

## Pushback

### A Pedagogy of Care

*Ersula Ore*

From the moment I step into the building I am marked an outsider. Regardless of the external signifiers of a teacherly ethos: sharply pressed business slacks, dress shirt, black leather briefcase, fresh pumps, and gray hair, I am still assumed to be a student. My black body in these clothes, in this space, denies me any other identity. For the third day in a row, second semester in a row, the same well-intended staffer addresses me as I make my way to the elevator. “Oh, this is the Language and Literature Building, the School of Business is located farther down the Mall.” I ignore the staffer, proceed on to the elevator doors, wait for them to open, and once inside push the number 6. Three of us enter: me; Walter,<sup>1</sup> a white male colleague from a different department; and a white male student. Neither I nor my colleague knows the student.

While in the elevator the student asks me if I work here. I find his question both interesting and telling: interesting in that his question is solely directed toward me (Walter, I gather, is invisible) and telling in that despite having entered the building on my heels and witnessing the interaction between me and the staffer before proceeding onto the elevator, the student still felt compelled to question me. I think back: the staffer was boisterous and enthusiastic when she addressed me; I was silent and dismissive in my response to her. Did the student take my dismissal as a sign of disrespect? Was his inquiry an effort to make sense of the interaction between me and

the staffer? What did he intend to gain by questioning whether or not I worked *here*?

The questions I ask myself are the questions I commonly mull over when curious students, parents, staff, and faculty ask me if I work here. I have experienced situations like this before, situations in which microaggressions posturing as polite and innocent inquiries hide subtle efforts to bait me into an insult. In this recurring situation, a white student or professor (or parent) asks me if I work here, to which I reply, “Yes,” to which they reply, “Oh! What do you teach?,” to which I reply, “English,” to which they reply in varying degrees, “You teach *English*?” (Sometimes this dialogue is modified by a demand for qualifiers: “So you have a PhD?” “Yes.” “Oh! . . . and where did you do your graduate work?” “Penn State.” “Wow! Penn State. . . that’s the home of Joe Paterno!” “Yes it is.”)

While in the eyes of my white inquirer this query appears relatively innocent, the regularity with which the question is posed to me, a black female professor, evidences a particularly problematic worldview. And while I typically hold to the script outlined above (solely in an effort to avoid embarrassing my white interlopers), today I deviate. When the student asks me if I work here, I reply, “Yes,” and then politely follow with a question of my own: “Why do you ask?”

The student’s body language changes; apparently he did not anticipate the question and, more specifically, the invitation to explain the purpose behind his inquiry. His eyebrows furrow and I can see his uneasiness settling in. Glancing from Walter, my white male colleague and back to me, the student replies with shoulders high about his ears and cheeks flushed, “I don’t know. I was just curious.” Despite my politeness the student’s response is pregnant with distress. He is clearly uncomfortable. I keep my eyes fixed on his before turning away and focusing my glance on the space where the elevator doors meet.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the brevity of the ride, I had a plan. I would allow the student to marinate in his discomfort by remaining silent, the intention being to provide him an instance in which to consider—if he so chose—the origin, nature, and purpose of his question. His discomfort in being asked to explain his motivation for asking me if I work here reflected that he had on some level recognized that his question might have been offensive. Unbeknownst to him, the regularity with which I have suffered this question no longer allows me to read his inquiry as innocent. Like the well-intended staffer’s comment downstairs, the student’s question reflects a white racial view of who is and who is not a professor. My plan to remain silent and induce a moment of

reflection within the student, however, was compromised by Walter, who, recognizing the student's discomfort, leaned forward between the two of us and interjected, "She's the one who's supposed to teach you how to write."

I looked at the student as he looked at Walter while Walter looked back at him. The exchange between the two, although unspoken, remained clear. Between them resided an understanding about who I was, what I was, and what my real worth and value were to them. Their newly refurbished bond incensed me. The student's comment was offensive; however, Walter's retort on the student's behalf was downright inexcusable. I see no other measure of recourse but to do the unthinkable. Turning to Walter I reply, "If I wanted your opinion I would have asked for it." Turning to the student I reply, "Your ignorance is offensive . . . this is your floor. I think it best you get off." I hold the elevator door for him until he exits and then ride up with Walter to the sixth floor in silence. There is nothing more to say. I am, as they say, done for the day.

