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Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable

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Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable

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In this chapter, we articulate a framework for making our commitments to racial justice actionable, a framework that moves from narrating confessional accounts to articulating our commitments and then acting on them through both self-work and work-with-others, a dialectic possibility we identify and explore. We model a method for moving beyond ordinary confessional narratives and engage in dialogue with “the willingness to be disturbed” (Wheatley, 2002), believing that disturbances are productive places from which we can more clearly articulate and act from our commitments. Drawing on our own experiences, we engage the political, systemic, and enduring nature of racism as we together chart an educational framework that counters the macro-logics of oppression enacted daily through micro-inequities. As we advocate for additional and ongoing considerations of the work of antiracism in educational settings, we invite others to embrace, along with us, both the willingness to be disturbed and the attention to making commitments actionable.

This chapter is inspired by the question: how can commitments to racial justice become manifest and actionable in our everyday lives? We have in different ways sought to answer this question and to find ways to embody transformative racial justice in our personal and professional lives. In doing so, we hope to initiate dialogue and to emphasize the processual nature of this work. Our work hinges on dialectic thinking, which engages the necessary tension between the critique *against* racism and the critique *for* social and racial justice. Critique is differently defined but is always considered an essential condition to making change. Like Porter et al., “[we] are not interested in simply reporting how evil institutions are; we think critique needs an action plan” (2000, p. 613). Power structures and systems of oppression are not changed *enough* by critique *alone*, but can become more entrenched by each conversation, presentation, and article that reveals oppression (Kincaid, 2003). As The New London Group (2000/2002), Porter et al. (2000), and Kincaid (2000) all argue, change requires new stories, new ways of collaborating, and new

ways of living. In other words, critique (in its many forms) should dovetail with opportunities to take action (also in its many forms).

Our work with the critique *against* and critique *for* is motivated by the desire to re-write the stories we tell and experience regarding racial oppression and racial justice. The narratives we tell (confessing our early encounters with racial oppression) hover closer to the critique *against* (and rarely move toward the critique *for*). Hence, we term such narratives confessional narratives: they confess pains and tribulation, but do not aspire toward actionable commitment. This realization made us think about their affordances and limits. Our chapter starts with this recognition. The trouble with the limits of narrative accounts catalyzed for us the move toward constructing a model for the reflective pursuit of racial justice.

In what follows, then, we first consider how “confessional narratives” often trap us into thinking of racism as primarily located outside of ourselves and solvable by completing specific tasks (along the lines of a checklist). We argue that one must (1) move from confessional narratives (2) with “a willingness to be disturbed” (Wheatley, 2002, p. 34) (3) to articulations of commitment that are (4) paired with reflective action. A great deal of self-work is required on the journey of growth from articulating a commitment to racial justice to making that commitment actionable and sustainable. In this chapter, therefore, we discuss (intrapersonal) self-work through cultivating emotional intelligence and finding time and space to work on racial justice matters. Thinking dialectically, we understand self-work is done alongside (interpersonal) work-with-others, which moves us toward institutional change. By calling for actionable commitments, we suggest the need to work in complementary *intrapersonal*, *interpersonal*, and *institutional* domains. Working with self and others in these three domains to pursue justice is a demanding project, which entails more than the long-term goal to end white privilege and oppression, while affirming the full enfranchisement of all people. Because this multi-dimensional work is processual, self-reflexive, and taxing, it hinges on a willingness to be disturbed—that is, a willingness to cultivate a tireless investment in reflection, openness, and hope for a better, more fulfilling future for us all.

Moving Beyond Confessional Narratives

Confessional accounts—efforts toward disclosing positionality, sharing an emergent recognition of oppression, and stating complicity paired with the need to counter injustice—are commonplace in antiracist, feminist, class-conscious, and other social justice discourse. Yet, we realize that these confessionals, like all genres, have affordances, limitations, and consequences. There are certainly important reasons for the continual re-emergence of confessional narratives. We, like many others, write such narratives responding to the desire to record: we feel the urge to

know and to articulate the *when, where, how*, and the agonizing *why*, which together catalyze an increased recognition of oppression and dominance. This accounting transcends memory and recovery *per se*. We document to process, interpret, and testify. We also need to account for and often justify our investment in antiracism, providing an originary moment, evolutionary history, and critical genealogy for our commitment. An articulation of positionality is necessary for the ethos of the speaker/writer who chooses to address racial justice in order to understand the stake or mandate in the discourse. As such, narratives *can* ground our argument, pinpoint manifestations of racism, and renew our commitments. We also acknowledge that confessional narratives can be important indirect arguments against claims of (dis)trust as well as toward establishing alliance or solidarity. Recognizing these different functions is important, but the discourse that emerges within confessionals can also *limit* the possibility of where the originary moment might lead.

Confessional accounts can trap us between narratives of victims/saviors and of villains/heroes. The confessional can lock us into the moment of countering outright denials or reluctant dismissals of claims of injustice (e.g., that racism doesn't still exist today or that it exists outside of the self). Confessional accounts can trap us into a stasis of fact: in affirming the presence of racism through countering denials of its existence. The classical rhetorical stases are invention/interpretive tools, pinpointing crucial questions that inform, constitute, and probably constrain our racial equity discourse. Put differently, sharing confessional narratives can keep us in the realm of the known and long proven, accounting for the fact that racism does exist, thrive, and morph, for example—even though many scholars have demonstrated this (Villanueva's 2006 analysis of master tropes being one prominent case). These personal histories can only provide us with a *starting point* when exploring together our commitments to racial justice and how we make these commitments actionable.

