



Counterstory as Research Method and Genre:

Bean and the Epic Workshop Fail

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In June of 2013, my youngest daughter, Grace, and I crossed the border into Canada from the United States, our applications for work and living permits in hand. We were directed by border agents to the immigration centre, and when our turn came to speak with an agent, as she completed our paperwork, she asked Grace what she most looked forward to about becoming Canadian. Grace said confidently, “Tim Horton’s!” This produced laughter among every agent close enough to hear. As our agent returned our documentation, she told us we would find a Tim Horton’s at the first exit after the border and welcomed us to Canada. The relief I felt was palpable. I had already promised my family that I would never uproot them to change jobs again. But more than this, I felt the anguish of living in a nation now adrift on rising tides of white supremacy and racism, now sinking in a sea of right-wing extremism and protofascism

receding. Some time would pass before I allowed myself to see, to hear, to know that not all border crossings were as easy, as welcoming as ours.

In Toronto that first summer, my middle daughter, Lucy, joined Grace and I in Canada. Together, we three delighted in the city's cosmopolitanism: in the rich hues of saris hanging in store windows, the smells of spices from around the world, the languages—all the languages! Mandarin, Swahili, Korean, Portuguese, Greek, Italian, Cantonese, French, Spanishes from Cuban to Mexican to Nicaraguan to Spain, Caribbean Englishes—Barbadian and Jamaican—so many World Englishes that we quickly lost count. We delighted in the out-of-service apologies on city buses as in the endless thank-yous offered by riders to their drivers at every stop. We danced up and down Church Street during Pride, and, in the evenings of that week, from my best friend's balcony, listened to the music and shouts of joy that lasted far into the night.

Slowly, though, reality crept up behind, laying its cold fingers upon me. A white woman at Grace's skating club congratulated me on bringing a white child to an organization in which, from her point of view, there were too many "Asians." Driving to one of Lucy's softball games in Cambridge, we passed a gas station flying not one but dozens of confederate flags.¹ A friend, colleague, and co-author joined the faculty at the University of Waterloo and described his border-crossing experience as a Black man, which was not merely unwelcoming but racist. During my friend's first year at the University, he was described by white women on the faculty as "aggressive" because he stood up in a crowded meeting room to introduce himself, and his students refused to use the honorifics, Dr. or Professor, when they spoke or wrote to him. At the same time, denials of racism rained down so thick that I felt drenched in them and

¹ Lucy wrote an essay about this experience. The feedback she received from her teacher was that few Canadians know the significance of the confederate flag. Over dinner, we mulled whether it was possible anywhere in the world to not know that flag's association with white supremacy, with slavery, with racism. We worried that our conviction that everyone must know was a sign of US-centrism. During the 2022 trucker protests in Ottawa, however, during which confederate flags and MAGA hats appeared in abundance, we decided we had been right.

drowning in pronouncements that I could not possibly—as an American—make any “unbiased” judgement about racism in Canada as my nationality conferred incompetence in such matters. Whatever expertise I might have possessed in critical race studies in ‘Murica was of no use here. When George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officers and Black Lives Matter protests spread outward across the world in a tacit acknowledgement of racism’s global reach, nearly every white colleague as well as every administrator at the University suddenly became, if not an expert, an “ally.” What this newfound allyship did not produce—at least not in my Department’s writing program—was much change in programmatic or curricular design or pedagogical praxis.

I suppose I sound bitter—and perhaps I am, at least sometimes. But far more than bitterness, what I feel is frustration. For it seems to me, with unthinking nationalism, Canadian scholars too often resist wholesale, research methods emerging from the US that might assist in advancing anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and decolonizing scholarship and pedagogy here as well—and do not, *prima facie* or *propius inspectionum*, exclude, marginalize, or silence Canadian voices and lived experience of racism and white supremacy as they are now and have historically been manifested here. This is so, in large measure, because the methods of which I am speaking of—in particular, counterstory—are not designed by nor do they serve the interests of a predominantly white academy in America that ranges in political disposition from neo-liberal to ultra-conservative. *Counterstory* is simultaneously a research method and genre developed by Black, Indigenous, and Scholars of Colour, as they analyze, interrogate, and critique white supremacy, racism, and settler colonialism in writing and writing centre studies (Martinez, 2020, p. 2). So, I am frustrated by a predominantly white Canadian academy that also feels epistemologically, methodologically, and pedagogically conservative and resistant to US innovations in research method—many of which are results of the intellectual, and emotional, and spiritual labour of historically marginalized and excluded BIPOC scholars and teachers.

In our field(s), writing, communication, and writing centre studies, we might, however, claim the moment to be and to do differently. Canadians, generally, and Canadian scholars, in particular, must of course name and resist the worst excesses of American arrogance and its continued export of increasingly fascistic political skullduggery. Such resistance is necessary *and* insufficient, for we should, I believe, also resist settler-Canadian nationalism as it is advanced and practiced via western research methods and academic genres among white and whitely² scholars across the disciplines here.