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The university elevator constitutes an interesting rhetorical space for examining how pedagogical care and goodwill are communicated by faculty of color in spaces where whiteness, the discursively constructed position of white racial privilege, is normed. The elevator is the proverbial tight spot. Not only is it physically constraining, but also its limited capacity, function, and restriction on time converge to create a rhetorical space so profoundly restrictive that it precludes even the savviest of rhetorical interventions. Marry these restrictions with the social norms and codes that enculturate elevator spaces and you have a microcosm of the larger social world in which the elevator operates.<sup>3</sup> In this article I read the university elevator as a microcosm of the larger historically and politically racialized space of the academy. The stringent limitations that constitute the physical space of the university elevator not only magnify features of the cultural logics encoded in the university but also amplify the raced and gendered scripts of the academy writ large. As one faculty woman of color put it, one's identity as a professor, department member, and contributor to the larger aims of the university is determined primarily by what she is not: "a white male, the archetypical expectation for a college professor" who by the very nature of his race and gender is assumed to be "knowledgeable, wise, and capable" (Lugo-Lugo 2012: 43). As the well-meaning staffers who greet me each fall semester remind me, I do not fit the normalized view of a university professor. I am black and female, and while these markers archetypically relegate me to a station of service in the space of

the university, what saves me from this misreading is my attire. I may not be able to pass for a university professor, and I may not be mistaken for a janitor, but I sure can pass for a black business student.

In this article I speak from my location as a faculty woman of color in a predominately white institution, as a woman seeking agent-laden strategies for asserting her humanity, and as a pedagogue who desires to teach and to learn. I forward two central arguments in this article. First, I argue that whiteness is a suffocating discursive impediment that hinders my ability to perform my identity as a pedagogue as well as my capacity to exercise pedagogical care. In the elevator situation narrated above I am poised, teacherly. My intention in answering the student's question with a question of my own is to direct him in a moment of self-reflection. Yet the reaction from my colleague, Walter, suggests the opposite. His interjection suggests that I am difficult, thorny, and bitchy and demonstrates one way in which unconscious appeals to racial power—in this case, an invitation to white racial communion—undermines efforts to educate students beyond basic classroom lessons. As a professor of rhetoric and composition I see my charge to instruct students in the rhetorical as an ethical responsibility. The intent is to inculcate them in ways that help them see beyond themselves, to instruct them in ways that help them recognize, acknowledge, and connect to the humanity in others. Part of this work requires that I direct students to question, interrogate, and reflect upon how they see the world, how they see themselves, and how they see others. This pedagogical philosophy is what guided the question I posed to the student and my subsequent silence. It was also the philosophy that guided my assertive declaration to both Walter and the student during our final interaction.

Second, I argue that my identity as a faculty woman of color negotiating the discursive impediment of whiteness in the university renders the ways in which I exercise pedagogical care and demonstrate my ethos as a teacher radically different from that exercised or expressed by others. I must strike a balance between serving the needs of my students and combating their adherence to white racial privilege. This balance is further compounded by a burden that my audience rarely acknowledges: the burden of accounting for and managing the stereotypes of black womanhood that are consciously and unconsciously assigned to me by my students, fellow faculty members, and staff. Walter's intimation that I am difficult and bitchy inscribes upon me the stereotype of the angry black bitch, which not only delegitimizes my voice and my efforts to perform my identity as a pedagogue but, in the same instance, instructs the student to do the same. What the comfort of his privi-

leged status prevents him from accepting is that I am not being difficult and that I am not being bitchy; I am teaching.

I call my practice in the elevator *pushback*. In what follows I theorize pushback as a strategic counterrhetoric and potential method for striking the balance between performing my identity as a pedagogue and combating the culture of white racial privilege that permeates the academy and delegitimizes my voice. Pushback is an ethical pedagogical posture that reflects a conscious awareness of whiteness and seeks to disrupt it by making it strange (Dyer 1997: 4). In the case of the elevator situation, pushback makes whiteness strange by calling it into question: “Why do you ask?” By asking the student to publicly acknowledge the warrant upon which his inquiry rests, pushback both troubles whiteness and simultaneously returns to the student the burden of suffering white male privilege. In the case of my white male colleague, Walter, pushback acknowledges how his condescension and assertion of white male privilege converge into an appeal toward white racial communion.