Accounts are bound to be local and individual, and so *separately* they deflate the political dimensions of all encounters with oppression. We see value in the adage “the personal is political,” but the value also comes from showing the seamless and seamed connections between these domains. The personal is not just loosely situated in a bigger political scene where power is, on the one hand, (ab)used to maintain inequities and privilege and, on the other hand, minimally contested and optimally re-configured and subverted. Rather, personal experiences of racism and interventions for antiracism also find their meaning in systems and institutions (including academic ones) that define and distribute power both in explicit and implicit ways. Such power is, in turn, affirmed in epistemological landscapes and networks of access and resources. The political nature of the personal is a constitutive dimension, for the personal occurs as we perceive it through the lens of experience (individual and collective), which is “a product of entire systems of social relations which are essentially time-bound, historically, culturally, and materially conditioned” (Leach, 1992). In other words, our individual action originates from

and acts with or against systems of oppression and empowerment. While the work of composing, sharing, and circulating narratives is indeed crucial, there is nothing inherent in these narratives that leads narrators and interlocutors from narration to transformation, from conjecture to policy making, from problem-posing to solidarity-building. Confessional narratives must complement the move toward more systemic understanding of oppression with personal commitments to and action against oppression and toward justice. Only then may we better recognize the political and find ways to intervene and work with/against systems of power. Transformation, policy-making, and coalition-building are processes that are commitment-driven and demand long-term investment and frequent renewal.

Considering an Illustrative Example

As a case in point, we look to writing centers neither because they are anomalies nor the only site where we see confessional narratives. Rather, they exemplify one among many places across the curriculum and within institutions where the pattern manifests. As evidence, much writing center literature discussing race and racism appears invested in the confessional narrative—in descriptive storytelling about racism observed in the center. Often, writing center literature posits tutors and directors as white, American, and native speakers of English and then recounts a story where the inability to recognize the systemic nature of racism leads to a tutor or writer of color ending their relationship with their writing center. These narratives tend to posit justice as teaching white tutors and writing center staff how to approach tutoring writers of color.

One example is *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, which opens with vignettes of different kinds of writing conferences in which the tutor is presented as an ostensibly white, middle-class, and American undergraduate struggling to meet a student's needs. One pair named Patrick and Sabah work on a paper for Sabah's graduate seminar. Sabah, an international student from Singapore, struggles with talking about herself positively. She states, "In my country it is considered inappropriate and too prideful to brag on oneself" (Murphy & Sherwood, 2008, p. 12). Patrick coaxes her to write confidently, but the text subtly emphasizes how his American values are more useful within the academy; the text states, "As an American, Patrick could boast of an accomplishment, or even take a justifiable pride in his achievements, but the same was not true for Sabah as a native of Singapore. Instead, her culture advocated restraint in discussing one's achievements and held that one should not claim excellence" (Murphy & Sherwood, 2008, p. 12). Sabah's inability to express pride is described purely in cultural terms and as a complication for a white American tutor to avoid when tutoring an international student. This rendering, like others we have read of writing conferences, examine a racially charged situation as a moment for a tutor to adapt, rather than to question, the

systemic nature of power in tutoring. The global is collapsed and dismissed into the local. One-time strategies of avoiding or downplaying racial tension in conferences trump long-term, expansive, and explicit ones.

In many staff education texts and handbooks that exist in writing center studies, the influence of tutors' identities on writers' self-disclosures is never discussed. The common characterizations of tutors and writers not only ignore the needs of tutors of color and international peer tutors, but also invest in and rely on white privilege and power. These narratives position students of color as liabilities to writing center discourse, resulting in a polarized/polarizing dynamic of liability where racial privilege emerges and is affirmed. White tutors, in turn, learn to work with writers of color and multilingual writers with a set methodology that limits the flexibility that marks good tutoring practice. Relying on the confessional narrative in our literature, conference spaces, and interpersonal relationships gives us a false sense of one-time, interventive response to racism, often fueling frustration when the "problem" of racism isn't immediately solved. These narratives do little more than reveal the presence of racism and express displeasure in its appearance at specific moments, in specific writing sites/spaces.

Narratives, in this sense, further the idea of individual (rather than systemic) racism, indicating that change can be made by focusing our attention on "the racist" out there or celebrating the "racially conscious" in here—picking up the ways we are trained to see "the racist" as the other, the few, and the obscure rather than thinking of "racism" as very much our own and embedded in all our everyday interactions. Illustrating the limits of the confessional, these narratives keep us in the realm of the (individual, local) problem, and they fail to move us toward articulations of our commitments or considerations of what ought to be. In effect, they hinder important self-work and work-with-others.