A plea for counterstory

In a 2014 essay published in *Composition Studies*, Dr. Aja Martinez issued a plea for counterstory to the field of writing studies. In 2020, her book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, was published by Studies in Writing and Rhetoric (SWR). Citing critical race theorist, Richard Delgado, Dr. Martinez distinguishes between the “stock stories” of dominant groups (including scholars promoting “objective” research) and counterstories: “[T]hose in power,” she writes, “craft stock stories to establish a shared sense of identity, reality, and naturalization of their superior position” (p. 38). With Delgado, Dr. Martinez defines *stock stories* as those that people in dominant positions collectively compose and tell about themselves. These stories choose among available facts to present a picture of the world that best fits and supports their positions of relative power. Stock stories feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality. Powerful because they are often repeated until canonized or normalized, those who tell stock stories insist that their version of events is indeed reality, and any stories that counter these standardized tellings are

² learned ways of knowing and doing—of thinking, speaking, and writing—characterized by a racialized sense of oneself as best equipped to judge, preach, and to suffer.” “Whitely people generally consider themselves to be benevolent and goodwilled, fair, honest, and ethical...Whitely people have a staggering faith in their own rightness and goodness and that of other whitely people” (Frye, 2001, pp. 90-91; see also Condon, 2012, p. 34). Note: whiteness is not particular to white people but can be learned and practiced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour as well.

deemed biased, self-interested, and ultimately not credible” (p. 38). In contrast, counterstory is concomitantly a methodology and genre associated with critical race scholarship. “Counterstory as methodology,” Martinez writes, “is the verb, the process, the critical race theory-informed justification for the work whereas counterstory as method is the noun, the genre, the research tool” (p. 2).

Continuing her explanation, Martinez clarifies, “as a methodology, critical race counterstory is a theoretically grounded research approach with interdisciplinary roots in ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, legal studies, and the humanities” (p. 3). Further, counterstory constitutes

a challenge to ‘majoritarian’ stories or ‘master narratives’ of white privilege. This methodology rejects notions of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color. Importantly, critical race methodology recognizes that experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices. (p. 3)

Among groundbreaking critical race scholars whose work often takes the form of counterstory is Derrick Bell (*Faces At The Bottom Of The Well: The Permanence Of Racism* (1993) and *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1989)). Bell once wrote, “Critical race theory writing and lecturing is characterized by frequent use of the first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of the law, and the unapologetic use of creativity.” (Critiot, 2021). Continuing, Bell notes,

The work is often disruptive because its commitment to anti-racism goes well beyond civil rights, integration, affirmative action, and other liberal measures. This is not to say that critical race theory adherents automatically or uniformly “trash” liberal ideology and method (as many adherents of critical legal studies do). Rather, they are highly suspicious of the liberal agenda, distrust its method,

and want to retain what they see as a valuable strain of egalitarianism which may exist despite, and not because of, liberalism. (Critiot, 2021)

For critical race scholars, including Martinez, Delgado, Bell, as well as Patricia Williams (also a ground-breaking counterstory researcher and writer), counterstory is distinguished from other research methodologies and genres by its overt commitment to a “liberatory and transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (Mari Matsuda qtd. in Martinez, 2020, p. 17). Martinez writes that CRT and counterstory “use a narrative method to theorize racialized experience” of “symbiosis, color-blind racism-interest-convergence, racial formation, intersectionality, or hegemonic whiteness” (p. 17). Finally, Martinez notes that Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Colour “can and do tell majoritarian stories,” and white folks—when we are “critically self-reflective of [our] whiteness”—can, do, and perhaps should tell counterstories (p. 23).

Snatching our people

Neisha Anne Green, colleague, friend, co-author, and the first Black person to give a keynote address at the International Writing Centers Association Conference (2017) frequently reminds me that it is the job of white folks to “snatch our people.” In her published address³ Green chronicles the emotional labour required of Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Colour who come to the work of anti-racism in academia, generally, and writing centre studies, in particular, first, last, or in-between. James Baldwin, the great ex-pat Black American novelist and essayist once wrote,

It can be unutterably exhausting to deal with people who, with a really dazzling ingenuity, a tireless agility, are perpetually defending themselves against charges which one has not made. One does not have to make them. The record is there for all to read. It resounds all over the world. It might as well be written in the sky. (1966, p. 174).

³ See *The Writing Center Journal* (2018), 37(1), pp. 15-34.

In her address, Neisha Anne made the acuity of Baldwin's description immediate and material for a predominantly white audience who have prided their field on its hospitality and generosity, without too much examination of the ways in which white supremacy and racism infuse such values when they attend academic *noblesse oblige*. Green writes,

success has not been easy. I have never had a job where I wasn't made aware of my Blackness. I have never had a higher ed job where I wasn't made aware of my lack of my whiteness. I have never had a job in writing center administration where I wasn't the first Black woman. (p. 20)

Towards the close of her address, Green responds to the question she knows white folks in the audience are silently pondering:

So, how do you help? None of that safety-pin rhetoric around here. When you see me struggling, get up and do something...how about you defend me so I don't have to defend myself? And please, please do not see things happening, then don't say anything, then come to me afterwards to tell me you're sorry. Cause I'm going to look at you and say you didn't do anything while it was happening. Be my accomplice. Take the risk. Give up some of the privilege you hold so dearly so that I can have some. (p. 29)

To me, Neisha Anne says, "**Snatch your people!**" And it is this work—the responsibility for which rests precisely with those of us who are white—that counterstory might help us to do well.