Rhetorical spaces are domains held by cultural orthodoxies (Mountford 2003): accepted views, attitudes, and practices that have been, through invariable repetition, calcified so flawlessly that they express as common-sense, as natural—normal. The university is such a space, and the university elevator, a microcosm of that space. For faculty women of color, negotiating academic space means that we must also negotiate race—more specifically, the histories of race and gender oppression that undergird the ideological and discursive structures of the university. Pushback returns the burden of legitimating our presence in academic space to those who seek to challenge it and is, as I argue later, an appropriate reaction to the discursive impediments of whiteness in the academy. To demonstrate this claim I turn to historian Stanley Bonner (1977) and black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 2000) to trace the signification of the pedagogue-slave and black chattel-servant. Using Bonner and Collins I outline the linkages among slavery, service, and education, arguing specifically that the status of the pedagogue-slave resonates anew when academics whose bodies articulate America’s legacy of slavery and history of biological and low-wage labor enter academic space. Using this framework, I then analyze the interaction among myself, Walter, and the white male student, unpacking specifically (a) the ways in which cultural logics of whiteness and elevator etiquette afford both men’s racist utterances a kind of “plausible deniability” (Alexander 2012: 48) and (b) how pushback as enacted within the tight space of the elevator locates my effort to actively and compassionately respond to injustice by consciously disrupting the racist sensibilities of others. I conclude by arguing that versa-

tile modes of expressing pedagogical care need to be recognized within the historical and cultural contexts in which they are situated.

### **Intersecting Histories of Service**

The term and vocation *pedagogue* takes its meaning from the Latin *paedagogus* and Greek *paidagogos*. As Bonner explains in *Education in Ancient Rome* (1977: 37–46), the pedagogue was the “trusted slave” placed in the “service” of the family for the explicit purpose of “walking with” children to and from school, “sitting with” them in their lessons, and disciplining them. He was their “guardian” and, as primary caretaker, was vested with the responsibility of not only educating his charges but also socializing them. Bonner’s description of the pedagogue as one who serves, walks alongside, and guards students in his charge reflects Roman culture’s belief that the pedagogue was one who participated in the moral enculturation, teaching, and disciplining of youths. “Escorting the youth on all manner of journeys was a very important part of the pedagogue’s duties”; he chaperoned them through life as well as educated them (44).

The black chattel mammy who evolved into the postbellum black domestic servant operated similarly to that of the ancient pedagogue-slave in that she, too, was responsible for inculcating morals and values within her young white charges (Collins 2000: 72–76). She, like her ancient counterpart, was responsible for imparting traditional proprieties of behavior upon the children in her care. Methods for reprimanding inattentive or wayward students varied among ancient pedagogue-slaves. Sometimes a strong word or “talking to” was used; other times, a strong hand. Techniques employed by the mammy figure were similar. While depicted as subservient and docile, her “motherly” station endowed her with the ability to reprimand her charges through strong language. In a sense, the forms of reprimand enacted by both the pedagogue-slave and mammy reflect a sense of “tough care” and thus a communal commitment to shaping the ethos of young Roman citizens and young white children alike.

However, the principles the mammy was permitted to instill differed from those of the pedagogue-slave in that they were not lessons about mathematics, logic, or poetics. Rather, the lessons the mammy taught had to adhere to a set of cultural conventions that observed the myth of white racial superiority and black inferiority. To begin, depictions of the mammy as illustrated by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Margaret Mitchell in *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and others portrayed her as nurturing and motherly, not as intelligent and learned. Unlike the pedagogue-slave, the mammy

figure was not desired for her intellect; rather, she was perceived devoid of sophisticated intelligence. As a black female slave placed in the service of the white family that owned her, the mammy had to strike a balance between nominal competency and intellectual deficiency. As the cultural logic of white supremacy made clear, a smart slave was a dangerous slave. “Smart” encompassed anything that challenged the logic of America’s racial hierarchy. This is to say that, while the children in her care were directed by their parents to “mind” their mammy, the mammy was implicitly instructed to “mind” the racial order; instructing her charges beyond basic lessons in Victorian respectability and white racial decorum was costly.<sup>4</sup> As Collins (2000: 72) explains, “The mammy image represents the normative yard-stick used to evaluate Black women’s behavior.” The mammy figure had to strike a balance between black acquiescence to white racial power and her vested power as stern mother figure. In doing so she was not permitted to fully humanize herself, that is, to teach her charges that, despite her slave status, she was a woman competent in more than domestic chores.