Shifting the Narrative and Its Uptake

How do we move beyond confessional accounts to truly transformative narratives? To shift our uptake of narratives, we need to recognize the political and global aspects of largely personal and local accounts. Indeed, confessional narratives share a larger purpose, as they are often written in response to two frequent critiques of antiracism work. The first dismisses manifestations of racism or other forms of oppression as relics of the distant past and as random, individual occurrence. The second argues against this work on the grounds of its relevance to composition and rhetoric studies and writing center work and scholarship. (Villanueva's piece counters the former, and the CCCC Diversity blog has sought to counter the latter.) These dismissal and jurisdictional arguments miss two key points: (1) the local is global, and (2) the personal is political. First, scholarship has well articulated the nature of racialization and racial formulation, pinpointing "that racial identities and

the social meanings attached to racial groups are widespread and deeply embedded in social, educational, political and economic institutions” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1071). Local articulations of racism can never be separated from national and international racial formulations. The decoding of the political nature of race issues evoked by individual and local narratives are crucial at this point in history where boundaries between peoples around the globe are shrinking. If we see that our goal is to teach more than reading and writing as techné and instead to invest in citizens who can participate in and enrich deliberative democracies (which is essentially a political project), we indeed need to recognize that “race issues cannot be treated as strictly local, for they are also caught up with national and international power relations” (Thompson, 1997, p. 9). Second, the political is always experienced on a personal level when people feel that their aspirations are undermined, stifled, or thwarted by political formulations that reproduce specific power articulations. Personal accounts can help us identify with the variegated nature of oppression.

Both global and political aspects of the local and personal account call for a different kind of engagement that willingly commits to listening and being disturbed (e.g., embracing a “willingness to be disturbed”) by what narratives uncover as they testify to our increasing racial consciousness and commitment to racial equity. Through listening and reflective response, we can move from the realm of narrative as a personal account to narrative as collective, transpersonal, and resistive knowledge. If we choose to listen rhetorically to the narratives and recover the shadows of discourse they answer (or are perceived to answer), we might reconsider how we recount and redirect uptake. Collective interpretation of narratives—that is, testifying and processing together—is crucial to collective recognition of our problems, our commitments to counter them, and our efforts toward making commitments actionable. Only when we dare to confront racial ideologies can we fully tell a transformative story, a story that is not just confessional. Then, telling the story is an attempt at re-cording the ties we create with stories we choose to tell—toward motivating and grounding our actions.

While nothing in writing narratives inherently pursues the long process toward racial justice, we value narratives and see how they can be used toward pursuing our commitments—particularly when we choose to capitalize on their power for understanding the process (the means) toward change (particular ends). Narratives *can* be an important first step, particularly when written and told for self-reflexivity, but they do not constitute the entirety of antiracism work. Reframing the uptake (ours and others) to the narrative itself requires an *attitudinal* and *action-oriented* shift. It is this shift that can lead us to re-write our narratives as we move toward racial justice.

To make our commitments to racial justice actionable, we need to disrupt confessional narratives in order to move collaboratively toward an actionable stance. We also need to shape-shift, to re-narrate stories that capture our vision. Much like the “trickster moments” that Geller et al. (2006) urge readers to embrace and seek

out, we pursue narratives that “can be generative, can nudge us to be mindful, to notice more” (p. 17). And, like The New London Group, by utilizing Design to improve Available Designs, we want to be “designers of our social futures” (2002, p. 36), focusing on rhetorical, systemic, and institutional work that makes “our working lives, our public lives (citizenship), and our personal lives (lifeworlds)” (p. 10) more racially just. Toward acting on these goals, in what follows we argue for cultivating the stance of willingness to be disturbed. We then propose three interdependent rhetorical moves that have the potential to re-design, transform, and move us closer toward racial justice. Namely, these moves are (1) embracing a willingness to be disturbed (2) articulating our commitments, and (3) making these commitments actionable. By no means are these final points of our thinking or in our long work together, but they are, we hope, valuable in proposing the types of self-work and work-with-others (e.g., intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional work) needed to engage in everyday/over-time, local/global, personal/political antiracism. We start with the first move: embracing a willingness to be disturbed.

Embracing a Willingness to Be Disturbed

As we work together to restore hope to the future, we need to include a new and strange ally—our willingness to be disturbed. Our willingness to have our beliefs and ideas challenged by what others think. No one person or perspective can give us the answers we need to the problems of today. Paradoxically, we can only find those answers by admitting we don’t know. We have to be willing to let go of our certainty and expect ourselves to be confused for a time. (Wheatley, 2002, p. 34)

A willingness to be disturbed underlies the work of articulating and making commitments actionable, as we are often challenged, confused, and even disturbed at times—wrestling with our personal narratives, our racialized positions in the world, and our relative power and privilege. Through choosing to be willingly disturbed, we have come to believe, as Wheatley does in *Turning to One Another*, that “[c]uriosity and good listening bring us back together” (2002, p. 36). Our willingness to be disturbed and our willingness to listen help us overcome seemingly insurmountable divides in the face of institutionalized racism enacted daily through a series of ongoing micro-aggressions and micro-inequities (Sue et al., 2007). Willingness to listen and to be disturbed makes us develop ways to resist how these micro manifestations of aggressions and inequities recycle their ever-present historical legacies.

