text of this poem). It captures the essence of what it means to be Black, southern, and defiantly oneself—even at the risk of losing oneself. Well, at least that is my interpretation of the poem written in honor of Trayvon’s life. Dr. Franklin wrote this poem at the height of the collective mourning of the loss of Trayvon as a fellow Floridian who took this murder personally. Though she is my friend, I did not ask her if

she knew Trayvon for fear of the likelihood that she had taught him or his brother during her career as a secondary educator. If I really think about it, though, we teach Trayvons. Black young men striding through society carefree during hunting seasons. Earlier this year, some of our Black students at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, affectionately known as FAMU (pronounced fam-you) in Tallahassee were threatened by a white man with a gun in a student-housing facility he did not own. They were invited. He was hunting. Fortunately, these Black students lived to tell the story of how their bodies were an act of defiance to this older white male's entitlement to public space. To life. Their vocalizing this injustice was an act of involuntary social justice. You see, black skin places a demand of social justice on Black people at a high price. For us, it becomes more than a curriculum: it is a matter of life and death.

I am careful not to homogenize Black colleges because they are no more monolithic than Black people, or any people for that matter. Although they are similar to predominantly white institutions in many ways, their historical traditions and their levels and types of support make them distinct. Michelle J. Nealy (2009) uses this metaphor to compare HBCUs and historically white institutions: "When traditionally white institutions catch a cold, HBCUs catch pneumonia" (p. 18). Antoine Garibaldi argued that, like many other institutions of higher learning, "Black colleges reflect the diversity that is so characteristic of the United States' postsecondary education system" (as cited in Brown and Freeman, 2004, p. xii). This constant comparison of HBCUs to traditionally white institutions, the latter representing the superior model, reinforces stereotypes of inadequacy in the former.

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*Editors' Note:* A version of this keynote was delivered at the International Writing Centers

Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on October 11, 2018. The IWCA call for papers characterized the 2018 conference theme, "The Citizen Center," in the following way: "Thus, we invite you to join us in Atlanta, Georgia, a city with a rich civil rights history, to reflect on how writing center professionals can engage in active citizenship and social justice work and to wonder with us: how might writing center professionals reframe our work through a lens of active \*center\*ship? How might we actively engage the calls to action that Grimm and others have placed before us? What are we doing in our tutoring sessions, our mission statements, our tutor education, and our campus impact work that demonstrates our active citizenship? What is the role of writing centers regarding social justice work? Our 2018 conference is a timely opportunity to come together to critically examine what we are already doing well and how we can do better."

*Authors' Note:* The authors wish to present this keynote as a conversation, one that represents our numerous conversations via phone and email. Thus, we preserved the polyvocality of our address and leaned into our shared folk tradition of call and response.

Given this context, I recognize the exigence of this IWCA conference's theme and its intersection with writing center studies since my dissertation redresses the social injustices embedded in the many ways Black people do language. As we planned, we both recognized the sincerity of the call, and yet we both shared a common response: Haven't we said this before? What have we done about it? This is not a critique of the coordinators or the team because no one group of people could do what needs to be done, but we aim to interrogate the blind spots of theory where we are able to comfortably say we don't do social justice while knowing there is not equal representation in our field of writing studies.

At once I recognize the exigence of this conference and its intersections with the work we do, not just in the classroom but also in the writing center when I reflect on my dissertation research, *Language in the Center*; a closer examination of those interstices leads me to ask: Do you know where your closest HBCU is in your respective cities? And if you do, do you know who directs the writing center there? And if you do, when was the last time you collaborated with that person? These are the questions that help us critique what we mean when we say *social justice*. Said differently, for HBCUs, social justice has always meant social activism, and it requires our moving our gaze beyond those who uphold our comfortable narratives because as Chiminanda Adichie (2009) has told us, we must challenge the notion of a single narrative. Our responses prove the ineffectiveness of sincere queries of social justice without systemic changes in the way we practice ethical writing center studies in our institutions. Social justice, then, requires social action, and we encourage you to use the awkward conversations as a mobilizing tool. Take notes. Whom have you been omitting from your conversations? Recentering the gaze of writing center studies from predominantly white institutions—and by extension, whiteness—towards HBCUs, tribal colleges, and Hispanic-serving institutions is one solution. In other words, issues concerning diversity in writing center scholarship have and continue to be explored in university settings where the demographic has shifted to include more marginalized races, but none of them include historically Black colleges or universities. And while we cannot speak for all these groups—we dare not suggest we speak for all HBCUs—we will point us towards the agentic power of learning from marginalized institutions such as HBCUs.