The postbellum climate of the mid-nineteenth century and Jim Crow politics occurring thereafter transformed the mammy from the large, asexual family caretaker into the obedient black female domestic who, in her responsibilities to the family, was likewise expected to “serve at the pleasure” of her white male employers (Richardson 2002: 676). Failure to acquiesce often resulted in the loss of employment, which consequently forced black female domestics to suffer indecencies not unlike those suffered by female slaves. While there is little evidence to sustain a claim of sexual harassment and abuse of pedagogue-slaves by their Roman masters, there nonetheless exists an eerie similarity between the expectations and treatment of the pedagogue-slave of ancient Rome and those of the postbellum black female domestic. “Pedagogues, like nurses,” explains Bonner (1977: 41), “were often remembered with affection . . . their services were frequently recognized by manumission,” and tombstone inscriptions “testif[ied] to their loyalty and devotion” to their masters and the families that owned them. While such adoration might not be shown the black domestic, her service to the family was nonetheless esteemed. As Collins points out, affluent whites commonly described their black housemaids as valued members of the family. The nurturing, guidance, and moral support they provided their young charges made them “honorary members of their white ‘families’” (Collins 1986: S14).

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Bonner's history of the pedagogue as a status and vocation of service resonates with me for the way it locates service within a system of bondage. The historical context situating the pedagogue as trusted slave links the very real history of bondage to educational service. It also evokes the paternalism insistent in America's racist culture in that the pedagogue-slave as trusted member of the family echoes the likeness of two iterations of black female subservience: the devoted antebellum house Negro, mammy, and the post-bellum black female domestic. While all bodies are written into a script, the script readily made available for brown and black bodies is one of devalued service.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Sharon, a young social scientist faculty woman of color at her first tenure-track job at a research-intensive institution, race and gender invite fellow faculty members to misidentify her as the help as opposed to a member of the faculty (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008: 17). Walking into her first faculty meeting since being hired, Sharon, excited, greeted a fellow faculty member with a smile and cordial "Hello." As explained to her interviewers, "The colleague, a sixty-something white male, looked up briefly and said, 'You can put the sandwiches over there' while pointing toward an empty table." Sharon was diplomatic. She explained to her colleague that she didn't have any sandwiches, to which he replied, "Then, what can I do for you? We're about to start our faculty meeting." Pushing through her agitation, Sharon calmly responded, "Hi, I'm your new colleague Sharon Jones. I work here." Like Sharon, it is my black female body and its intimate connection to the perpetuation of American slavery, its history of forced service in the form of physical and reproductive labor, and its subsequent supporting role to the continuation of what bell hooks refers to as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that permits the white staffer on the first floor and the white student riding along with me in the elevator to question my presence (hooks: 1989, 2004). Like Sharon, my black female body resonates a history of racialized service against which I must regularly contend.

There is a second, more intimate reason that I find Bonner's history of the pedagogue resonant. Placing his account alongside histories of black female service reminds me that negotiating space means that we must likewise negotiate race—more specifically, histories of race that haunt the spaces in which we reside. To be clear, I am no mammy. I am no maid. I am a pedagogue descended from mammies and maids, and it is these histories of black female subservience as marked by my black skin and female body that trouble my interlocutors, so much so that they seek a remedy for their discomfort. Thus, when they ask me, "Do you work here?" I hear, *Are you a secretary*

*or something because “black female professor” is fanatical. It’s like that black unicorn—shit just don’t exist.*

While the elevator incident shared above illustrates something specific to my positionality as a faculty woman of color at a large research institution in the Southwest, it is representative of a larger, more insidious problem within the academy: whiteness. Whiteness is synonymous with white privilege and white supremacy (Morrison 1993; Frankenberg 1993; Mills 1997; Haney López 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2010, 2012). It is a resilient “epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial ‘Others’ and oneself” that support and perpetuate the asymmetrical power dynamic between whites and nonwhites (Arnesen 2001: 9). It is also, as communication scholars Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) make clear, “a strategic rhetoric” that discursively constructs and maintains a racially privileged social location.