We follow Wheatley’s challenge to embrace a *willingness to be disturbed* to sig-

nify the important role self-work plays in our project. Like Wheatley, we value encountering disturbances because doing so helps us “see [our] own views more clearly,” and is “a very useful way to see invisible beliefs” (2002, p. 36). Entering into the work with a willingness-to-be-disturbed stance signifies that personal epistemologies are part of systemic racism and oppression. This willingness also signals an openness to dialogue and a recognition that antiracism work is messy and ongoing. Antiracism is not a one-time deal: we are here with each other and with others to learn, to recommit ourselves, and to work toward making our commitments actionable in our lives. We strive, therefore, to confront our individual and collective fears and respons(a/i)bilities—work that we have found necessitates a willingness to be disturbed, as Wheatley calls us to. We believe that disturbances are productive places from which we can clearly articulate and act from our commitments.

Articulating Our Commitments

Just as it is important to open to a willingness to be disturbed and to move beyond confessional narratives, we see a need to articulate our commitments so that we can make them actionable. What grounds our vision and guides our process of embracing and sustaining the work of antiracism? The act of articulating (and re-articulating, regularly) our commitments is important for ensuring ongoing engagement with antiracism rather than a performance that is easy to drop in and drop out of. Further, we have found that it’s not enough to engage *just* in a “critique of” or “action against” racism (or stances that make us complicit), but rather we need a positive articulation of “critique for” and “action toward” to keep our eyes on the *ought to be*, to pull from Horton (1997), Mathieu (2005), Branch (2007), and others.

Put simply, our shared commitment is to equity, to justice, to humanity. Work for antiracism is simultaneously work for racial justice and, as we understand it, work for social justice broadly, as our identities overlap and systems of power and privilege are intertwined. Equity work is always incomplete and involves always striving. It is everyday and local, while systematic and institutional. We have come to this understanding through seeing how systemic racism is enacted in small, regular, and everyday micro-inequities and micro-aggressions—bias enacted often not through conscious intent, but through the normalization of inequitable experience and seemingly small, though consequential, acts (see, e.g., Rowe, 1990; Sue et al., 2007). As we work at unlearning white supremacy and undoing this everyday racism, we engage in a process of tracing how systems of power and privilege work similarly, and yet differently, across enactments of oppression based on (assumed) group memberships. Therefore, the work of articulating commitments involves deep, iterative self-reflexivity. This involves, for example, asking questions of ourselves, such as the following:

- *Values*: What values, attitudes, and actions *can* and *must* we practice for racial justice?
- *Emotions*: How can we experience and act from joy in the pursuit of justice, and how can we mobilize joy to sustain and leverage our commitments over time?
- *Relations*: What networks best fuel—sustain, support, and nourish—our actions so that, for instance, time is spent caucusing (e.g., whites building solidarity with other whites committed to racial justice) and in building cross-racial coalitions and meaningful relationships?
- *Conditions*: What conditions enable the development of beliefs/values, attitudes, and actions consistent with antiracism? What conditions foster cross-racial relations? What conditions best sustain and motivate ongoing action and activism?

These questions cover a huge territory, but each question reflects our understanding of the multi-dimensional work of making commitments actionable, which comprises (1) intrapersonal self-work and (2) work-with-others on both the interpersonal and institutional levels. We turn next to these dimensions in which we see possibility for making commitments actionable.

Making Our Commitments Actionable

Our proposed multidimensional framework grows out of and responds to the need for *dialectical thinking*—residing in a liminal space of both/and. Drawing on Papa, Singhal, and Papa, we understand the dialectic *not* as simple dualisms, but as processes with four elements: “(1) contradiction, (2) motion, (3) totality, and (4) praxis” (2006, p. 43). Together, these elements help us understand how seemingly contradictory stances and moves are not only necessary, but mutually constitutive and supportive. Dialectic thinking is a strengths-based approach toward personal and micro-level change with the goal of influencing political, institutional, and more traditionally conceived macro-level change. The dialectic approach helps us value where we are and, at the same time, aspire toward where we’d like to be. This means appreciating what has been learned and also setting goals toward observing and intervening more frequently and in more nuanced and timely ways.

We are drawn to dialectic thinking largely because it allows us to see the productive tensions between critique and action. We can neither be so drawn to the realm of critique *against* that we miss other ways of taking action with others, nor can we be so focused on outward action that we lose critical, introspective reflection upon our methods, processes, and goals. As an approach for making our commitments actionable, the dialectic allows us to understand the importance of self-work alongside work-with-others, two ways of conceptualizing critique-and-action that

we explore in what follows.

Doing Self-Work

Dialectic thinking directs our attention toward the important role of intrapersonal self-work—or individual “self study,” with the goal of building self-reflexivity—and occurs alongside work with others. This self-work entails an investment in a serious, processual self-reflection and a rich dialogue with the self about how we think, how we feel, and finally how we invent time and space as lacking or available. The following sections reflect this process of self-reflection, which involves, among other considerations, the work of cultivating emotional intelligence and finding both time and place for the work. We offer these examples to begin operationalizing our commitments and understanding self-work as action-oriented and valuable.