We offer you a sense from our experiences in these spaces to be coupled with our good intentions in hopes to move the field closer to being the sustainable change agent we hope it will be. Now I turn the page to Robert.

## What, Then, Is a Citizen?: An Invitation

What is a citizen? For me, this is an inherited question, one that echoes within, between, and beyond the interpolating words of Phillis Wheatley and Lucy Terry, or the fiery jeremiads of James Baldwin, or even the magnanimous speeches of Barack Obama. I wish to begin with this simple, yet generous, question because I want to establish a common ground, a center from which to begin. And your answer to my question (what or who is a citizen?), depends upon your vantage point; it depends on the particular democratic vista on which you stand. Perhaps it even depends upon your orientation, your social mobility (or lack thereof), the continuation of a bloodline, or even intergenerational privilege. When I read the call for this year's conference, I was immediately struck by the word "citizen." As I encountered the word again and again, it began to reverberate in several directions.

I begin with the etymology of the word (etymology is one of my favorite pastimes—I'm a nerd, I know). *Citizen* comes from an Anglo-French word *denizen* and means a person who dwells within a country, as opposed to *foreigners* who dwell outside its limits (Citizen, 1989). Thus, *citizen* connotes a type of freedom in a space or place. But what happens when you wonder beyond the limits of the city or country, or rather you are born just beyond the limits—on the margins? By definition, a citizen occupies the center, the mainstream as it were. For the moment, let us bracket this supposition about the center and the margin, or that *citizen* approximates a type of corporeal and spatial schema.

I also thought about how we bandy that word around without any consideration of privilege and about bell hooks (2003), who talks about how a citizen might operate within our "culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and its attending gaze (p. ix). Whom we identify as belonging to our society and who gets to decide haunt the pages of Claudia Rankine's (2014) genre-bending collection *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Specifically, there is a prose poem that takes up the national obsession with the limitations and ethics of connoting a citizen. The poem is rife with possibility, inheritance, and kinship. On one page, it reads, "In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis/In Memory of Eric Garner/In Memory John Crawford/ In Memory Michael Brown/In Memory . . ." On the opposite page, Rankine writes, "Because white men can't/police their imagination/black men are dying" (pp. 134–135). Through the typography and form of the poem, Rankine performs a type of labor we often valorize

in the academy, the labor of theory. Many of us would be hard pressed to think about any poem, let alone this poem, as theory. But it is.

Understanding Claudia Rankine and Toni Morrison's theory has framed my scholarship. Poems like Rankine's are, as Toni Morrison has said of *Beloved*, "about remembrance, an act imbued with as much memory as disavowal. That is to say, people are often compelled to paradoxically commemorate trauma even as they are desperately trying to forget it" (Randolph, 2012, p. 105). And perhaps this is what Rankine is doing, a theory of remembrance (and disposability). Elsewhere, I have written that "poetry promises a sense of possibility and existence without binary modalities or the totalizing effects of modern life, society, and culture" (Randolph, 2017, p. 294). Poems like Rankine's work on "so many levels because it does not—in form or as genre—insist on fatalist ways of reading or knowing. Poetry threatens both individualistic and collective epistemic ruptures. Literature has the capacity to alter how teachers and students see the world. And this insight is invaluable to sustain social justice projects" (Randolph, 2017, p. 294).