Introducing Bean

For several years, I have been at work on a book of Counterstories that centre on the composite characters of a student named Bean and a teacher, loosely but not exclusively based on me (and often on my most regrettable habits of mind and pedagogical failures). Dr. Aja Martinez notes that composite characters "represent more than just a single individual and are intentionally crafted as composites that primarily embody ideology as informed by a '*trensa*'

of personal experiences, the literatures, and hard data” (2020, p. 25). She suggests that composite counterstory telling adds to critical race research in three primary ways: by providing “empirical space for researchers to recount the stories and experiences of people in politically vulnerable positions; by offering “descriptions of rich, robust contexts” for those stories “whole maintaining the complexity of meaning” associated with them (particularly by shifting focus from individuals to broader patterns of lived experience among Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Colour within institutions); and as “the appeal (ethos, logos, and pathos) of making research accessible beyond academic audiences” (p. 24). In the context of the Bean stories, though neither Bean nor his teacher are very likeable (and frequently are absolutely despicable), both the narrative register and composite qualities of the characters permit readers to recognize and reflect critically upon their own whiteness as well as on their (our) implication in systemic and institutional white supremacy and racism without (too much) of that *j’accuse* that I understand serves quite often as a justification for a quick exit from discomfiting dialogues. To be clear, the Bean stories (including the one I tell below) are not *true*. Bean is a fictional character who says and does things in and outside of class that embody in distilled form performances of whiteness, toxic masculinity, racism, and white supremacism that can and do seethe beneath the surface of classrooms in which I and other colleagues have taught not only in the United States but also in Canada. The narrator is also a fictional character who staggers under the weight of her own whiteness even as she struggles to make actionable in her classrooms the anti-racism to which she is committed.

I don’t like to speak ill of students who receive quite enough vilification from their professors. I scroll past Facebook posts and Twitter feeds where folks post student writing in order to make fun of it or heap ridicule on those students we may all have been once (and if we weren’t, were likely the beneficiaries of a host of class, gender, and race privileges, at least, that our students do not universally enjoy).

But the Bean stories are not that kind of story. Bean is not a first—or even second—generation university attender. He does not come from a poor or working-class family. He is not Queer or Trans or Two Spirit. He is not an international student, not a multilingual student, not a new Canadian, not Indigenous, Métis, or Inuit. Bean is not Black, not a Person of Colour. Indeed, there is no sense in which Bean's success might be hindered by prejudice or poverty or by any social, economic, or political condition. Bean moves through a world designed for his ease and comfort—a world in which he may choose to fail but will have to work really, really hard to succeed at failing. And Bean is disinclined to work hard.

Because Bean has no troubles to speak of, no challenges to overcome, one might wonder why he is worth speaking of at all. Bean, after all, is the very epitome of that character who has so thoroughly dominated the attentions of white western politicians, philosophers, economists, and poets. Why waste more ink on him, you might ask.

The reasons are these: there can be no meaningful or productive interrogation, analysis, critique, challenge, or resistance to the ubiquity of Beanishness if we don't study Bean. Bean is not a dupe, although he plays one convincingly. He is not compelled by spiritual conviction although he is capable of justifying both his desires and his literal and metaphorical riches with scripture till the cows come home. Bean is, to riff on Gilbert and Sullivan, "the very model of the modern major general." Imagine William F. Buckley, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, Dick Cheney, Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, Margaret Thatcher, Boris Johnson, Brian Mulroney, Doug Ford, Stephen Harper, Justin Trudeau, Andries Treurnicht, Edward J. Bourke, or any concatenation of white western or western aligned political leaders and pundits (ranging across the political spectrum from the far-right to neo-liberal) *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseum* rolled into one college-aged young man and you'll begin to understand that Bean is the reason more of us should pay attention to Frank Wilderson's *Afropessimism*.⁴ Bean would definitely

⁴ Wilderson defines *Afropessimism* as "a theoretical lens that clarifies the irreconcilable difference between, on the one hand, the violence of capitalism, gender oppression, and White supremacy...and

rather nuke democracy and capitalism and Christianity and everything else he has ever claimed as both his birthright and his legacy than give way to racial justice. But Bean is capable of learning and putting his learning to good use as he dominates and recenters himself in nearly every pedagogical moment with degrees of subtlety that increase over time.

