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# Affective Dimensions of Transracial and Transcultural Scholarly Collaboration

## A Case Study

*Al Harahap & Brian Hendrickson*

### Abstract

The exigency of transracial and transnational academic collaborations has emphasized an array of positionalities and uncovered the inadequacies of traditional, formal, objective relationships. We draw on our experience through a decade of multiple projects to identify the need for collaborators to not only recognize our individual positionalities but, also just as crucial to the health of the collaboration, reflect on and discuss difficult differences deliberatively. We focus on the controversial travel ban and boycott calls of CCCC 2018 Kansas City as one example moment and site where this happened for us. The academic conference also serves as a representation of a much grander academic project between thousands of collaborators.

### Introduction

We were first introduced to each other early in our careers by a colleague at the 2012 Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Shortly thereafter, Brian invited Al to co-chair the Diversity Committee of the Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO). In those initial interactions, we showed one another the restrained, formal respect that professional colleagues would expect in a new collaboration. However, that dynamic gradually shifted as we continued to meet virtually once each week with the ambitious task of making the graduate organization more diverse. The parent organization, CWPA, recognized that their membership and leadership, including students, were relatively homogenous—in terms of racial composition, positions/titles of membership, and institution type. Thus, our task was part of CWPA's mission to establish a mentorship pipeline toward eventual equitable and inclusive conditions within the parent organization. The enormity and stakes of that task perhaps heightened our sense that we would need to function and communicate on the same wavelength, perhaps even form a close bond, if we were to hope for any kind of organizational change. We took to heart Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's (1985) call to acknowledge the affective dimensions of collaborative writing, noting too Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2014) contention that "emotions are not 'in' either the individual

or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (p.10). Sure enough, as we continued to collaborate across various contexts over the coming decade—professional organizations, conference presentations, editorial responsibilities, and the occasional road trip and backpacking expedition—we learned how to communicate openly about the affective dimensions of our lives, work, and friendship in ways that have enhanced our professional collaboration. To each other, we are no longer interchangeable academics in dress shirt, suit, and tie, but have become real people with complex identities that have to be negotiated within what Ede and Lunsford (1983) called "rigid time schedules" (p.153). Shedding our professional facades has enabled, even necessitated, us to become more emotionally invested in our working relationship.

Demographic identity—in our classrooms, our field, and our professional relationship—has always been at the forefront of our work together. Brian is a white, cis, hetero man who grew up middle class in a predominantly conservative county in the U. S. state of Florida, oblivious to what that all meant in terms of his own privileges and biases, and he has never lived outside the United States. For much of the past two decades, however, he has been plodding through what Janet E. Helms (1990) described as the process of white racial identity development, trying to get to the point where he can more healthfully own that identity through a commitment to antiracism. An important part of that developmental process has involved collaborations that challenge reductive racial identity categories, such as his work on local racial healing initiatives, his partnerships with leaders in international indigenous rights movements, and his continuing collaboration with Al, who is proactively trying to eschew identity marker labels. This thought-project, for Al, has gradually built up over years alongside developments of identity politics both in and out of academia. As an immigrant across multiple regions of the globe, Al has difficulty responding to the reductive "from" question of origination: with how to place himself in the limited academic categories of "native," "non-native," "first-language," "second-language" English speaker-writer; with being considered part of one socioeconomic class in one place and a different one in another; with belonging to racial/ethnic categories that are malleable depending on regional and historical contexts; and with claiming non-English pronouns as a statement on the limitations of a binary, gendered language. Al seeks to deliberately break down the public proclamations of socially constructed identity marker labels to be more fluid with their gender presentation, sexuality, and ableness of body and mind.

In other words, identity is complicated. So, we had to learn over the years how to communicate about identity in a more personal, nuanced, generous, trusting, and reciprocal fashion. For example, Al had to open up about how they were processing the trauma that coincided with living under constant threat of deportation. Brian had to better understand that. Brian also had to confront the effects of growing up in a culture rife with white supremacy and toxic masculinity. Al, who is not raising a traditional family unit

with children, has had to try to understand the pressures Brian feels to balance work and friendships with his domestic responsibilities.