The poem consists of a list of names of Black people, adults and children alike, who have died at the hands of police officers. What is notable to me, as teacher and as a Black man who is equally subject to the violence of the State, is that with each reprinting of this collection, additional names are added (Waldman, 2015). The effect is one of powerlessness and fungibility: an endless litany of Black names, in black script, cast against a white backdrop, the impossibility of white pages that we, as writers, traffic in day in and day out. It would be foolish of us to think this legacy—its bite and recoil—does not stalk and haunt the students of our institutions. This is a legacy of white supremacy in America. At my institution, the legacy of this racism and white supremacy casts a long shadow. And yet, our students are expected to succeed despite it, in spite of it. With the specter of death painfully present at every quotidian turn, we must ask: And how exactly do we quantify or qualify student success under such strains? And how does the writing center or studio facilitate that success?

To help me think through the meaning of success and labor of survival in such precarious times, I turn to the ancestors, real and imagined. I turn to the performative and sympathetic magic of Black writers. Writing center studies is a trans- and interdisciplinary field, utilizing a plethora of methodologies and theories to flesh out what we do, why, and how. A cursory review of literature reveals how much white critical theorists are centered and privileged. But for my efforts, I have begun to push against the boundaries of writing center studies, to venture beyond the center of the discipline, to examine and utilize Black critical theory. I ask these questions constantly and consistently: What would writing center studies

look like if we centered the theories, ideologies, perspectives, and praxes of Black folk who are doing the antiracist and anti-oppression work we purport to do? What would happen if we engaged the critical theory and philosophies of Black women: Morrison's (1993) "rememory," Evelyn Higginbotham's (1993) "politics of respectability," Kristie Dotson's (2012) "epistemic oppression," Sylvia Wynter's (cited in McKittrick, 2015) "being human as praxis," or Christina Sharpe's (2016) "wake work"?

The need, indeed the desire, to assemble unique theories that are intentionally inclusive is important because some of the circumstances in which African Americans learned to read and write were and are not valorized by mainstream, dominant culture, including the academy, even at HBCUs. In order for me to examine the agenda and work of HBCU writing centers, I cannot rely on traditional (read: hegemonic and patriarchal) epistemologies or methodologies. Consequently, my address broaches thematics of (il)legibility, perception, and normativity. As the Black feminist Barbara Christian (1988) tells us,

People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, and our very humanity? (p. 68)

And this assault, as Christian terms it, is violence, in and of itself, an under-theorized aspect of African American educational and literacy discourses; this talk, project, and inquiry seeks to begin a dialogue about ways we can begin to address inclusion in accessible and tangible ways.

*Kendra L. Mitchell*

## **A Black Woman with a Story**

I, too, am a Black woman with a few stories of my own. (This story, an excerpt from my research, provides a snapshot of student writers' and writing center staff's embodied experience of many HBCU writing center practices beyond the existing writing center gaze.)

Student J entered the Writing Resource Center, hereafter Center, eager to tackle the revisions suggested by his professor. As the invested educator she was, she had walked him down the flight of stairs to the Center's small room with its accordion-styled dividers. We greeted the student-professor pair with optimism and presented the standard folder with

the contract that strongly encourages writers to improve their craft with concentrated assistance with perfecting their writing. His smile reached across his narrow, caramel face as he straddled the chair across the oblong table we shared and initiated the conference. After skimming the instructor's brief comments, I agreed that Student J approached the assignment with a nuanced and fresh perspective, which he demonstrated amply in the first few moments of the session, but some of his word choices, sentence structure, and organization did not follow Edited American English, or academic writing, as expected by the teacher—and probably most writing center practitioners (including myself at the time). Much like many of my former clients and staff in the Center, he was fluent in AAL, defined as an Africanized version of American English, or African American Language (Smitherman, 2006, p. 3) but less proficient in Edited American English organizational logic. So while Student J used complex sentence structures, these complexities at times resulted in a mixed construction or the occasional run-on sentence. Additionally, he occasionally provided more detail than his professor perceived necessary, and he created new verbs or nouns to suit his purposes. To his credit, he had a knack for using figurative language and rhythmic language: his words rolled off the tongue and into the soul. But he struggled with the required Edited American English. Drawing on our Center's procedures for working with a client's essay, I had Student J read his essay aloud, while I asked questions like, "What did you mean when you said \_\_\_?" and "This part of your essay is a little unclear to me; can you tell me what you meant without reading the essay to me?" My goal was to help him retain the virtues of his essay while moving the draft closer to tightly organized Edited American English revision.