Let me assert that the argument here is not that women of color in general or black female professors in particular are more oppressed than any other group of scholars. There is without a doubt, as in all social spaces, a hierarchy of oppression; to deny such a truth is to turn a blind eye to the very real systems of power and privilege that mediate waking life. My point is that the histories of service that render my black female body legible in white academic space operate on assumptions about my ethos that in turn direct individuals to make conclusions about my worth and value both to them and to the university writ large. While I have to contend with “well-meaning staffers” and the case of mistaken identity only at the beginning of *each* school year, the intimate inquisitions in the elevator by students contesting my presence in academic space and the snide remarks about what I’m “supposed” to do are a year-round occurrence. This very real, all too common scenario articulates three conclusions about my ethos: (a) I am not a professor—only black business students wear professional clothes; (b) I can’t be a professor—the student considers me an imposter; (c) If I am a professor, then I am one of little worth—I fail to provide the services “associated” with my discipline, a discipline that is, as intimated by Walter, one of “service” to the larger, more important academic community. This is my location, this is my rhetorical situation, and this is just one example of how my ethos is preconstructed for me, one of a litany of moments in which I am reminded of how the trifecta of my race, gender, and disciplinary status within the academy troubles those with whom I work, those for whom I teach, and my overall passion to place myself in the service of my students.

### Whiteness as “Hidden” Transcript

The university is not a space detached from the world outside. America’s long history of racial power, heteropatriarchy, and classism saturate the social space beyond the university just as much as they saturate the space within it. The sexy, sultry Latina; irrational or incompetent female professor; the black servant; the angry black bitch; and the exotic, submissive Asian are all stereotypes that call the academy home. These controlling scripts are powerful forces with which to contend, for as oppressive ideological constructs they deeply influence how faculty women of color are perceived, treated, and engaged by students and faculty alike. Disrupting these stereotypes often leads to moments of extreme discomfort. As demonstrated by the student in the elevator, placing pressure on the underlying assumptions of others—particularly when that pressure is applied by a nonwhite—can have dire consequences.

Much of critical race studies and critical legal scholarship examining whiteness in the twenty-first century utilizes tropes of invisibility as a means of problematizing the commonsense logic and normalizing rhetorics of white racial privilege. White privilege is the “invisible knapsack” (McIntosh 1988), the “invisible weight” (Bonilla-Silva 2012: 176), the framing position that precludes its own existence by remaining outside the frame (Dyer 1997). As George Lipsitz (2006: 1) makes clear, to be white in America is to be a member of “the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.” The student’s choice to question me while in the elevator reflects this observation. Cloaked by his seemingly innocent entreaty to observe elevator etiquette is an even more insidious call for me to follow racial etiquette and “recognize my place,” as it were. By instructing me to follow the code of the elevator, the student demonstrates one means by which “seemingly nonracial way[s] . . . of stating racial views” safeguards him from appearing outwardly racist (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 48).

As literature outlining the tensions experienced by faculty of color makes clear, such moves as those employed by the student are common during interactions between faculty of color, white students, and white colleagues (Moses 1989; Johnson 1994; hooks 1994; Stanley 2006; Greene 1990). Most commonly discussed in this body of research is how faculty of color negotiate both micro and macro forms of aggression as they navigate academe. Unconscious racism expressed in the form of “excessive scrutiny from peers, superiors, and students” (Wilson 2012: 65); imprinting onto black women faculty in particular the controlling stereotype of the black mammy figure

or angry black bitch; the need to work harder to receive less than equal recognition and respect; factors of invisibility and hypervisibility (tokenism); unequal pay; and other forms of institutionalized difference, exclusion, and abuse are common daily occurrences and realities for those of us whose bodies do not articulate the knowledgeable, wise, and capable ethos consciously and unconsciously attributed to white male professors (Lugo-Lugo 2012: 42).

Research aside, over a decade of first-hand experiences teaching in predominantly white institutions, living among the students whom I taught, and shopping in spaces where I was often—despite the regularity of my presence—questioned, followed, and harassed have provided me, as these unfortunate experiences have provided many of us, with a situated knowledge about race, gender, and space that belies the claims of color blindness and the growing narrative of postraciality. The truth of institutionalized and unconscious racism is a reality that some of us cannot afford to ignore. Acknowledging that this is a part of our everyday lives, that our uncontrollable phenotypical display and gender place us at the crux of history and myth, and that our forms of negotiating belonging diplomatically may not always make our white colleagues and students “feel good” is an ethical responsibility that the privileged must bear. Communicating and demonstrating our humanity in spaces that work regularly to deny us both are the burdens that we must bear.

