

# Chapter 16. I Feel You: A Shared User eXperience as a Racial Storytelling of Positionality

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## Remembering the Storm ...

Sitting in my kitchen on my swivel cooking stool, peering out of the window at summer rain drops rapidly hitting a nearby carport, I removed the scrunchy holding a high bun. I ran my fingers through to my scalp, then further down my dreadlocks as if to soothe my brain from maximum overload. Today, I finished conducting the last of ten two-staged interviews for my dissertation, which went well beyond the hour and a half allotted. What was shared during these candid conversations hung in the air molecules. Still hearing the voices echoing in harmony, an eerie silence interfered as I began to swing my legs to the rhythm of the rain. Within the silence, I continued to watch clouds move in, covering the sun almost entirely. I replayed each voice recalling a myriad of racialized encounters, with compositionists and writing teachers alike, speaking of the dehumanizing and denigrating ways their prose was fragmented as unauthorized or untenable, how their writing was devalued: *you didn't write this; your stories are uninteresting; you need to up your diction*. During our conversations, I worked to keep a neutral composure. Yet, listening to their stories disintegrated my quasi-armor. Their journeys through commonplaces of composition—the very sites meant for access—perilously exposed their Black bodies to the toxic undercurrent of violence still present in the work of composition. As their former dual enrollment teacher and writing tutor, and in my present stasis as a doctoral graduate and writing instructor, hearing the trauma experienced with composition at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) turned theories into bullshit. Hearing their experiences uncovered my own reflection as a 40-year old Black woman returning college student sharing the insurmountable disparages students of color encounter in the name of literacy learning. During my time as a student, I experienced similar scrutiny, accusations, and evaluation as a (*mis*)user of composition.

As I annotated my data, I knew these stories of *Black students user experiences with composition* would be incredibly valuable to the field's purposes and missions of inclusion. Due to liminal scholarship in the field centering Black students' experiences told by Black students, Black teachers, or Black literacy scholars, it's important to me to include racial stories, including my own, to critically disrupt traditional ways our stories are often told through the white gaze. Racial

storytelling is the modality of my master's thesis where the user experiences of this same group, who were high school students, are the pith. Centralizing racial stories of Black student experiences in higher education at predominantly white institutions is imperative to the work I do as a Black woman literacy teacher-scholar-activist. My work is grounded in user experience (UX) and racial storytelling to ensure the stories I tell are by those who lived them. The intersection of UX as racial storytelling is a method to present and preserve the stories and the storytellers—a pillar of cultural rhetorics, centering the maker and the making of the human experience. My dissertation is a longitudinal extension of my master's research seeking to learn of Black dual enrollment students' experiences with composition at PWIs. For my dissertation, my former dual enrollment students-mentees-turned-research-participants trust me to hear and tell their stories honestly and fervently, requiring the utmost care and respect of each story, each reflection, each compelling account as they, too, understand the assignment, and the criticality of inclusion.

Earning their trust began in high school dual enrollment and continued throughout their academic journeys, which at this point in my research spanned a decade. Now, well into their adult lives and experiences, I was honored by their willingness to share intimate and often traumatic moments with composition for the sake of research. Our relationships mattered, and it was critical that I be as intentional and integral as humanly possible to conserve the thoughts, feelings, sayings, and doings of the storytellers, as well as situate my researcher positionality. I knew many of the experiences that were shared, but from a different point of view—the white high school English teacher with accusations of plagiarism, to the only Black student, and the Black literature instructor who shared their drafts as examples of failures without permission. I assumed what I knew and essentially observed of their experiences could possibly present a barrier to the depth, detail, and willingness to share. I was prepared to stay behind the veil as a researcher, where my line of questions refrained from over-reaching into my own recollection. However, the stories shared during the hours-long conversations posed a unique and emotional challenge I was unaware would occur during this process.

## Pain and Conviction

Completing my notes to self, I slowly closed my MacBook, tracing the Apple logo with my finger as I stared aimlessly at the silver finish. I realized what I just heard were more than recollections of Black students' past experiences with a few rapacious writing teachers. What I heard in gut-wrenching detail were witness testimonies declaring a nefarious assault at the hands of agents of literacy—all in the name of disciplinarity—and to my own astonishment, revealing I, too, am guilty of contributing to their harm. The weight of this revelation felt palpable as I rubbed my eyes under my glasses and began thinking what they described seemed way more intentional than coincidental. Realizing my role

in upholding underpinnings of composition's supremacist practices tipped the scale from researcher to accomplice. The storytellers disclosed multiple racialized experiences with composition instructors in high school and at multiple universities. Their stories were an egregiously missing perspective from composition research—narratives of Black students' racialized encounters at composition's thresholds. While I knew I had to tell it like it t-i-is, because not doing so would leave these stories constellating in The Void, providing ample space for these narratives as the GPS, I first had to navigate the sudden tsunami of self-conviction. I allowed self-questioning to materialize, as I suddenly began feeling unexpected emotion swelling in my veins. The idea of my being the cause of *any* student devaluing, and essentially an accessory to abandoning their agency, autonomy, and authority in the name of so-called "disciplinary expectations"—especially Black students—made me literally sick to my stomach. I thought, *how can I as a Black teacher, Black woman, intentionally or unintentionally cause and/or carry out harm to any student?* As I attempted to repent these thoughts, my embodied response suddenly reached its peak as my eyes became blurry with tears that paralyzed my writing. I let my Apple pencil drop, rolling onto my iPad as I continued to sit and gaze at the raindrops on my kitchen window falling in sync with my now-flowing tears.