It might be tempting to think of Bean as a trickster, for he has no moral compass. But tricksters dip in and out of stories in the flash of a bird's wing. They don't stick around for 500 years wreaking havoc. It might be tempting to believe that Bean is a devil, a demon, a malevolent supernatural being who might be—if we were very lucky—constrained but never eradicated because evil is obdurate and eternal. But this is magical thinking for Bean (and subjects like Bean) are the products of human labour. It is true that neither such products nor the labour that produces them can be unthought-of, unremembered, eradicated from history. The question is whether or not a Bean can be unmade. Could there be a future in which no white person—no one at all—might ask themselves, “Who will I have been?”, and find the answer at the end of their lives to be: Bean? It is not unreasonable to believe the answer to that question to be an emphatic, “NO!” But this is what stories are for: to imagine the unimaginable—to make intelligible even the most impossible futures. In this sense, the Bean stories join all the other beginnings whose endings are yet to be written.

A quick note on nomenclature: Bean's name is taken from a practice among “blue-blooded” east coast, American men of a certain age who call one another “Old Bean.” Also making an appearance in the story that follows is a white cis-gendered woman student named Dete. This name is appropriated from a children's book by Johanna Spyri called “Heidi.” Dete is the aunt of the child, Heidi, and perhaps the most striking of Dete's qualities is her capacity

on the other hand, the violence of anti-Blackness (the human necessity for violence against Black people) (228). In short (and at the risk of radically over-simplifying his argument), Wilderson argues that there is and can never be any resolution or conclusion to white supremacy and, in particular, to anti-Black racism for these forces so thoroughly saturate human life globally as to have become ontological facts.

for espousing moral principles that effectively disguise her self-interest in doing what she wants while simultaneously advancing the illusion of her moral rectitude. That is to say, Dete's morality is performative.

A Taste of Bean

One sunny afternoon in October, the students in my composition pedagogy course were arrayed before me, sitting at long straight tables, faces forward. This is exactly the kind of classroom I told my Department we shouldn't use for the teaching of writing or for the teaching of the teaching of writing. Yet, here we were, preparing for our first workshop on formative feedback and anti-racist pedagogy. I had asked students to read Vershawn Ashanti Young's essay, "Should Writers Use They Own English," and a sample text my multilingual graduate assistant had composed for the purpose of this workshop. I had shaped the workshop around an assignment James Sledd provided to an old, edited collection called *What Makes Writing Good*. For those of you who are not familiar with Sledd's work, he was—for he has now passed on—an irascible Marxist compositionist who annoyed nearly every other compositionist with whom he ever came in contact by critiquing the field's functional enforcement of class privilege and the rules of racial standing that systematically disadvantage students of colour. It was James Sledd who coined the term, "the composition Masters." Dr. Sledd had a wicked, biting wit, which he used in every debate at every College Composition and Communication Convention he ever attended. But he was exceptionally kind and generous to me, and to every student with whom he interacted, I suspect. In any case, the book, "What Makes Writing Good," is a collection of writing assignments and samples of student writing composed in response to those assignments. Each set—assignment and sample writing—is accompanied by a commentary from the contributor, explaining what makes the student sample good writing.

With the permission of both teacher and student, James Sledd had contributed an assignment, designed and used by Dr. Crew, an instructor at Claflin College, in 1971. The assignment—the first of the term—asked students to write a series of five dialogues—one with

a police officer, one with a prospective employer, one with a lover, one with a best friend, and one with a small child. Each dialogue, Dr. Crew insisted, should provide a different answer to the question: “Who are you?”. The writing sample in response to this assignment was fierce! For example, the student, given the pseudonym Martin Roberts, titled his interview with a prospective employee “Whitey interviewing you for a job.” The entire piece is composed, quite unapologetically and with a great deal of humor, in Black English. For example, in Martin’s dialogue with a child he writes, “Hi man, my name is Martin what is your’s Old Blacks the snot catcher I catches anything you can let loose. Well that’s good man because I have some Bugger in my nose that is ready to fly. Well I do other things besides that I play sports, now that’s whats happening lets see what going down in the park OK man” (p. 34).

In his commentary, James Sledd admits that he can think of few teachers of writing who would judge this writing to be “good.” He acknowledges, “many eminent black Americans would say that a teacher who calls such a paper good is a sentimental and condescending paternalist, denying students the help they need in learning standard English...” But, Sledd, says, he thinks “such judgements are mostly wrong—one index of the craziness of our world.” Continuing, he writes, “No language, and no variety of a language would survive for long if it did not serve some purposes better than any other serves them, and it follows that our problem in using English is the problem of reasoned choice among purposes and among the linguistic means to accomplish them. We limit our choices unnecessarily if we refuse to learn more kinds of English than our social and personal histories give us access to” (p. 35).