The student’s behavior in the elevator is a manifestation of what I have come to term *racism’s new clothes*. These “new clothes” cloak racism, rendering it invisible and thus nonexistent to those it empowers and evermore difficult to combat for those it disempowers. This is to say that Jim Crow isn’t dead and gone; he just got a bit savvier. Adapting to the political climate of the post–civil rights era, Jim Crow turned in his overt tactics for more covert ones. These covert forms often manifest as “microaggressions,” discursive strategies that reinscribe the color line. Psychologist Chester Pierce (1974: 515) defined microaggressions as “white put-downs, done in automatic, pre-conscious, or unconscious fashion,” as a means of communicating racial superiority. Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (2007) and Peggy Davis (1989) further unpack Pierce’s concept. For Sue et al., microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile derogatory or negative racial slights and insults.” They are often “unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” (2007: 273). For Davis they are “stunning automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority” (1989: 1576).

In all three definitions we see that the lack of conscious intent on behalf of the offender does not mollify the overt intent constituting the purpose and damaging power of racist cultural logic. That is to say that those operating—whether conscious or not, intentional or not—under the cultural logic of whiteness articulate and perpetuate its ideology of white racial superiority and nonwhite racial inferiority. In this sense, the presence or absence of conscious intent does not attenuate one’s complicity in institutionalized racism. Even when decisions or actions, such as the student’s in the elevator, are performed through a series of “thoughtless” choices—what some might refer to as unconscious habits—they nonetheless aid and abet adherents’ blindness to the damage and violence they do.

The pervasiveness of this ideological system has a disciplining power, one that affects both those it interpolates and the nonwhite subjects it aims to subjugate. In a word, I am attuned to a frequency that privileged others are not. Consequently, what I sense in the student’s question is the following: (a) an attempt to reclaim the space of the elevator as one dominated by markers of his racially and historically situated power, (b) that he is not fully conscious of the racial script he attempts to enforce, and (c) that he is likewise unaware that, unlike some, I don’t mind making others uncomfortable, particularly when my purpose in doing so is to mark racist habits intolerable.

### **Pushback: A Response to the Hidden Transcript of Whiteness**

While on the one hand our close proximity and my efforts to observe polite etiquette—that is, to play the game and excuse an implicitly racist statement—preclude a desire to be rude, they on the other hand afford me an excellent opportunity to be abrasive. In this scenario, abrasiveness takes the form of what I call pushback, a deliberate act of confrontation informed by a conscious recognition that the intent undergirding such action is to disturb the racist sensibilities of others.<sup>6</sup> Such a counterhegemonic, antiracist stance follows suit with other forms of critique, insurrection, and agency construction—specifically, what bell hooks (1989) refers to as “talking back,” what legal scholar Patricia Williams (1991) describes as “jaywalking,”<sup>7</sup> and what Gwendolyn Pough (2004) explains as “wreck.” Talking back, jaywalking, and wreck are all forms of audacious talk—“sass”—and might best be understood as a kind of “stepping out of bounds,” as the ones exercising such talk are presumed to have forgotten themselves. As a child I was often reprimanded for such transgression. “Sass me again, hea?!” my mother used to say, but only when her hands were full. Under such conditions, rather than reach out and physically snatch me up, she used her words to “straighten me out” instead.

My mother's verbal reprimand was to remind me of my place, to direct me to do the work of getting back in line and acting accordingly, which, in the case of my mother, was as a respectable young girl, not the grown woman I was apparently trying to be. I have, however, come to recognize when sass is needed, as well as the various manifestations it may take as an adaptive response and posture to ardent aggression. In other words, I have come to recognize sass as what Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2004: 23) describe as "an attitude of necessity"—what we in the field of rhetoric and composition would refer to as a strategic and productive art.