Attempting to bring such imperative stories to light as research displayed undeniable implications for my positionality. The stories illuminated ways writing assessment caused irreparable harm to my former students, influencing how they currently see writing and themselves as writers. I recalled looking at each of their faces, explaining methods they invoked navigating terrain between self-efficacy and extrinsic performance expectations where feedback and interactions unequivocally left unwarranted impressions upon their writerly bodies reminiscent of the scars of insolence endured by our ancestors. Succumbing to my emotions, I closed my eyes, removed my glasses, and took a deep cleansing breath that led to shaking my head back and forth in disgust, as I thought about how I became a representative of the very tenets that continue to sustain composition's hubris of whiteness. While I viewed myself fighting against the regime of classist, racist, gatekeeping practices that still plague the enterprise of composition, my participants were fighting on the same grounds where they were completely unprepared and unaware as casualties.

Their stories—stories of being racialized, dehumanized, interacting at and across thresholds, different institutional spaces, encountering those who present as skin folk—convicted my own role of unintended but glaring espionage. I accompanied them during moments of struggling, disbelief, and surrender, yet my orientation as an agent of the discipline had no view. This group was my assignment as Black students seeking privilege of access to the very institutions built by and on the backs and bodies of our ancestors, while my disciplinary presupposition inserts the same scold's bridle used in my own shackling. My own agency, autonomy, and authority wasn't encouraged as a Black student, until

graduate school. As a practitioner of literacy teaching, whose intrinsic motivation is equality in the literacy classroom, my English language arts (ELA) and composition praxis endorsed the same supremacy I and my former students flagrantly endured. As a Black teacher, my own Black body had and still experiences a continuum of consternation, including my writing performance. As the self-proclaimed advocate and activist of Black students' learning experiences, I unequivocally contributed to the systemic and systematic oppression of composition's existing underpinnings for the freedom of Black voices. I am complicit in subjugating the violence of literacy. It was reliving the calamity of their trials and tribulations that brought on my embodiment. I attempted to diverge from my emotion by continuing to watch the rain, only to find the weather's inability to disrupt my mind from catastrophizing the detriment I inadvertently caused students, my students. An attempt at reconciling my relationality led me to the point of sliding down the rabbit hole of despair, as I questioned my lack of purview, asking how could *I* have done *this*?

### (re)Positionality

The sound of the rain became louder, allowing me to regain my presence as the final tears of the moment ran down my flushed cheeks before wiping them away. I sat in my moment, replaying contemplations of the conversations. As if the rain somehow encouraged it, what materialized was a reorientated view of where these stories, our stories, could take this research. I suddenly imagined my positionalities and identities were in conversation with the positionalities and identities of my participants, essentially becoming the connective tissue. UX mapping as visual storytelling is the foundational method I used, but I had a different type of story to tell where the journeys, racialized experiences, and now positionalities are prevalent. I needed these stories to be front and center.

Initially, I wasn't concerned with our existing relationship causing a conflict with my positionality. Our rapport afforded me as a point of contact across their academic, and now adult life experiences. I allowed myself some latitude here because I absolutely value these connections which reach far beyond where and how we met. Maintaining an appropriate researcher "distance" was challenging when the people answering my questions were people I have watched and reared through multiple life stages, from high school, to college, to grad school, to first careers, to second careers, entrepreneurship, marriage, and parenthood. I believed that our conversations, albeit ontological, could still uncover something relevant to the arguments I was attempting to make.

I knew coming into this project that there would be some sensitive navigating to fortify boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship, which is why I was constantly checking protocol at each interview. What I was not prepared for was how the interviews unveiled the perspective fault lines which ran between us, revealing a symmetrical and asymmetrical viewpoint simultaneously that

suddenly became visible. Returning to earlier annotations of the interviews, I saw something in the data that I did not see before—another perspective. While my teacher-tutor perspective was complicit in confirming the same colonial strongholds of systemic and institutional underpinnings on behalf of the discipline, as an adult returning college *student*, whose undergraduate to graduate matriculation was happening at the *same time*, and at one of the *same* university locations, I realized I, too, was racialized at some of the *same* thresholds within composition.

Acknowledging a physical response to these memories, I began biting my bottom lip, recollecting the inexplicable commentary I received: *your writing is pithy, your perspective seems sophisticated, why don't you use an Oxford comma?* As an observer and advocate of this particular group of former dual enrollment students, hearing their stories and ways in which they reflect, theorize, and in some cases, rationalize negotiating their identities with composition triggered me to reflect on my own trauma that exposed a similar violence. Identical to all of the interviewees, I was racialized and interrogated about the ways I chose to author my lived experiences as I matriculated as an adult returning college student. Every time I spoke, wrote, or walked the neutral-washed hallways with any sense of self-actualization, writing professors and instructors, Lit professors, and English education professors often applied their writing assessment with the hand of white supremacist-writing disciplinarity. As I listened to the accounts of my interviewees' interactions, I was able to recall writing professors and discipline teachers alike evaluating me, my Black life experiences, and my prose for similar *validation*.