For my pedagogy course, my TA composed an elegant translingual *and* code-meshed version of Dr. Crew’s assignment. I created a rubric for the assignment that explicitly encouraged playing with, among, and between languages and/or codes. Together, we adapted a handout describing the kinds of feedback one might give to a writer and at what stage in the writing process each kind is likely to be useful. We also crafted a PowerPoint presentation that, among other points, reminded students that useful feedback should attend to such

matters as what stage writers are at in the composing process, what writers are trying to do—including whether they are trying to push at the limits of the assignment—and what kind of feedback writers feel they most need. Our presentation reminded students to begin by asking questions. And then, on a final slide, I wrote:

REALLY USEFUL FEEDBACK DEPENDS UPON THE KINDNESS AND GENEROSITY OF THE READER. YOUR JOB IS NOT TO TEAR THE WRITER DOWN, CRITICIZE THEIR WRITING OR THEIR PERSON. YOUR JOB IS NOT TO OFFER UP A JUDGEMENT ON THE QUALITY OR VALUE OF WHAT THEY HAVE DONE. *YOUR JOB IS TO JOIN WITH THEM, TO SUPPORT THEM IN ACHIEVING THEIR GOALS FOR THEIR WRITING.*

Having provided them with an assignment description, rubric, handout, and writing sample (that included a brief author's note explaining their project, their intended audience their aims, and the kind of feedback they hoped for), I asked them to read and then as a group brainstorm the questions they might ask of the writer and to consider why those questions would be pedagogically sound and appropriate.

As students screeched their chairs turning them so they could form groups, I silently congratulated myself and turned to grin at my TA. I told myself we had covered every loophole Bean might find to make a mess of class discussion. Did I mention that, once again, Bean had appeared in my classroom? Yup. He presented himself on the first day of class, hauling a backpack so full he might have been heading for an attempt to summit Mt. Everest. Chucking it on the floor beside a seat in the very back row, Bean grinned at me toothily. Sighing, I turned to look at my TA, who sat facing me in the first row. "Bean?", she mouthed silently. I nodded and felt, of all things, tears welling up. I turned away quickly and headed to the restroom to get myself under control. "For Christ's sake," I scolded myself, "Don't be ridiculous! Get back in there and teach as if Bean isn't even there!" Of course, that is far easier said than done, as I well knew. However, I girded my proverbial loins and headed back to class.

Anyway, on this lovely October afternoon, I watched as students read together. And I watched astonishment, anxiety, and confusion wash across their faces. Most of the groups rifled through their handouts and article pdfs and finally, in what looked like nothing so much as desperation, turned again to the final slide of the PowerPoint, still glowing on the screen above. They read it again—and then they jumped in. I always love that moment when a classroom begins to hum with student voices. But on this day, one group sat silent and sullen. Anthony—the only student of colour in the group—had moved his chair away from the others and apparently gone to sleep. I watched as Bean appeared to dominate the conversation among the remaining students. He leaned in to make one final point then sat back in his chair, his legs splayed wide as his group members laughed—too loudly and for too long. Then I watched derision and anger flash across their faces like a broken motel sign: VACANCY/NO VACANCY; VACANCY/NO VACANCY. Bean watched me, his eyes narrowed, and a small smile curving up one side of his mouth.

Finally, I called the class together and asked them what they came up with, what questions they would ask of the writer. From the back corner of the room, Bean's hand flew into the air. Before I could look for another hand—any other hand—Bean shouted, “WERE YOU ON DRUGS WHEN YOU WROTE THIS?”

His group members howled with laughter, but I could see that Bean's outrage at the language of the writing sample, the audacity of its writer, at me for wasting his time with such a text—was incandescent. Definitely no vacancy at Bean's motel.

“Is that kind?”, I asked.

“Nope.”

“Generous?”

“Nope,” said Bean. “But Dr. C, it wasn't kind or generous for you to waste our time with this writing, if that's what you call it. I call it illiterate. This person doesn't even belong in the

same room with *us*,” and Bean waved his hand to draw all the other students into his orbit. “Dr. C, what about *rigour*?!”

He spat the word at me, and suddenly I catapulted back in time to a committee meeting during which one of my best friends, fed up with another colleague’s advocacy of “rigour,” said, “You do know the etymology of that term, I assume. From *rigere*? Be stiff. Stiffness, Hardness, Firmness...” Her voice trailed off meaningfully. Losing all self-control, I had begun to laugh wildly until tears rolled down my face, and I had to excuse myself from the meeting. In the classroom, I turned away and took a sip of water, willing myself back into the present moment and the dilemma of Bean that would not be well addressed by dissolving into more fits of hysterical laughter.

Before I could say a word, Aisha, one of three Black women in the class raised her hand and, gratefully, I called on her.

“Our group turned to Dr. Vay’s article to get a better sense of what this writer was trying to achieve. We love the way Dr. Vay braids Black English with edited academic English to make his argument against Stanley Fish, not just by what he says but by how he says it. Just listen!” And Aisha read aloud,

...when folks dont get no jobs or get fired or whatever cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Applachian accent or sound like whatever aint the status quo...Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come saying that people make theyselves targets for racism if and when they dont write and speak like he do. But dont nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them “vulnerable to prejudice.” It’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. Like the way some view, say, black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language, like what Fish expressed in his NYT blog, that make it so” (110).

Bean practically bounced out of his seat. “I feel sorry for that guy. His professors probably just passed him along cuz he’s Black. How’s he ever going to get a job writing like that?”