As we worked together, he hesitantly acknowledged his tendency to write how he spoke, offering this as if he were at confessional sharing a sin. But, instead of becoming excited about the essay's growing clarity, Student J gradually lost his initial enthusiasm. He became increasingly irritable when I queried him about his linguistic choices. He protested that delaying his point to the end of his sentence or the end of the paragraph was a deliberate writing choice of which he was proud. And he objected to what he called "revising his voice out of his essay." Then, as his body slumped to the right of the chair, his right hand propping his drooping face, defeated, he asked in despair and with agitation, "Ain't that what I said?" Fearing I was losing him, I changed tactics. Instead of continuing to use Edited American English, I responded to his question in kind: "But that ain't what you wrote." With that simple gesture of linguistic camaraderie, I showed my respect for the nuances of his expressions and reengaged him in our joint task, never realizing that, in the process of crafting what I thought was a successful session, I was reinforcing what sociolinguist

Geneva Smitherman calls the “linguistic push-pull” of language so many African American students experience in the classroom and in the writing center (Mitchell, 2015, pp. 2–3).

In essence, he was toiling with his love for what he wrote alongside the institutionalized disdain for how he writes. This exchange is not unique to me and my HBCU: many others notice this in their writing centers and classrooms. For Student J, it was a kind of intervention. For me, it was an act of social justice that lends itself to the theory of HBCU writing centers as potential third spaces. If we consider Elizabeth Coughlin, Jennifer Finstrom, Elizabeth Kerper, Kevin Lyon, and Sowmya Sastri’s (2012) definition of third space in a writing center context as “the location or ideology that is negotiated and/or created when different identities or spaces come into discussion with one another” (p. 4), we can see how HBCU writing centers are always in the process of becoming through co-creation via shared cultural values. When we follow our students’ lead and transform marginality into third spaces, we are able to help our students and ourselves shift our gaze towards a theory just beyond our normalized rules and into a more curious space.

*Robert E. Randolph Jr.*

### **On Writing Centers and Critical Marginality: The Dean’s Assignment**

Earlier this semester, my chair informed me the new dean wanted us to go on a “tour of writing centers.” She wanted us to gather information about how other writing centers worked and their “best practices.” My chair punctuated “best practices” with a long, dramatic pause. I had been here before; she was my second dean since becoming director. A new dean with cursory “interest” in the writing center and very little strategy for its longevity. For so many deans, perhaps even yours, the writing center operates mysteriously within the nebulous ecology of higher education, an academic unit charged with “student success” and all that means. The dean’s assignment further vexed me because I had not met her or submitted a report about our writing center. How did she know my center was not employing “best practices”? I was additionally perplexed by the schools she chose for us to visit: Elon University, North Carolina State University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These are mighty fine institutions, but they don’t look or feel like mine, which happens to be the largest HBCU in the country. I began to ask myself: Had my dean come into her new role as leader of the college with preconceived notions about what a writing center was or should be? Had she seen our writing

center as inadequate or insufficient? And did these notions have anything to do with deeply entrenched ideas about race and whiteness? The latter question was the one that lingered in my mind as the chair and I embarked on our mythopoetic journey down Interstate 40.

Here, I generously extend grace to my new dean. I will not speculate further about her motives or even her choices of schools. However, for me, her request for this “fact-finding mission” was nevertheless dubiously and tangentially linked to certain sentiments about the worth and value of HBCUs. When some of my colleagues heard about this mission, they encouraged me to speak to the dean. I did not. I had a desire to inform her how the trip to the “premier” institutions in our state trafficked in internalized racial and elitist politics. Instead, I kept that opinion to myself. Since HBCUs are fixed firmly at the margins in the minds of some educators, let us take up the corporeal and spatial nature of the margin in earnest.

