



## When Love Hurts: Confronting William Styron's Racial Misery in College Composition Classrooms

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### **Author Biography**

Natasha Moore is a professional nerd and classroom social justice activist serving as a Professor of English at Southwestern Illinois College. Her Freshman Composition class themed “Uncomfortable Conversations” has earned her the reputation of being politically incorrect and always unexpected.

# 2022 Pedagogicon Proceedings

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*Acknowledging and attending to how professors feel about their students is an often ignored but fundamental component in creating relationship-rich pedagogy. This paper references William Styron's "This Quiet Dust" to facilitate a transparent discussion about how we truly feel about Black Language, its role and use in the academy, and how these feelings ultimately shape how our Black students experience our encounters with them.*

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### Introduction

A few years ago, our college's English department "ran the numbers" to see the pass rates of our students from our pre-college writing sequence to our college writing sequence. One of my colleagues, the only other Black full-time faculty member in our department, requested the numbers be broken out by race to see how well we were serving our Black students. We always prided ourselves as a department with a very successful developmental writing program, yet suspicions persisted as to whether we were serving all students equally well.

The data revealed we had an overall pass rate of around 79%. However, when broken down by race, the numbers told a different story: Our Black and Hispanic students were only passing out of our developmental writing sequence at a rate of 16% and 18% respectively. We were abysmally failing our Black and Hispanic students.

But I knew that already. I hear my coworkers bemoan the writings of their Black students all the time. I've also witnessed them excuse some types of error in student writing as simply those of a beginning writer, and then dismiss a Black writer's essay as exasperating and unknowable, unteachable. Many times, however, I am not quite sure they are consciously aware of their biases toward student error. We are a very liberal department, after all; and by and large, most of my colleagues do actively participate in departmental "protests" against unjust and outright racist institutional policies when they occur. They proudly

display “Black Lives Matter” signs over their office doors, and eagerly lead faculty development workshops on “inclusive” and “socially just” teaching practices. It’s a puzzling paradox, one that can be readily explained as a hypocrisy. But after working with my coworkers for over 12 years, and witnessing their dedication to their students, I can’t accept such an easy accusation. I do, however, see the mismatches between how disconnected they are to Black student writers and their perception of themselves as vanguards of Black student experiences as troubling.

### **A Literary Illustration**

This disconnect is uncomfortably familiar to a story William Styron, the Southern White author of the infamous novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* published in 1968, tells in his essay, “This Quiet Dust.” Beautifully written, this transparent essay admonishes the Whites of his time to take responsibility to heal racial injustices by challenging their own beliefs about Blacks as inferior and instead forming real relationships with Blacks around them by getting to know them. He contends that not doing this introspection will have insidious results as their continued harmful actions toward Blacks can come from a place that feels like love on the part of the Whites. As an example, Styron describes Mr. Seward, a prosperous peanut farmer in the town where the Turner insurrection took place who has agreed to help him in his research on Nat Turner:

Mr. Seward was a solidly fleshed, somewhat rangy, big-shouldered man in his early forties with an open, cheerful manner which surely did nothing to betray the friendliness with which he had spoken on the telephone. He had greeted us-total strangers, really - with an animation and uncomplicated good will that would have shamed an Eskimo... (p. 24)

And then during a tour of his house, they come upon Seward’s young son’s room where there is a big ole sign reading “2,4,6,8, we don’t want to integrate.” A little embarrassed, Seward offers this comment:

I don’t know anywhere that a Negro is treated better than around here... You take your average person from up North, he just doesn’t know the Negro like we do. Now, for instance, I have a Negro who’s worked for me for years, name of Ernest. He knows if he breaks his arm-like he did a while ago, fell off a tractor-he knows he can come to me and I’ll see that he’s taken care of, hospital expenses and all, and I’ll take care of him and his family while he’s unable to work, right on down the line. I don’t ask him to pay

back a cent, either, that's for sure. We have a wonderful relationship, that Negro and myself. By God, I'd die for that Negro and he knows it, and he'd do the same for me. But Ernest doesn't want to sit down at my table, here in this house, and have supper with me-and he wouldn't want me in his house. And Ernest's got kids like I do, and he wouldn't want me in his house. And Ernest's got kids like I do, and he doesn't want them to go to school with my Bobby, any more than Bobby wants to go to school with his kids. It works both ways. (p. 23-24)

I think of this passage every time I think about the disconnects within our department. I also often relate to Styron's feelings about the exchange:

There might have been something vaguely defensive in his remarks but not a trace of hostility. His tone was matter-of-fact and good-natured...