Cultivating Emotional Intelligence

We have found that self-work often begins by being attentive to our emotions—that is, checking in about not only what we think (head) and plan to do (hands), but also how we *feel* (heart). Emotional intelligence refers to our ability to recognize and to manage effectively our emotional states, and it relates broadly to “self awareness, self management, social awareness, and the ability to manage relationships” (Goleman, 2006). We can cultivate emotional intelligence through self-reflection and deliberate attention to the nature and function of our emotions, especially anger and joyful commitment—two emotions we explore here. We reference anger and joyful commitment because they represent two different ends of the spectrum, noting how each can be a generative force that helps us work to attain racial justice.

Recognizing our own emotional responses helps us to act even through uncertainty. This reflexivity springs from a recognition of the generative potential of emotions. Reflective recognition of our emotional states helps us to take up a productive, albeit discomfiting, liminal stance. From this stance, we can ask ourselves many questions: Can we reside in a place of creative possibility, while naming our range of emotional responses (e.g., *anger* because of oppression; *frustration* because we are not doing enough; *hurt* because we are misunderstood)? Can we reflect on what positive/negative emotions have to teach us? Are we *acting*, *reacting*, or both? These questions are partly informed by Lorde’s (1984) essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in which she explains how anger (even fury) is an appropriate response to racism. These questions are also informed by Buddhist monk Nhat Hanh’s book *Anger* (2001), which discusses the need to *acknowledge* and *care for* one’s anger the way we would care for a broken leg (and not hide,

neglect, or cut it off). Both Lorde and Nhat Hanh are powerful activists who recognize the generative force that resides in our uses of anger to move ourselves and others forward. This *moving forward* is not automatic though. Because harnessing the generative potential of emotions is neither automatic, dispensable, nor easy, we must intentionally attend to connecting our head, heart, and hands, while reflectively renewing our actionable commitments.

Reflecting on the uses of anger, we seek to come to a place where we are less resigned to the presence of racism and other oppressions. Racism shifts and changes and may seem impossible to quantify or truly represent; it is false to say that “we’re in a better place” now than we were fifty years ago. Many of us who work to end oppression come to places where we have little more energy than to recount the oppressions we see, to patch and piece together solutions for people wronged by our institutions, and to choose which oppressions in our life we have the time to battle. For example, while writing this, laws like Arizona’s HB-87, Alabama’s HB-57, and Georgia’s HB-87 (copycats of Arizona’s bill) legislate racial profiling and discrimination and, in effect, write into law the association of whiteness with citizenship. We must balance anger with the works of faith: our seemingly small interventions will bring tides of change in the years to come.

Antiracism is so often associated with struggle, yet acts of struggle—and especially of resistance—can be full of joy, excitement, learning, and growth. We recognize that these emotions, though at very different ends of the emotional spectrum, teach us and help us act toward a more equitable and just world. Inspired by the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and by Buddhist teachings, Hartnett (2010) writes about the need to commit ourselves to activism while caring for ourselves and others. “Joyful commitment,” writes Hartnett, “asks us to pledge ourselves to work for social justice and for personal growth, to be both radical in our demands and gentle in our demeanor, both outraged by inequality and oppression and joyous in our commitments to end them” (p. 71). As such, functional, generative uses of anger and the move toward a joyful commitment nourish our spirit. Functional, generative uses of our emotions offer transformation that can both result from and sustain the pursuit of racial justice. We find that cultivating emotional intelligence is important for inspiring frequent re-commitment, for sustaining us, and for building strength for the long haul.

Finding Time and Space

For the most part, the self-work involved in cultivating emotional intelligence comes neither easily nor naturally. We often find any number of priorities claiming our attention, so it’s necessary to devote time and space not only to the work of antiracism, but especially to the self-work required for actualizing our commitments. So we find that part of self-work is about dedicating the time and space for ongo-

ing reflection—reflections on one’s own positioning and power, on one’s relations and ways of relating, on one’s participation and leadership, and on so much more. Finding time and space for self-work is perhaps most important when it is in such limited supply and when self-care is considered a privilege in and of itself. The dialectic helps us see the value in *prioritizing time* for self-work, as this work informs and strengthens work-with-others. Similarly, the dialectic helps us to understand the *importance of holding space*.

Racial justice work often does not receive the time and attention it should because it is often seen as *in addition to* other responsibilities. Geller et al. (2007) write that many writing center directors—and, by extension, writing program administrators (WPAs)—feel they do not have time for anti-oppression and anti-racism education for their tutors (and consequently for themselves) because ending racism is posited as a Sisyphean task that is overshadowed by the other pressures and mandates put on writing units at their academic institutions. Thus, we look for ways to make antiracism part of every task and to articulate the goals of antiracism as central to our writing programs, teaching, and scholarship. To do this, we need to hold time and space to get out of our normal, local, and patterned contexts to think with each other about how our commitments can become *integral to* all responsibilities. We need the time and space with allies to discuss matters and plan action that can jumpstart change. We need the time and space to help us deepen our commitments, creating really important synergies and partnerships. When in the absence of the luxury to participate in (inter)national networks, we must work harder to establish local networks.

As we work against oppression and for social justice, we complement self-work with work-with-others. The cumulative impact of cultivating emotional intelligence and finding time and space to renew our commitments can help us work with others differently and more effectively. Through the dialectic, we see that action-oriented self-work is every bit as important as working with others. The ways we do this work may align, overlap, and even diverge. At times, self-work may become the central means for articulating and pursuing our commitments, while at other times, we may be largely engaged in outward-oriented partnerships or institutional work. What is important to note is that each actionable move necessitates, informs, and strengthens the other.