The most common definition of margin refers to a border or edge, a space that often marks the furthest limit of an entity. As a spatial concept, it demarcates the space beyond what is deemed necessary or a limit where something ceases to be utilized or desired. Then too, the margin also marks the limit of possibility—of existence, examination, or exploration. However, these definitions connote a hidden symbiotic relationship: the margin does not exist without the center, and this powerful binary reifies power relations and social hierarchies. Though my understanding of the margin/center paradigm is informed by those hierarchical considerations, I do not rely on them. The margin/center paradigm is a social construct with arbitrary meanings and real-life consequences. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (1984) asserts that marginality provides a “special vantage point” from which to critique and dismantle social ills such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism (p. 16). The counterhegemonic praxis of critiquing from the margins remains a time-honored tradition with Black public intellectuals. Additionally, Edward Soja (2010) reflects on the possibility of the transdisciplinarity of the “spatial turn,” an affective praxis that examines how our social dimensions transform our environmental and geographical realities. This perspective, he argues, utilizes a “socio-spatial dialectic” that moves beyond traditional spatial considerations and emphasizes the processes of class formation.

And so, in my writing center studies inquiries, I take up both hooks’s and Soja’s theorizing about (and around) the margins. I situate spatial thinking to critically approach how and why the margin (and by extension the center, perhaps) should be important to my work and research. In other words, which writing centers move at the margins of our discourse, and more important, why? What discourses reveal themselves when we assume the material conditions of the margins as educative, instructive,

and pragmatic? How do the margins and marginal conditions activate and constitute new, inventive knowledges and methods of inquiry? I have had to seriously take up the theorizing of Black folk because “normative modes of inquiry and containment often are incapable of assessing . . . value” (Manning, 2016, p. 27) beyond neoliberal and capitalistic ways.

To write about and for the margin and marginalized people, both within and outside the academy, is to write about an intense predicament. The burden (or reward) of doing so is inextricably linked with seemingly intractable machinations of visibility. And to do this work is to see oneself as the disenfranchised from a vantage point that produces a type of (radical) agency and knowledge—which is to say, inclusion/exclusion has material effects. The margins represent a place where “cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (Gordon, 2008, p. 25) are allowed to illuminate a sensuous knowledge. This knowledge makes one radically available to oneself, operating at the level of impulse, ability, and intimacy. As I have prepared for today’s talk, I have vacillated between belief and mania, self-doubt and confidence, between the personal and the social. To make peace with myself as a scholar, researcher, student, teacher, and writing center director, I had to truly take up the margins as a serious inquiry and unequivocal concern. I had to acknowledge and get comfortable with uncertainty, the penultimate condition of the margin.

Again, centering spaces/places has social capital, theoretical or otherwise. The classroom, the archive, fields of study, indeed, the writing center, inculcate their occupants with dimensions of both restriction and promise. The center/margin paradigm is also such a place. This critical project ruminates about how language either confines or regulates people to the margins of our society and how language developed at the margin imbues those inhabitants with certain potentialities. These potentialities are pedagogical and bound to a certain futurity that retheorizes what the purposes of education may become. Additionally, if the margin and the center enter discourses together and can never be separated, we must begin thinking through new ideologies and epistemologies coupled with that association. And while scholars traditionally understand the center as the demarcation of privilege and the margin as a demarcation of disadvantage, the social statuses of these spaces often give way to material realities that cannot be subsumed or understood by the other. That is, to be at the center is not always privilege, and to be on the margin is not always disadvantage. Depending on positionalities, circumstances, and contexts, these spaces represent more, in excess of normative narratives. And this is the lived experience of my writing center. Because we operate on the margins of traditional discourse about writing centers, our methodologies,

theories, and praxes are excluded from full consideration. HBCUs and writing centers alike are sociopolitical spaces conceived for exclusion (or for the excluded). Both are often read as spaces of undesirability, illegibility, disposability, and neglect. Again, were these the ideologies that circulated in my dean's mind? Was our visit to these predominantly white institutions informed by these notions of deficit?