The racial misery, at any rate, is within inches of driving us mad: how can I explain that with all my silent disagreement with Mr. Seward's paternalism, I knew that when he said, 'By God, I'd die for that Negro,' he meant it? (p. 25)

### **Dealing with the Racial Misery**

Although it is tempting to focus solely on the abysmal pass rates of our Black students, I knew our college's results were indicative of a larger problem in the field of Composition Studies in America's colleges (Baker-Bell, 2020; Gilyard, 1996; D'Eloia, 1975; Lee, 2017; Hollie, 2001).

Composition studies and all its concomitants have yet to deal with how they *feel* about Black English, its speakers, and its use and role in the academy. At the heart of the matter, most believe the same lie: that Black English is inferior. And that it is tied to a culture that is inferior or at most only good enough for entertainment, but not sophisticated enough for the halls of academia. Dr. April Baker-Bell describes it as an anti-Black linguistic racism in her book *Linguistic Justice*:

It includes teachers silencing, correcting, and policing students when they communicate in Black Language...It is insisting that Black students code-switch to avoid discrimination, which essentially penalizes Black students for the existence of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. It involves teachers believing that there is something inherently wrong with Black Language, and therefore, it must be eradicated. (p. 21)

And no matter how many times we say we believe something different, the collective hall talk and historical teaching practices in teaching composition to Black students on the part of Whites and Blacks betray this ugly sentiment. As a modern, politically correct culture, we want to believe differently, we want to believe we *are* different. But without doing the same types of meaningful introspection Styron encouraged Whites to do in 1968, we are subject to inflict the same insidious harm to our students – all in the name of love.

### **Or Empathy...**

The connection between one's language and one's self is so intertwined and so well-documented that professors must be able to have empathy for both in order to have empathy or connectedness with either (Lanehart, 1996; Smitherman, 2017; Alim, 2003). So, while many well-meaning professors believe that they may be liberal, social justice warriors, part of the reason why we see great disparities like the ones present in our department is because we care about students, but not necessarily in the right ways or from the right places. Chezare Warren (2015), in his study "Scale of Teacher Empathy for African American Males (S-TEAAM): Measuring Teacher Conceptions and the Application of Empathy in Multicultural Classroom Settings" explains that empathy in professional settings need two dimensions: empathetic concern (EC) and perspective taking (PT). His study showed teachers had more EC and less PT. In other words, like Styron's Dan Seward, many teachers do have concern for their students. They care if they do well in class. They care about students' general wellbeing. They may even show real concern for students' family lives or for neighborhood concerns.

But Warren contends that simply being "sympathetic" or caring is not enough. To possess real empathy, a teacher also needs to be able to see things from students' perspective – something that is near impossible if the teacher has deeply held beliefs that the students' language and culture is somehow inferior, inappropriate, or simply unacceptable for the academy (Baker-Bell, 2020; Ball & Lardner, 2005; German, 2021; Kynard, 2013).

In other words, care and concern are simply not enough. Real evaluation of our own deeply held beliefs is constantly necessary to ensure that those beliefs do not inflict linguistic and cultural violence on our students. To illustrate using Styron's example of Mr. Seward and Ernest, we can see that the problem with their relationship was that Mr. Seward thought he was very connected to and empathetic toward Ernest – even to the point where he said he'd die for him. And while at least Styron believed that that may have been true for Mr. Seward, this

belief in his love for Blacks is simply not what Ernest needed. Ernest needed Mr. Seward to respect him enough to know that the unjust systems of segregation and inequality that Mr. Seward so proudly upholds inflicts violence on Ernest and his family. He needs Mr. Seward to pay him fairly, to vote against unjust laws and systems, and most of all to see a man standing in front of him and not a “nigra” (as Styron notes that Seward affectionately called him).