Doing Work-with-Others

As a complement to and extension of self-work, we recognize the need to do interpersonal and institutional work within groups and across groups, which is crucial to systemic intervention toward racial justice. This complementary work not only differs from self-work, but also necessitates ongoing reflection on *the means* and *the*

ends of collaboration, participation, and leadership. Too often in doing antiracism, we skip over the various types of work-with-others, which we here are trying to tease out and attend to with care. Working with others has many dimensions: cognitive, affective, and processual/procedural. Such work also balances dialectic possibilities like responding tactically, while planning strategically; being in-the-moment, while thinking long-term and working over-time; attending to interpersonal dynamics, while taking on institutional leadership. This multidimensional work is facilitated by two conditions: namely, creating and holding space for self and other and listening rhetorically. First, we would like to create more space for self-work with others who can help us listen more and more deeply to the “disturbances” in our accounts, to the articulations of our commitments, and to the moves toward making those commitments actionable. We need to hold space so that we can engage with others in critical, reflective, courageous dialogues (Singleton & Linton, 2006) about power—both in the sense of privilege and power *over* and in the sense of power *with* and *for*. Second, as we work with others, we need to attend to the relational and affective work involved in creating racially just institutions in which all members’ rights are realized. In making institutional change, we must reflect on and recognize power relative to others, which involves deep attention to the *right to tell* and the *obligation to listen*. As we describe below, some of these moves are procedural, some interactional, some rhetorical—and all informed by the dialectic approach.

Doing Self-Work with Others

In this section, we focus on two (of what surely are many) dimensions of working with others toward social justice. These are (1) critical reflection on one’s own power, privilege, and positioning and (2) taking care of the collective. These dimensions show the need for self-work with others to be reflective, dialogic, and affective, as well as ongoing. This work cannot be a one-time deal. As we care for ourselves, we care for others, and others care for us: care toward intra- and cross-racial solidarity can only be built through ongoing self-work, courageous dialogue, and the willingness to be disturbed.

Reflecting Critically on One’s Own Power, Privilege, Positioning

When working with others—both through caucuses (i.e., within one’s racial membership group) and through coalitions (i.e., in cross-racial collaborations), critical reflection on one’s role is important for building solidarity and sustaining relations toward collaborative work over time. Recognition of power and privilege, especially our own, is difficult but doable and indispensable in work-with-others. Though it is possible to train oneself to notice how we articulate power, it is in relation to others that we tend to *make claims about* or *use* our power. Critical reflections on power—and the manifestations and implications of power *over*, *with*,

and *for*—are essential to antiracism. These reflections not only teach us about the logic of oppression as a discourse—a dynamic articulation of collective power *over* and power denial—but these reflections especially show us how our own power makes solidarity possible. In other words, the very same power *over* brings to sharp relief how commitment makes solidarity (power *with*) for racial justice (power *for*) possible and necessary.

Fortunately, we often find ourselves situated to make commitments to fairness and justice actionable. This often happens when we choose to be in the generative place of being teacher/learner with our colleagues and students—for example, when we interrogate with others what it means to be a confidant and, in turn, an ally. The ally role is not a role that one should enter without giving thought to the harm as well as the good that can be done. In the case of antiracism, well-meaning white folks can do damage when acting only on what *they* see as the right thing to do in terms of racial justice without listening to folks of color. Instead, to prevent the hurt that eliminates the possibility of cross-racial solidarity, whites need to recognize that in working with others, there's a need to appreciate, to challenge, and to be willingly disturbed. When it is well used, the ally role is relationally intelligent and can open much possibility. But when it is not done well—that is, without critical reflections on one's power, privilege, and positioning—it can hurt ourselves and others and get us further mired in the mud of institutionalized racism.

Doing self-work with others involves ongoing care-full self-reflection that takes place, in part, through courageous dialogues. Institutes, retreats, and seminars can play important roles, for example, in facilitating and supporting reflective self-work, while establishing networks of colleagues who can help us look, look again, and listen more carefully than we probably would on our own, in the everyday context and rhythm of life. National and international networks can support everyday activism in local contexts and help to build disciplinary and cross-institutional change. Further, within these networks, we can *courageously* confront our own prejudiced assumptions. To do so, we need equally to learn from and listen to others (both within and across racial groups) who can help us realize these assumptions. Collaborative processing leads us to a second dimension of work-with-others: caretaking of the collective.