Yet, as I thought further into the ways our experiences are parallel, I began to imagine including these intersections of our experiences and what these collective perspectives could bring into focus for the field's (re)alignment with its purposes. Our racial stories provide a missing view into the journeys that many diverse students must take toward literacy learning and the (un)intended barriers included. What became most interesting is how our stories collectively became even more critical to the research narrative. Our realities as Black students—our execrable interactions at composition's thresholds—are snapshots of our unknowing infiltration of disciplinary boundaries. After my additional passthrough was completed, it was painfully apparent my experiences with composition—the racialization as a Black woman teacher, Black woman student, and now, Black woman faculty—were in conversation with the racialized experiences my participants shared.

## Joys of Disorientation

While I knew I had some extraordinary stories to tell, due to my positionality, I found myself critically questioning if my personal stories were somehow irrelevant. I didn't want to complicate things or have my stories disrupt the main narrative. I already had a specific design plan and was eager to follow through. I

questioned what my positionalities could offer my research. As usual, I convinced myself momentarily that I didn't possess the agency, autonomy, or authority to tell our stories the way I believe they should be told—an indelible and self-defeating practice I find often plagues me as a scholarly writer. I wax and wane about what's the best way and the most effective way to ensure the stories, as well as illuminate the voices in the stories, while protecting the tellers at all costs. But trying to find an optimum way to add my *Happy Trees* to the canvas left me strolling in the weeds, lost in the possibilities until I could no longer see clear blue sky.

Due to this *Well, damn!* moment, I knew the stories I had to tell essentially became paramount even more so, which meant I had to be precise how I wanted the stories to be told to do the most effective work. What I began imagining is how our stories illuminated different perspectives in multiple dimensions of our journey with composition at PWI's, and how these perspectives would add value to the ways we, as a field of rhetors, would find these stories invaluable to the missions and purpose for composition. Our positionalities in the stories shared in my research, as users of composition, reflect interacting with composition's usability as Black students, and as Black writers where our experiences illuminate a continuum of discriminatory encounters with composition's embedded gatekeeping, especially at PWI's. I began to see the benefits in using our stories as a lens in which to view narratives of Black students as users and our experiences with the assessment practices, policies, and procedures of composition. It was here where I realized I needed a specific method of storytelling for our stories to live and breathe.

After another passthrough of the interviews, transcribing data while also navigating my emotional upheaval through another good cry, I watched the clouds part with glimpses of the sky. Learning of Black dual enrollment students' user experiences with composition is the thesis from which this research emerged. As a UX consultant and researcher, I saw limitations in journey mapping's ability as a method newly entering into writing studies research, where defining characteristics that are based on social causes are used in other research paradigms to describe and define human behavior. Racial identity is used to create, qualify, and justify systems of power, privilege, and disenfranchisement, where the intentional socialization of race often used in research critically ignores Black embodiment. Black students' experiences with composition, as users, are a missing yet valuable purview into the ways we understand our interactions with historically racialized students as researchers and teachers. Learning of ways writing assessment continues to reaffirm whiteness in literacy learning will benefit our pedagogical efforts. As a UX professional within industry spaces, as well as non-tenure-track online composition faculty, I have a working knowledge of visual tools that can represent behaviors of human-centered interactions. Combining nostalgic and memorial storytelling methods of user experience with journey mapping as a new method of racial storytelling, user experience as racial storytelling (UXRS) functions as a visual representation to bring Black narratives within conversations of compositions usability.

## Final Thoughts ...

As I reflect on this research journey culminating in my dissertation, *Voices From The Void: Dual Enrollment User Experience with Composition*, I marvel at the emotions, epiphanies, responses, and revelations that became evident during this process. After this research experience, crucial and unmistakable aspects impacted my positionality, including how important it is to examine multiple personal perspectives as a kaleidoscope of possibilities. My researcher positionality prior to the interviews had no purview of my complicity or was unknowingly shrouded by the work of composition. It was during the interviews that the hood of disciplinarity was slowly removed by their stories of perseverance.

As a Black woman literacy researcher, not seeing value in my own positionality as a worthwhile contribution, even when conspicuous implications develop, almost resulted in my leaving too much on the table. I became disorientated due to unpredictability of what emotionally could occur, as the interviews revealed way more than I had anticipated. This disorientation ultimately resulted in a reflexive redirect that allowed me the opportunity to bring forth the kind of stories I believe need to be heard. Our collective stories, as racial storytelling—my participants, as well as my own—serve as narratives of racialized experiences present across composition's contexts, spaces, and commonplaces. Centering my positionalities in concert reifies the supposition of the impermeable barriers of race and identity plaguing literacy learning, and critically attests to the fault lines, blind spots, and extent boundaries acting upon any sincere efforts of institutional transformation by way of inclusion.