What I've laid out thus far represents a counternarrative. It is my perspective on what it means to labor institutionally, racially, disciplinarily at the margins. Herein lies the importance of this address: the insistence to look rigorously at the tendencies, autonomy, and operational pulse contained within a marginal status or marginal spaces. My argument, perhaps, is not so much about the intervention of language to describe these marginal discourses within educational and writing center studies but about activating a continuity of difference, celebrating survival (as only the marginalized truly can), and circumstantiating the prinesence on our radical presence in institutions, disciplines, and discourses. In other words, what life and learning moves at the margins, at the border, at the limit of what is recognized as imperative and generative? Then too, a concomitant aim of this address is to consider how textual gaps, absences, and silences at the margins operate pedagogically and rhetorically. Here, I will ask you: Who are the prominent Black and Brown voices of writing center studies? Can you name them? And how do you account for so few Black and Brown conference participants in this room today?

*Kendra L. Mitchell*

### **On Being Curious: A Black Woman with a Theory**

In the spirit of using Black women scholars to frame our theory and practice, I stand here as a Black woman with a theory about why we struggle as a field to really move beyond conversations around dismantling the power structures Nancy Grimm (1999) addressed 20 years ago in *Good Intentions* towards sustainable and progressive equitable laws in our society and writing centers that benefit those who have historically been strategically excluded from basic human rights. I believe we lack curiosity about the margins. Specifically, we lack a genuine interest in what we can learn from the margins. Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Beth Boquet (2007) also acknowledge that "our profession has done little to date to complicate tutors' or our own understanding of racism in relation to our individual and professional identities, our teaching and tutoring work, or our institutions" (p. 96). In a similar vein, considering the call addressed in Grimm's 1999 work and juxtaposing it

with the line of questioning by my colleague, we also must think about why we are circling back to the same conversations despite the books that have been written by Staci Perryman-Clark (2013), Smitherman (2003), and Elaine Richardson (2003)—to name just a few—that privilege Black and brown voices. We have works in the field. I have referenced Jackie Grutsch McKinney in my own talk and scholarship, and yet we still must ask the same questions at this conference. So we must also ask ourselves: What’s missing from our theories? Is theory enough? I reiterate the need for the kind of curiosity that moves beyond theories and the instinct to “Columbus” [here we mean the verb] other people’s lived experiences. It can only thrive in that third space that exists outside our comforts—HB-CUs are not exempt. In fact, they are in themselves counterspaces that must create new spaces where we can metaphorically hold space for new perspectives.

I am reminded of my nine-month tenure as a Fulbright guest lecturer in South Africa in 2016 during the peak of their nationwide, student-led protests. I challenged my 150 students in my diversity-in-higher-education module to choose to become curious about their colleagues’ plight and pair that curiosity with empathy. I had to figure out how I would convince students whose families have been at war for decades to level with one another for an hour: stand in your ideas, turn your heads, and your feet may follow. I invite you to join those brave students in swiveling your heads, hold space for the conversations the margins might lead to—the questions: let them not fall here and onto a dead tree—in print only. Let it be manifested in your writing center spaces. In your communities. In our roles where we are given opportunities to call action to the fore, right? To actually move our fingers to write. To dirty our hands. To move outside of our positions that we’ve held so dear. We must use curiosity though it is tenuously productive because it is only then that our gaze will follow.

With that, I transition to our closing . . .

*Robert E. Randolph Jr.*

### **More Names, More Names, More Names: Why This Wake Work Matters**

When I was a new writing center director, one of the highlights of my nascent directorship was attending the 2014 IWCA Summer Institute in Lexington, Kentucky. My chair informed me the institute would be an excellent opportunity to learn more and network. I applied for and was generously awarded a scholarship. I was eager to attend because the theme that year was about diversity and inclusion. Vershawn Young gave