Taking Care of the Collective

Effective and sustained work-with-others tends to the needs and the goals of all parties involved. The absence of such attention risks foiling the condition of togetherness that enables a dialogic process in the pursuit of racial justice. This is why it is crucial to complement cognitive, critical reflection with affective and relational resources that we can use to support one another. Community organizers recognize the value of “caretaking of the collective,” foregrounding our need to build intentional structures to care for ourselves and each other when engaged in

antiracism work. We struggle with embodying the wisdom of this notion (the value of caretaking), and it seems that we are not alone, as is evidenced by a question posed to one of us recently: *How do we better cultivate peace within ourselves when we're engaged in peace-work?*

The work of everyday antiracism necessitates the emotional intelligence we've discussed earlier. Knowing when we need to re-fuel is important for sustaining the work, and it is equally important to recognize when others need time to refuel. This self-care can happen with others, as we process together modalities of oppression, while leaning into each other's needs and strengths. At its best, caretaking can facilitate and build a collaborative antiracism network, as partnerships and collaborative leadership are needed for making institutional change. Thinking dialectically, we see that engaging in self-work with others can strengthen work within institutions (e.g., in our classrooms and writing programs), just as working together for institutional change can allow us to do self-work with others. That said, critical reflection and caretaking come into play just as much when working for institutional change: we never leave behind self-work, but carry qualities such as reflection, dialogue, and emotional intelligence with us into more structural ways of making our commitments actionable. Likewise, we continue to find time and space for sustained and commitment-driven work-with-others *institutionally*.

Working Together for Institutional Change

In relation to institutional change, reflecting on and acting from places of power become essential. As we work with others toward institutional change, the process and result of the dialectic critique against oppression and critique for justice will vary. That said, we work within this dialectic as we articulate and act from our commitments, while also deliberating the consequences of choosing to *interrogate*, *relinquish*, and/or *use* power (especially when our work seems to reproduce the status quo). To this end, in these final sections focused on institutional change, we complement (1) interrogating power with (2) utilizing power. This interrogation of power *over*, however, can't be done only on a one-with-one level because it creates instances of insulated, local response to manifestations of racism. Instead, we need to make this interrogation structural so that it is independent of any person (e.g., the director of a writing program/center). Interrogating power should be part of an institution's culture, history, and vision—i.e., woven into its institutional fabric.

Interrogating Power

Our desire to interrogate power directs us to be more deliberate about questioning who, when, how, and to what end power is used in writing instruction, writing programs, and educational institutions more broadly. At times, our response may be troubled by an urge to relinquish power to resist oppression; however, we nei-

ther think relinquishing power is the only choice we have to pursue racial justice (though the urge to do so is understandable), nor is it necessarily useful or inherently altruistic. We can, alternatively, choose to use power *with* one another and *for* the pursuit of racial justice. As power *over* is relational (a relation of domination), so is power *with* relational, thriving when people together are willing to: (1) resist the urge to speak *for* others; (2) embrace the duty to listen to claims of grievance, even when un(der)vocalized; and (3) embrace respons(i/a)bility.

First, power *over* can be interrogated as we resist the urge to speak for. We invoke here Alcoff's (1991–1992) recognition of the very fine line between advocacy and totalizing (reducing and misrepresenting) the experiences of others even as we attempt to be allies. What makes us cross that line—tripping, reproducing, and preventing a discourse of testifying and solidarity? Alcoff offers a reflective process that can start by *at best* resisting and *at least* interrogating the desire to speak for others.

Second, it is almost impossible to resist the urge to speak without embracing the duty to listen. This begs the question: How can we listen better and ask others to listen better so we don't need the "proxy speaker" or the "sponsor"? Rhetorical listening has been addressed well in the literature (e.g., Glenn & Ratcliffe, 2011; Kelley, 1998; Oleksiak, 2014; Ratcliffe, 2005;), asking us to interrogate our assumptions about who has the right to tell and what accounts or interests impede us from recognizing this right. Rhetorical listening invites questions like: Who has the right to tell and to testify? How do we signal a commitment to listen when others' testify and seek to be heard? What is the impact of not telling and not listening? If the process of interrogating power starts with this model of critical examination, it goes deeper and becomes more demanding when we, as Alcoff suggests we do, examine our positions and the tacit ideological discourses that define how we know, feel, be, and—we would like to add here—listen. Alcoff (1991–1992) recommends, therefore, a serious analysis of our standpoint and context, an openness to critique and accountability, and an attentiveness to consequences of our privileges and the affordances of our positions. All enable listening.

Third, embracing responsibility and response ability is part of the dialogic, recursive nature of the work toward racial justice. There are numerous manifestations of the challenge of interrogating power *over*, which we think, when balanced by the choice to embrace joyful commitment, can result in response ability. We've seen white folks start antiracism work and then abandon it: leave articles half-written, committee charges half-met. It also prompts us to think about how white people so often get "credit" for doing antiracism work (i.e., professional credit and academic cultural currency), while people of color are expected and over-required to do "diversity work" without much, if any, credit. And even with the research and many narratives about faculty of color doing "double duty" (Gloria, 1998, p. 37)—that is, over-doing service, advising, teaching, research, and writing work—the problem

is so entrenched that whites committed to antiracism continue to benefit from it. For example, white faculty who write about race and antiracism are recognized for this work and can trace professional gains from it (see, e.g., hooks, 1994). Even when recognizing the problem, whites committed to antiracism participate in and benefit from this structural inequity. Another way of saying the same thing: though whites committed to antiracism participate in and benefit from this structural inequity, relinquishing the work neither alleviates the asymmetrical distributions of responsibility to recover from racism nor does it solve the problem. Rather, it invites us to contemplate a central question: What rhetorical and leadership skills do we need to develop for the kind of solidarity and advocacy toward restructuring/ countering the power of whiteness? We believe these skills come from an approach where we are willing to be disturbed and to let go when summoned to listen. The skills, practice, and responsibility of interrogating power are necessary alongside the skills, practice, and responsibility of using power for wider institutional change.