In doing so, we have become increasingly aware of the broader need for collaborators to attune to how entangled affect is in the spatial, temporal, and sociocultural dimensions of our work and how that entanglement shapes the ways we, in turn, collaboratively shape the field of rhetoric/composition/writing studies, especially as we undertake justice-oriented work in increasingly transracial and transnational spaces. As the Black Lives Matter movement catalyzed a global reckoning with racial injustice, the coinciding social justice turn in writing studies and related disciplines (Walton/Moore/Jones 2019) manifested in increased scrutiny of racially unjust policies and practices within our professional organizations and journals (e.g., Inoue 2016) as well as antiracist efforts to transform those structures (e.g., Cagle et al. 2021). As part of this broader trend, scholars in our field have begun to call attention to the affective, relational, intersectional, and deeply personal dimensions of interracial scholarly collaboration (e.g., Faison/Condon 2022; Johnston et al. 2022; Licona/Chávez 2015; Pettus et al. 2022). This work is valuable, though not only because greater ethnic diversity more strongly correlates with higher impact factors than other markers of diversity like academic age, discipline, gender, and institutional affiliation (AlShebli et al. 2018). By drawing upon one particularly illuminating anecdote, we aim to contribute to this emerging conversation by calling attention to how affect shapes our collaboration and our field. Accordingly, we will make the case that explicitly attending to the affective forces at work in any transracial and transnational scholarly collaboration has implications not just for the success of that collaboration but also for the future of rhetoric/composition/writing studies on a global scale. We will close with recommendations for how our field might more intentionally cultivate opportunities for transracial and transnational scholarly collaborations to constructively account for the affective dimensions of collaborative work.

### CCCC Kansas City as Case for Affective Collaboration in the Field

On June 7, 2017, the State Conference of the Missouri National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (MONAACP) issued a travel advisory for the U.S. state of Missouri. MONAACP's advisory was primarily a response to the passage of Senate Bill 43, which enacted a state law limiting protections against various forms of discrimination, but the advisory also cited multiple examples of "looming danger," including racist attacks on high school and college students, homophobic comments by state legislators, the Islamophobic killing of two internationally born men, and excessive police traffic stops of African Americans—including that of Tory Sanford, who died while in police custody without ever being arrested.

Just weeks prior to the advisory, the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) issued the call for pro-

posals for its 2018 Annual Convention to be held in Kansas City, Missouri. The CCCC Black, Latinx, American Indian, and Asian/Asian American Caucuses (2017, August 15) later issued a joint statement in which they “strongly suggest[ed] moving the locations of the 2017 NCTE and the 2018 CCCC conventions from St. Louis, MO, and Kansas City, MO, respectively, to locations that are more inclusive of and safe for all of the NCTE/CCCC membership.” After this statement was first posted to the WPA-L,<sup>1</sup> Todd Ruecker (2017, August 17) pointed out, “When conference rates were off last year, I recall seeing a few dozen messages about that. This seems like a much more important issue to discuss.” Ruecker’s remark called attention to how unusual this silence was. In addition to being known as a space to procure helpful advice from colleagues and share job ads and calls for proposals, the WPA-L was also known as a space where gripes were frequently aired, especially in regard to CCCC Annual Conventions.<sup>2</sup> One could interpret the relative silence on the WPA-L regarding the travel ban as a typical phase during a busier time of the academic calendar. If, however, as Iris Ruiz et al. (2023) described it, the WPA-L functioned as “a manifestation of inequities within the discipline at large” (para. 5), then one could interpret the relative silence on the WPA-L regarding the travel ban as a manifestation of the broader field’s lack of awareness of and, on a more affective level, concern for the dangers that traveling to Missouri posed for scholars of color, as well as a lack of any sense of obligation to act in solidarity with MONAACP and Missourians of color.