a brilliant keynote address. While I was welcomed by some participants at the institute, I also dealt with microaggressions. And I felt isolated in this academic and professional space. The day before the we left, I went walking downtown for our lunch break. That walk culminated in what Morrison calls “rememory” when I encountered a historical marker that read “Cheapside Auction Block.” The marker described the ground I was standing on: “African Americans were sold as slaves at Cheapside Auction Block on the public square in the 19th century. Lexington was the center of slave trading in Ky. by the late 1840s and served as a market for selling slaves farther south. Thousands of slaves were sold at Cheapside, including children who were separated from their parents.” Those of us who study and lecture about the institution of slavery understand what it means to be sold “further South” to places like Mississippi and Louisiana. Those of us who lecture about the institution of slavery understand the visceral horror of children separated from their parents, never to have sight or sound of loved ones again. That marker reminded me of a lineage of inherited pain and resilience. As all thoroughly ensconced 21st-century citizens do, I posted about the incident to Facebook. But before I did that, I instinctually googled the auction block and its significance. I was interested in why it was call “Cheapside,” though intuitively I knew why. It was called Cheapside because at one side of the courthouse, healthy slaves were sold. On the cheap side were sold slaves who were elderly, or disabled, or undesirable.

Beyond rememory, I was embodying Christina Sharpe’s (2016) theories about *wakefulness*. In many ways, Sharpe eschews the clichéd millennial idiom of being “woke.” Instead, through word magic, she re-orientes the “paradox of blackness” around the incompleteness of becoming and being “in the wake” (p. 14). What she’s really theorizing is how we (all Americans) are inundated with anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and the aftermath of chattel slavery, even when we aren’t consciously thinking about it. When I returned to the institute that day, I must have been visibly shaken because several of the participants asked me how I was doing and what was wrong. I recounted my experience with the historical marker. Some expressed concern and remorse for my having this experience. Some were unconcerned. That indifference left me bereft, and I never intended to participate in another IWCA event. And yet, here I am today.

As I consider my current job as a writing center director at North Carolina A&T State University, I am thinking through the critical commitments and missions of HBCUs in the 21st century. About how a large number of them came into being amid the scraps of postreconstruction, a time when some Black folk desperately wanted to move into the mainstream society, to realize their full citizenship in this country. In many

ways, those missions and expectations have changed. The writing center is expected by faculty, students, and administrators to “fix” papers, focusing on grammar and mechanics. But to what end? Writing center theorists and compositionists know the crux of writing does not reside in grammar and mechanics alone. Robert McRuer (2006) asserts, “Composition in the corporate university remains a practice that is focused on a fetishized final product, whether it is the final paper, the final grade, or the student body with measurable skills” (p. 151). This assumption also applies to writing centers. At my school, my tutors must strike a unique balance between allaying fears and anxieties about using vernacular and home languages and educating for the world beyond the college, a world with defiant and embodied consequences of nonstandard language usage, a world rife with difficult and discombobulating moral enactments on the Black mind and body. In other words, my tutors are preparing my students for living “in the wake.” And while some university administrators think about student success as landing a good job and the writing center as integral to preparation of career-placement documents, I am also thinking about my responsibility to my students’ understanding of the racial world they are entering and inhabiting.

I believe in Asao Inoue’s (2016) call for “writing centers to be revolutionary change-agents in the institutions and communities in which they are situated . . . [to] facilitate structural changes in society, disciplines, and the institution itself” (p. 94). And I vehemently agree with his pronouncement that “writing centers are more than centers of writing, but centers for revolutions, for social justice work” (p. 94). Perhaps, if we think through what it means to have a “citizen center” we would first critique the notion of “citizen” and all it implies. My ancestors, for instance, were only “granted citizenship” by virtue of political maneuvering, arm twisting, and the ratification of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But we know legal distinction is a far cry from social acceptance (and we shall not legislate this further). The litany of names in *Citizen: American Lyric* (Rankine 2014), those subjected to extrajudicial killing and violence, bears this out:

Trayvon Martin. 17 years old. Returning home after purchasing Skittles and iced tea from a corner store. Followed, accosted, and shot to death by a so-called “neighborhood” watch coordinator.

Michael Brown. 18 years old. Stopped by police. Shot 12 times while surrendering with his hands in the air. His body lies in the street for 5 hours.