Aisha bounced right back. “Dr. Vay is a full professor right here at this University. And he’s BRILLIANT! And he’s written and published more books than you’ll probably ever read.”

Bean, for the first time that semester, turned and looked at Aisha. From a sudden embodied stillness, he said, “It’s hard to make an objective argument when the argument you’re making is self-interested.”

Now that stillness spread like typhus across the classroom. Aisha’s face grew cold and hard, and she folded her lips together carefully. Sahira, Celeste, and Shea crossed their arms as if they were one body. And their lips folded too. Anthony, who had stopped pretending to be asleep, stared at me balefully.

My beautiful workshop had gone to hell in a handbasket.

“Perhaps,” I said, “we should parse Dr. Young’s argument in order to get to the bottom of this debate.”

Barely loud enough for me to hear, Aisha muttered, “Oh. I thought we were already at the bottom.”

Pretending not to hear, I continued. “Dr. Young takes issue with Stanley Fish’s admonishment of writing teachers to teach only what many in the field currently term, ‘edited academic English.’”

“White English,” muttered Celeste.

“Remember, Dr. Young quotes Fish,” I carried on. “If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, ‘I have a right to my own language,’ reply, ‘Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I’m here to teach you another one.’ (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it’ (as qtd in Young, p. 111). And what does Dr. Young say?”

Several white students appear to be caught in a dissociative state. But one did raise her hand albeit timidly. “He says that Stanley Fish is hypocritical for telling teachers that students don’t have a right to their own language and then telling students that they do. Mr. Young says...”

“That’s *Doctor* Young!” Anthony corrects her.

“Dr. Young says Stanley Fish really means that multicultural students shouldn’t object to learning his language; they should be grateful. But Dr. Young says everybody should learn to be plurilingual and multidialectical, not just multicultural students. And he says we should at least be opening to mixing dialects and languages together in our writing and our speaking” (p. 111).

Another white woman had thrust her hand in the air like Hermione Granger.

“Yes, Dete?”

“I think,” she began as if she were starting her car for a coast-to-coast trip along the trans-Canada highway, “it’s important to note that, despite Dr. Young’s articulateness, his argument that successful white men can get away with speaking and writing ungrammatically is fallacious, right? My father is a very well-regarded lawyer and his briefs are masterpieces...” But Dete could not continue for Anthony had snorted with laughter and more than half the class were doubled over. I was holding it together, but barely.

Dete’s face reddened. “In any case,” she began, attempting to speak over the hilarity; “in any case, I think it’s important to note the importance of facility with EAE⁵ to professional success, especially here in Canada, right?” Sensing a pending interruption, Dete rushed onward.

⁵ EAE is an acronym for Edited Academic English. EAE is represented the form of standard English most commonly associated with scholarly writing. The representation of EAE as an academic standard is identified by the Conference on College Composition and Communication as linguistic supremacism in its 2020 statement: “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice” (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice>) and as white language supremacy in its 2021 statement: “CCCC Statement on White Language Supremacy” (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/white-language-supremacy>).

“I think what Aisha and Celeste are trying to say, Bean, is that achieving literacy in that discourse is challenging for Black people who are not provided the affordances you and I have enjoyed, right? Frankly, I find Dr. Young’s argument to be a racist one. It seems he would continue to deny his own people the opportunity to learn correct English.”

Aisha stood up. “And I think it is important for *you* to note that I don’t need you to explain to anybody what I mean, *riiiiigh?* And, *further*, you should know that my father is a very well-regarded heart surgeon.” With that, Aisha gathered up her belongings and walked to the doorway. “I think this class is over,” she said, as she left the room.

Celeste stood up. “Well, I think it’s important for you to note that my mom is a nurse’s aide and my dad is a mechanic, and I still don’t need you to teach me your damn English.”

And so it went. One by one every Black student left the room until only Anthony remained. He too stood. “What I want to know, from Bean,” he said, looking at me, “is whether he actually believes his position in this debate is *not* self-interested. Because, from where I’ve been sitting, his argument looks like intellectual onanism.” And off he went, leaving behind a sea of baffled white faces and Bean, who appeared to be rapidly googling the definition of *onanism* on his phone.

Silence fell like a pall over those of us who remained. Finally, Dete said, “Dr. C, is class really over? Because I paid good money for these credits, and I thought our class went until 3.”

I did know we needed to stay, needed to think and talk together about what had just happened. “Half an hour remains of our class time,” I said. “I think we should stay.” And I launched into the abyss.