The joint caucus statement succeeded in stoking some conversation on the WPA-L, accumulating several hundred cosigners, and prompting a quick response to the WPA-L from outgoing CCCC Chair Linda Adler-Kassner (2017, August 17) assuring that the CCCC Executive Committee was “listening hard to the suggestions.” A link to an official update (now deleted) from CCCC on their ongoing deliberations was shared to the list on August 28 (Carbone 2017), followed by an official decision (CCCC 2017) rejecting the possibility of moving the convention at such a late date and recommitting to a standing “Conference Siting and Hostile Legislation” policy, which called for engaging with members and other local organizations in local activism while ensuring attendees’ safety at the Convention. The *WPA-L Archives* contain no record of that statement ever being posted to or discussed on the list. Again, the silence speaks volumes. Drawing upon Ahmed (2004, 2014), we might say that this silence surfaces in the field’s predominant online discursive space as a resounding ambivalence toward engaging with scholars and Missourians of color, even as objects of consideration. That the WPA-L was not a space where scholars of color showed up in critical mass as subjects themselves to discuss and debate the matter speaks volumes as well to how that space failed to cultivate a broader sense of belonging.

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1 Now defunct, the WPA-L was not officially affiliated with CWPA, NCTE/CCCC, or any other professional organization, but it was at the time one of the field’s most utilized listservs within the United States. Professional organizations frequently used it to communicate important information to members and nonmembers alike, and members of the field frequently used it to discuss those announcements.

2 For a case in point, search the *WPA-L Archives* for the term “bedbugs.”

Certainly, plenty of discussion was still taking place off-list between CCCC members as to whether to boycott or attend the 2018 Convention. While our own conversations often began with commentary on the drama unfolding on the listservs or behind the scenes, they quickly shifted into how we found ourselves enmeshed in the circumstances in different ways given our different positionalities. Brian, who had recently secured a tenure-track job, had less to lose professionally by boycotting; he could afford to miss a year and not lose out on the networking opportunity or line on his curriculum vitae. On the other hand, going carried little personal safety risk for him. Was it better for him to show solidarity with his colleagues of color leading the boycott by leveraging his agency as a paying CCCC member or should he leverage his privilege toward contributing to a safer convention for his colleagues of color in attendance? Brian had cosigned the joint caucus statement, but now that the Convention was moving forward regardless, how should he proceed?

At around the same time, and in response to member concerns, the 2018 Convention Program Chair, Asao B. Inoue, invited Al to join the nascent CCCC Task Force on Social Justice and Activism, one of many formed in an effort to institute antiracist transformation within the organization. For Al, showing up and doing this work that needed to be done, at least in this instance, was more crucial to the potential change than the statement of boycott. By explaining his own stance, Al had successfully convinced Brian of the merits of showing up and leveraging his positionality, and as has been our collaborative custom, Al invited Brian to also serve on the CCCC Task Force. In general, when Al pulls Brian into a collaboration, it is often to have a white ally he can rely on for moments that strategically require white privilege. When Brian pulls in Al, it is often to make a project or space more aware of its homogeneity or lack of inclusiveness. But what we have in common at this point is that we have grown to trust each other, which in turn has strengthened our collaborative processes.

Preparation for the 2018 Convention was in many respects an invitation to the broader field to build trust between white scholars and scholars of color through meaningful allyship that centered the latter group's concerns and expertise while not expecting them to do all the labor. One such trust exercise manifested through our work on the CCCC Task Force's Safety and Security subcommittee, which was charged with ensuring the safety of Convention attendees traveling to and from the Convention and related events within the Kansas City, MO metropolitan area. We launched the Welcoming Companions Pilot Project after our preliminary needs survey of CCCC members found that more than half would either "definitely" or "maybe" use the service and that respondents found additional benefit in the service as a networking opportunity. The pilot included multiple ways for members to request a companion: a booth at the Convention, a phone line staffed by volunteers, and an online advance signup form. As with any pilot project, this one ran into several significant challenges. We found difficulty in identifying enough volunteers to cover even the standard hours of the Convention schedule. Very few people signed up in advance. And when we arrived in Kansas City, we realized that the distance

between the airport and downtown, where the Convention was located, was substantial. This would require considerable effort from volunteer Companions to accompany colleagues, and we did not have funding to pay them shuttle, taxi, or rideshare services.