Using Power

Because racism is institutional, we believe that a significant part of making commitments actionable must happen within the institutions we occupy and shape. Institutions are big structures full of bureaucracies, and as Fox points out, “Most of us, even in rhetoric and composition, aren’t prepared for working in bureaucracies” (2009, p. 15). However, institutions can be changed, and we look for ways to use institutions for greater access and equity. Consider what Porter et al. say about institutions:

Though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable. In other words, we made ’em, we can fix ’em. *Institutions R Us*. (2000, p. 611)

True, not everyone within an institution holds the same power, but we shouldn’t allow our individual positions to determine whether we act. When we are in the shadow of power feeling small and subjugated, too often deferral—saying it’s not our place to speak/act or it’s someone else’s struggle—presents itself as an easy move. But why not change our perspective? If we’re in the shadow of power, that means we are really, really close to power, and with some creativity, we may be able to make something of the situation.

Teachers, WPAs, and writing center directors are ideally positioned to do institutional change work, forwarding equity and justice goals. And, as Porter et al. write, “for those of you who think such optimism is politically naive and hopelessly liberal and romantic, we believe that we (and you, too) have to commit to this hypothesis anyway, the alternative—political despair—being worse” (2000, p. 611).

Again, though, commitments must be actionable and more than hopeful rhetoric. Within the context of understanding racism as a manifestation of institutional culture, politeness, and silence, we believe intentional efforts must be made to disrupt the status quo. Working toward more racially diverse teaching and tutoring staffs and cultivating the conditions that support racially just pedagogy and administration represent two areas well suited for activism and institutional change.

Faculty, WPAs, department chairs, deans, provosts, presidents, and chancellors occupy positions of power making them responsible for structural components of an educational space. These spaces have the potential to harm, heal, empower, and produce any number of other negative and positive consequences related to race and equity matters. “We cannot remake the world through schooling,” The New London Group points out, “but we can instantiate a vision through pedagogy that creates in microcosm a transformed set of relationships and possibilities for social futures” (2002, p. 19). WPAs’ conscious work (e.g., toward recruiting, hiring, and retaining a racially diverse staff as well as providing professional development opportunities) can help teachers/tutors confront racism within themselves, their classes/conferences, and writing programs/centers in general.

A specific example of an institutional shift occurs when faculty and administrators think critically about staff in regards to race and other identity memberships. The suggestion to hire more people of color at first seems tokenizing, and this suggestion is potentially motivated by tokenizing efforts. We have seen, however, remarkable shifts through conscious hiring when this hiring accompanies a move toward actively supporting tutors of color and changing the climate of the program/institution. For example, new hires draw in new students and colleagues from their networks, forward new perspectives on what the program/institution should be, and participate in shared leadership. Moving away from attempting to effect change *only* from top-down, one-time efforts and shifting instead toward all-in, long-term approaches helps us change the culture of a writing program and higher education as a whole, mitigating the disappointment accompanied with slow change.

Documents like “Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Institution” (Crossroads, n.d.) show the gradual nature of change and specify fundamental, observable markers of institutional change, but even such carefully constructed documents sometimes contain ambiguity, which represents both an entry into dialogue and potential impediment to action/goal actualization. Using power to effect change institutionally involves work-with-others in which we act based on commitments. Careful articulations—combing over word choice and phrasing—go hand-in-hand with the dialectic of interrogating and using power. These are different manifestations of power, which remind us of the role intrapersonal self-work plays when working with others, both interpersonally and institutionally. The many ways in which we make our commitments actionable—many of which are

discussed here, while many more we continue to explore and find together—necessitate the *both/and* stance characteristic of dialectic thinking. And the dialectic, we find, brings us back to cultivating a willingness to be disturbed—that is, a stance of genuine openness to listening, learning, and leading on one’s own and with others.

Conclusion

Together, we believe that an everyday educational process toward racial justice works against the macro-logics of oppression enacted daily through micro-inequities. A dialectic intervention focused on self-work and work-with-others might, at first, seem to have only local impact. However, if the local and personal converse with or gesture toward historical, social, economic, or otherwise material roots and implications, we believe they have the potential of addressing the larger macro-logics of inequity and oppression. We address inequity also by acknowledging how we experience, see, understand, participate in, and advocate against these macro-logics and micro-inequities differently based on our racial identities, personal histories, and intersecting positions within broader systems of power and privilege. Talking and listening across these differences has meant, for us, struggle, yet hope; vulnerability, yet possibility.

Through working together, we have come to realize the care-full, processual, reiterative, and self-reflexive nature of the work for equity and social justice in educational settings. It is this togetherness and openness to being disturbed that allows us now to think about a transformative narrative, one that moves beyond confessional accounts. Ultimately, we write toward the goal of making our commitments actionable and, in turn, creating new realities that are more racially and socially just. By continually doing self-work and work-with-others, we hope to live a recursive theory-practice-theory-practice life allowing us to never stop learning and acting with our local, national, and international communities. We hope to inspire this willingness to be disturbed in others, and we look forward to learning from and engaging with and alongside *you* on the long haul toward racial justice.

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