Leaving Dr. Young’s article aside for the moment, I talk them through James Sledd’s commentary on Dr. Crew’s assignment and Martin Roberts’ response to it. Sledd points out that Dr. Crew’s assignment offers a beginning point and not an end point. The assignment invites writers of the dialogues, in each case, to “imagine the speech of others, varieties and uses of language not their own.” I told them that I expect, as did Dr. Crew and Dr. Sledd, that the

assignment is an invitation to a recognition “that there are indeed many kinds of English, each with its own uses” (p. 35). I added that as writers and speakers we can, indeed, choose between our Englishes as we consider the contexts, our own situatedness, our purposes, our audiences and interlocutors, and *what* each of those Englishes enables us to communicate that the others do not. I pointed out to them Sledd’s admonition that this assignment could not be construed as suggesting that Dr. Crew would never teach academic English. But by inviting students to write in their own Englishes and by valuing those Englishes. Sledd argues that Dr. Crew interrupted the linguistic supremacy (always and inevitably tied to racism, xenophobia, colonialism, and imperialism) that continues to prevail both across colleges and universities and in what passes for commonsense in the public sphere.

Having distracted them, I hoped, from their antagonism to Dr. Young’s argument, I returned to his article. Dr. Young, I pointed out, uses Stanley Fish’s New York Times opinion piece not only to critique code switching but also and more, especially to argue for code meshing. “Remember,” I said, “how carefully Dr. Young defines these terms. If you look at page 114 of his article, he writes, ‘Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts.’ He argues further that code meshing is a prevalent discursive practice across private, public, and professional contexts for written as well as spoken communication.”

At this stage I noticed that more than half the remaining students were beginning to pack their bags and the rest were gazing sadly at the clock, whose hands seem to have stuck at 11:30. Suddenly, I was overcome with exhaustion. I have to regroup, I told myself, before I could “snatch my people.” But I knew I was letting the moment pass. And I knew I both had to and could not make amends to Aisha, Sahira, Celeste, Shea, and Anthony for I had surely failed them utterly.

Back in my office, the afternoon light faded to dusk. Holding my head in my hands, I gave into my despair. I didn't intend to do harm, I told myself. But I knew I had. In his book, *Race Frameworks: A Multidimensional Theory of Racism and Education*, Zeus Leonardo writes, oppression recalls the fundamental link between the oppressed and the oppressor *as a relation*. In other words, a racialized society cannot have the racially oppressed without the racial oppressor, two dialectical poles where each owes its existence to the other...The oppressor-oppressed dialectic reminds us that oppression is neither the masochistic drive of the first nor the inadequate properties of the second, but *the resulting dynamics of a social relationship* that favors Whites [sic] and dispossesses people of color. (p. 16)

Ricky Lee Allen reminds us that if we can say that there is or must be a pedagogy of the oppressed, then we must also acknowledge that there exists already a pedagogy of the oppressor that remains, as an absent presence (at least for raced-with peoples) hidden from our view (as cited in Leonardo, 2013, p. 16). The material histories of oppression, of racism, and of their corollaries: white supremacy and white privilege and the racial imaginaries, that are the products of that history are “stamped from the beginning” onto not only pedagogical practices predicated on monolingualism and the linguistic (and, of course, epistemological) supremacy attributed to normative, standard academic English, but also the capacities of the most well-meaning teachers to shift pedagogical paradigms toward anti-racist praxis.

Bean and Dete acquired the white and whitely constraints on their racial imaginaries, imaginaries they had embodied and performed so ably during our class, before they ever arrived. And the driving ideological imperatives of those racial imaginaries were far more powerful and entrenched than a single workshop could shake loose. But my teaching, too, had been driven by a dysfunctionally white and whitely sense of who I am and my competency to intervene in those imaginaries. I had doomed myself the moment Bean began to speak, for I had ceded control over the discussion to him and confirmed white ownership of the classroom

each time a white student spoke up while I said nothing. I had not affirmed Aisha's argument or Celine's correct calling out of the white supremacist cast of EAE. I had not stopped Dete in her tracks as both the register and the substance of her remarks veered between innocuous if annoying white-splaining, racist microaggressions, and overt racism.

A headache opened its maw at the front of my skull, and I felt my capacity to think and feel begin to shrink back from its reach. I wanted to give in and give up and go home. Mechanically, though, I reached for my copy of *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* and turned to page 112. "Guidelines to educators who aim to frame their pedagogy and the crafting of curricula with CRT," I read aloud. And, switching on the desk lamp, I bent my head once more toward the book's pages.

Coda

I arrived at my office early the next morning determined to find a way forward. Unlocking the door and stepping inside, I inhaled deeply. My office smells of books and pencil shavings (I love a sharp #2) that deliver sense memories of my grandmother and mom as they studied and wrote. I cherish the smell, for with it I feel that their courage and strength might run in my veins too. I opened my laptop and began to draft an email to Aisha, Celine, Sahira, Shea, and Anthony. I had just typed the greeting when, from the hallway, Anthony said, "Dr. C., may we speak with you?" All five of them were there, waiting and watching me.

My heart lifted, for surely if they were here there might still be hope. "Yes! Please! Let me find us all chairs." I scurried into the classroom across the hall to abscond with a few chairs so we could all sit together in my office. Finally, I sat too. We sat quietly for a moment before I spoke.

"I know an apology is insufficient," I said. What happened in class yesterday was inexcusable and unforgiveable. I am sorry, though, and I've been trying very hard since class ended to learn, to teach myself how to do better."