Miram Carey. 34 years old. Innocent mother with a baby in tow, made a wrong turn near the White House. Shot 5 times from behind.

John Crawford III. 22 years old. Shot by police without warning while shopping at Walmart. Holding a toy BB gun and talking on his phone. At no point did he aim the toy gun.

Eric Garner. 43 years old. Harassed by the NYPD. Died after being held in a chokehold. NYPD policy prohibits the use of chokeholds.

Tamir Rice. 12 years old. Shot by police within 2 seconds of arrival after playing with an airsoft gun. He did not aim the gun at the police.

Aiyana Stanley-Jones. 7 years old. Shot and killed in a police raid while sleeping on her grandmother's couch.

Rumain Brisbon. 34 years old. Unarmed father of four, shot to death when a police officer mistook his bottle of pills for a gun.

Some of the names are familiar; others are not. Perhaps the particulars of their deaths are irrelevant; or, perhaps, the particulars collapse under loss itself. Some of these cases have been adjudicated. Others have not. The results of these adjudications, in any case, are irrelevant. This litany of names is paltry, at best. More names, more names, more names will be added to Rankine's list. As we begin this conference in Atlanta, the social and financial hub of the New South, let us move forward with the understanding of this reality—the imminent and immanent death of folks who are called *citizens* but who lack the “coin of the realm” to confirm that status. As we leave this conference and return to our respective campuses, let us understand the psychic condition we all toil under. Thank you.

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## Appendix<sup>2</sup>

Manual for Still Hunting White-tailed Deer in a Gated Community  
*found poem for Trayvon Martin*, by Yolanda J. Franklin

Deer hunting in Florida is as old as recorded history.

Actions delineated here are designed to ensure public desires

for recreation. As deer populations grow, so does popularity

of hunting for recreation. The exploitation of deer increases

during this period. “Still Hunting” is characterized by stalking

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<sup>2</sup> The editors gratefully acknowledge Anhinga Press for permission to reprint this poem in full.

or concealing oneself and waiting for quarry. The practice of hunting at feeding stations was legalized, enhancing opportunities for still hunters to locate and harvest. In vehicles while coordinating movements with cell phones, hunters hunt larger blocks, sit next to trees or hide in bushes. The newly formed Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission recognizes the need for public hunting lands, so Florida's acres are open to public hunting, the vast majority open to deer hunting. To provide landowners with tools and flexibility to control deer numbers, the Commission implemented a deer depredation program. Overpopulation is the most pressing challenge. Deer in Florida are considerably smaller. In Florida, whitetails are known to have various types of trauma, and are a species of wildlife whose over-abundance degrades its own habitat as well as the habitats of others. Delaying harvest of bucks until maturity carries rewards: more bucks in subsequent years and seeing bucks is a key component of hunter satisfaction. Seminole County is infested with white-tailed deer, so legislation approved deer eradication throughout south Florida. Managing hunter satisfaction enhances overall recreational experiences. The Commission began

the comprehensive surveillance program to occur at two levels: passive and active. Passive involves observation and culling of free-ranging deer that demonstrate abnormal behavior (suspect or target animals). Active includes random investigating of hunter-harvested deer. The challenge will be to provide an array of opportunities that deer harvest will continue as a necessary and desirable practice for many years. Whether a hunter prefers to harvest only mature bucks, or chooses to harvest any deer within range is a value judgment. It is considered the most popular game in Florida.

**Kendra L. Mitchell, PhD**, is assistant professor of English at Florida A&M University, where she teaches composition, literature, and historical linguistics. Some of her current research interests and pursuits include co-splay in Toni Morrison's *The bluest eye* and codifying registers of culturally situated silences in HBCU writing centers.

**Robert E. Randolph, Jr., PhD**, is a Lecturer of English and the Director of the Writing Center at North Carolina A&T State University. Most recently, he is the author of "The queer poetics of social justice: Literacy, affect(ion), and the democratic rigors of writing," in *Leadership, equity, and social justice in American higher education: A reader* (2017).