This is an apt example especially for college Composition professors. Because we are so central to Black college student achievement, it makes sense to consider how we *feel* toward Black English, its speakers and its role in the academy. Just as we know students are not mere empty cans waiting for educators to fill with knowledge, we professors are not mere robotic arms passively filling the cans. Even equipped with all the best curriculum, discipline knowledge in Composition, Linguistics, Education, and Sociology, and the best current pedagogy, real learning in the classroom takes place at the exchange between professor and student when the professor actually sees the student and the student knows they have been seen. In short, real teaching and learning must confront the personal racial and class misery between professors and students. None of this exchange can take place if professors cannot see themselves.

But seeing is a hard thing. Especially when that seeing reveals evidence that is counter to everything that we want to believe about ourselves. This makes hearing a hard thing also. Where in academia, or in teacher education programs, or in graduate programs do we get to sit with these conversations and do the hard work of seeing and hearing? I can imagine how a White educator would read Carol Anderson’s *White Rage* and wince when she asserts that the Black presence alone does not incite white rage. Rather, it is Blackness with an ask, an attitude, a gall to want more that is problematic. Anderson echoes Styron’s sentiment when he said that Whites’ attitude toward is grounded in the “...simple conviction that Negroes were in every respect inferior to white people and should be made to stay in their proper order in the scheme of things” (p. 11). Both Styron and Anderson stress the point that Whites don’t need to hate Blacks to perpetuate violence against them. They only need to hate Black ambition to be equal. Thus, Whites can simultaneously believe they are acting out of good will toward Blacks and believe that Blacks should be subjugated.

How does a White professor take this in? I can imagine most of my coworkers feeling immediate empathy for their Black students. But what of the anger, the feeling of accusation, of the knot in the stomach, the lump in the chest that grows quietly because they believe others believe they could be a bad professor,

that they must have some responsibility for the racial grading disparities in their classrooms? How do White teachers receive a work where they perceive it as an attack on their goodness? How do Black teachers reconcile their desires to affirm and be affirmed with their own complicated experiences with Black Language and linguistic injustice in the academy? How do teachers hear that the practices they employ every day on conscious and subconscious levels can actually be injurious to the Black students in their classrooms? How do they process that their love can hurt? How do they process this hurt?

Let us return to William Styron as I believe he offers a tangible and realistic blueprint for addressing our current racial miseries in the classroom. Written in first person from Nat Turner's point of view and ultimately tone deafeningly ill-timed, Styron's 1968 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* received much backlash from the Black academic community. It was thought of as preposterous of Styron, a Southern White man, to think they he could have the moral authority to write authentically and responsibly from an esteemed Black hero's perspective. Styron responded to the criticism with the essay "This Quiet Dust" as an explanation, a defense of sorts. In it, Styron contends that the racism of his time was rooted in Whites' deliberate ignorance of Blacks and therefore, it was the Whites' responsibility to get to know Black people to begin racial healing. His novel then, his creation of Nat Turner as a character, was his attempt at getting to know and understand Blacks and their experiences.

## **Conclusion**

As college professors, we find ourselves in a similar dangerous psychosocial position and I believe Styron's example for navigating this terrain is a good one. First, we acknowledge that our perceptions of our students are shaped in a culture that is all-encompassing and anti-Black: we all breathe in the smog. This means we must accept our ignorance and that we must accept that some of our beliefs about our Black students are problematic. Second, we must do the work to build relationships with our students that allows us to specifically see how they may be experiencing our classrooms, and our pedagogy. And finally, we must remember that transparent vulnerability, though difficult, is the work of real love and true empathy.



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