The silence deepened.

Finally, Aisha spoke. “Dr. C., we’ve been thinking too. And we talked until 3:00 in the morning about what happened.”

Shea chimed in. “We see you, Dr. C. We can see that you are trying to make a difference. You talk about critical race theory, and plurilingualism, and anti-racism, and we can see that you are trying to be something better than another performative white ally.”

“When you give me feedback, Dr. C.,” said Sahira, “you do what you are trying to teach us. You honour my home languages and my English. You recognize that I’m trying to do a thing, and you work to figure out what that thing is so you can help me accomplish my goals as a writer.

“But Dr. C.,” said Celine, “what you do with each of us individually you don’t do when we are all in class together.”

I could feel my face getting hot. I wanted to explain it all; wanted to expound on my pedagogical philosophy and the meta-reasoning informing my pedagogical choices. I bit my lip hard to keep my mouth shut and willed myself to stay present, to keep listening.

“Here’s the real Tea, Dr. C.” Aisha, Celine, Sahira, and Shea grinned as Anthony continued. “When that damn fool, Bean, walks in the room we can see that you are all about him.”

I slipped my hands under my thighs to hold them still for they were shaking.

“The whole class is always about Bean. When he says a thing, you try to intervene, but never directly. You go all sideways, and then all the white people start yapping about all the things, and you try to talk all the white people out of all the things without ever telling them they’re mouthpieces for racism: justifying white supremacy and trying to sound smart doing it. So, we wanna know, when Aisha said what she said yesterday, and then Bean said that racist shit, why did you let that go?

The five of them looked at me intently. Waiting.

“I, ummmm, I guess when Bean said what he did I got thrown.”

“You think we don’t get thrown?” asked Celine. “When you don’t jump in there and tell Bean directly what it is—what racism is—you lay the work on our shoulders—again. And why should we do that work—for the likes of Bean? Or Dete?”

“Respectfully, Dr. C.,” said Anthony, “do you actually think you can reason Bean’s racism away without naming it? Without calling him out? You left me to do that and I’m tired—we’re all tired of that asshole. Tired of all the assholes.”

Sahira took a quick, audible intake of breath, and Anthony said, “Sorry, Dr. C.”

“That’s okay, Anthony. The Beans of this world are assholes.”

I know what the reason is, but the vulnerability required to speak the reason aloud—to students—slips beyond my reach. All those voices in my head; I silently list them:

This writing you do, is it actually scholarship?

Personal narrative is passé.

You’re not in the U.S. now, you know.

Sure, Canada has racism, but it’s nothing like as bad as American racism.

Have you actually read any Canadian writing studies scholarship?

Do you actually have a methodology?

I steeled myself for what must come next. “I’m scared, I guess.”

“Dr. C.! What do you have to be scared of?!” Celine spoke. “We looked you up last night. You have tenure! You’ve published books and articles and chapters! We looked at the Sunshine List! You have a great salary—and benefits! Hell, you’re in line to be president of the biggest international organization of writing and communication teachers and scholars in the world! What the hell do you have to be scared of?!”

I felt myself slipping. Back years and years in time. I had been co-facilitating an anti-racism workshop at an International Writing Centers Association conference. Among the participants were two Black women and six or so white women. Among the exercises my colleague and I had planned was this: we asked the participants to write briefly about what

they most feared when they considered making their commitments to anti-racism actionable. Then we went around the table, giving each some time to narrate their fears. The pattern that emerged was stunning. The white women talked about their fear of losing friends, their fear of what colleagues might think of them, their fear that administrators or, worse, students would become angry with them. They feared poor student evaluations and performance reviews. The Black women feared for their lives and for the lives of their children. They feared lynching, homes or churches being torched, white boys turned shooters.

Shame didn't begin to describe what I began to feel as I remembered those voices and the pattern they wove together. All these years of studying and writing and working at understanding racism and white supremacy, at conceiving of and doing anti-racism, and I was still *that* white woman!

"I can do better," I said. "I will do better. Will you come back to class and let me try?"

Aisha, Celine, Sahira, Shea and Anthony gazed at me, and I felt the intensity their examination of me. I took a breath and smelled again books and sharpened pencils.

"It's not like I'm never going to mess up again because I surely will. But I can take myself in hand, I can do the interior work I need to do to deal with these fears: to lay them down because they are a burden to me and a harm to you. I won't expect or ask you to teach me."

The room was quiet.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you for coming to see me and for calling me out. I know I hurt you, and I failed you by not acting more courageously yesterday. If you need or want to drop the class, I'll help you with the paperwork to make sure you can do that without penalty or cost. And if you stay...well...I really hope you'll stay. You're all so brilliant, and I would be so honoured by your continued presence in the class."

Something just outside the door rustled, and I looked up. My TA stood at the threshold. Shea, Sahira, Celine, Aisha, and Anthony stood as one and turned to go. My TA held her hand

up and as each student departed, they exchanged a high five with her. When they had all gone, A'dab walked through the door, closed it gently, and turned to face me, smiling gently.

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