We did discover, though, that attending to the affective dimensions of traveling to Kansas City was more important than attending to the logistical ones. Just by offering the service, we created a point of contact between colleagues of color who were anxious about traveling and a team of volunteers who could provide assurance regarding the relative safety of the bus ride from the airport and the environs immediately surrounding the Convention. At the same time, the Welcoming Companions Pilot Project also provided us another layer of opportunity to process the affective dimensions of our own collaboration and friendship.

We had flown into Kansas City early to assess the safety of the route to and from the airport and the areas around the Convention. We arrived at our hotel late in the evening, famished, to find the hotel bar and restaurant closed. The maître d' was sympathetic to our plight and connected us with the hotel shuttle driver, an affable fellow who agreed to take us to his favorite place for late-night Kansas City-style barbecue chicken wings. Over beers and wings and between chatting with the locals about other great places to eat in the city, we talked about how it felt to be there—at the Convention, in the academic field, in the world—together, with different identities and positionalities. We had flown in from the cities serving as our respective, temporary homes to this new city steeped in its own unique culture and burdened by an unfortunately less unique, ongoing story of racial injustice. We carried with us our own unique geographies and experiences, which we unpacked together on the bartop. It was not the first time and it would not be the last, but it was a moment when Brian came to better understand how Al felt as a visible minority in a politicized and racialized moment and space and when Brian's deference of subjectivity gave Al the affordance of being vulnerable enough to share. All of this contributed to our trust-building in the ways we each differently needed so that we could show up in our justice-oriented work in ways that would benefit the field. And it is very possible that in undertaking justice-oriented work, we had opened up a space to grow closer as friends while also growing more cognizant of one another and ourselves as individuals and members of an academic community.

### Implications for Transnational and Other Cross-Group Collaboration

This particular space and moment became a pivotal node in the ongoing development of our collaborative relationship. Just as the Kansas City metropolitan area spans the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers, which mark the border between the two eponymous U.S. states, this case study, too, operates as a metaphor, if not direct physical manifestation, of what academia at large—and our field specifically—is undergoing: an ongoing negotiation of the various identities and needs of the human individuals within

the community. In essence, the CCCC Convention, the largest annual gathering of rhetoric/composition/writing studies scholar-teachers in the United States, if not the world, is itself a collaboration involving around 3,000 member attendees every year, both in the months leading up to it and during the culminating short week of the Convention itself. One reason the 2018 Convention was fraught for many is because we did not have the mechanisms to properly address affective dimensions in collaboration. CCCC itself is a large-scale collaboration that can no longer sustainably pretend that its members participate without identities more complex than the titles and institutional affiliations on their name badges, and the 2018 Convention in particular was evidence of the need to acknowledge and, together, negotiate the pertinent affective dimensions of our collaboration in real space and time. Our collaboration is just one of the many unfolding within this larger system, and while we are not necessarily presenting it as an ideal model, we do share it to encourage others undertaking long-term collaborations to take the same leap we have by establishing the basis for a more relational collaborative dynamic.

For our professional relationship and collaborative endeavors to work, we have had to acknowledge our individual identities and positionalities, and that has required time, vulnerability, and reciprocity, as well as a commitment to doing this work not only within our own interpersonal relationship but within the broader field. As the international rhetoric/composition/writing studies communities become more enmeshed on a global scale through conversations such as this, we are inevitably going to contend with difficult social justice issues. Dealing with them productively will require us to lay effective groundwork of relationality and reciprocity. Drawing upon these lessons from our own transracial and transnational collaboration, which began for us as graduate students, we would like to stress the importance of establishing stronger transnational graduate mentorship networks wherein future scholars and leaders in the field might develop collaborative relationships early in their careers around commitments to justice-oriented work and sustain them by more fully accounting for its affective dimensions. In addition, we encourage scholarly collaborators to be more mindful of how the affective dimensions of collaboration are always entangled in the spatial, temporal, and sociocultural dimensions, perhaps by explicitly attending to these complexities through autoethnographic metanarratives that accompany collaboratively written manuscripts, or any other means of rendering more visible within professional academic culture how the authors have navigated these sorts of contingencies in their work.

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