Talking back, jaywalking, and wreck are all variations of sass in that they are expressions of a consciousness that, in acknowledging the oppressive power of racism and heteropatriarchy, operate as critical rejoinders and open challenges to raced and gendered norms. Each is a "rhetorical weapon of self-defense" (Pough 2004: 49), a purposely disruptive act of brazen defiance aimed at bringing attention to interlocking forces of oppression through the deliberate and open transgression of gendered, racial, and classed norms. Tracing the lineage of this embodied rhetoric, Pough asserts that "sassiness is the precursor to bringing wreck" and is "a large part of the lineage of Black women's expressive culture" (49). Pushback, I posit, shares this lineage.

Pushback, like other forms of sass, locates my efforts to actively and aggressively respond to injustice by consciously disrupting acts of implicit racism as they operate within the historical, social, and political sphere of America's post-civil rights era. Within this cultural space, overt expressions of racial power and/or appeals to whiteness via ardent rhetorics of white supremacy are replaced by more subtle, less overt cultural logics such as multiculturalism and color blindness, which forgo "the logic of white supremacy [and its] imaginings of *race* as biological differences" for more "progressive" logics that proclaim equality but do so at the cost of omitting from the frame the structural nature of racism (Ratcliffe 2005: 14–15). For instance, multiculturalism argues (a) that race is an imagined category and that ethnicity is a more appropriate framework for defining and articulating cultural heritage and (b) that by celebrating one another's cultural heritage we combat racism (*ibid.*). The peril in this cultural logic is that it flattens racial difference by dismissing the structural and institutionalized nature of racism. Under multiculturalism, racism becomes an individual characteristic rather than a larger system structuring our daily lives. Color blindness extends the logic of multiculturalism by asserting that race does not matter. The common adage for those adhering to the rhetoric of color blindness—or what might be better termed today as postraciality—is that "I don't see race." To "not see race"

is to say that the system of racial power and privilege undergirding civic life does not exist, that race is an issue only for those who still adhere to the faculty logic of race (“Didn’t you hear, there’s no such thing as race!”), and that walking in the world as we do today is not guided by both unconscious and conscious understandings of racial power.

But people see race; it’s just that the way we see and articulate it today is different from the ways we saw and articulated it in the past (Frankenberg 1993; Morrison 1993; Ratcliffe 2005). That is, rather than say, “I’m asking you whether or not you work here because you’re black. Additionally, you seem to think yourself exempt from following racial codes, and that bothers me,” folks say. “Me asking you whether or not you work her has nothing to do with race.” In *Racism without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) makes this point clear through his examination of the rhetoric of color blindness and the ways in which this discursive force—despite its denial of racism and white racial privilege (color blindness is really just another way of saying “I’m not a racist”)—rearticulates calcified notions of racial superiority and inferiority. When asked questions about equal opportunity lending and equal education, housing, and work, the workers and college students of Bonilla-Silva’s study rationalized the disparity between whites and blacks as a result of nonracial dynamics. Under this rhetoric, contemporary racial inequality is rationalized and explained through powerful narratives of nonwhite accountability—that is, as a result of “market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and . . . imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 2).

In the same way Jim Crow racism was an adaptation to the postbellum politics of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, color-blind racism is an adaptive response to the post-civil rights politics of the twenty-first century. Post-civil rights politics has created a new set of racial norms that prohibit open expression of racist views (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 53–54; Alexander 2012: 2–3). Consequently, people have “developed a concealed way” of voicing their adherence to racist ideology. This concealment, however, is not necessarily conscious or intentional. The adult workers and college students interviewed in Bonilla-Silva’s study are not fully conscious that their rationalizations regarding the educational gap between blacks and whites and differences in housing and employment reflect their adherence to racist ideology until a question problematizing their logic is posed. This lack of awareness is due to the ways in which whiteness has been normed. As legal scholar Stephanie Wildman (2005: 247) explains, “The conflation of privilege with the society norm and this option to ignore oppression contribute to the invisibility of that privilege both to its holder and to society.” As a result, “whites do not

see whiteness” and therefore cannot “see the privileges associated with it” or the violence it does to others (248). When social actors attempt to make whiteness strange rather than normal, an ardent rhetoric of white defense arises. In these instances, semantic moves signifying nonracialism—moves like personal testimony (“I have black friends” or “I didn’t get the job because of a black man”) and projection (“They are the racist ones”)—are employed to save face. Other explanations following a logic of meritocracy and individual choice likewise help to erase white racial privilege from the frame.

Meditating on theorist John Mayher’s notion of “uncommonsense” and the disciplining power of racism, Keith Gilyard (1996: 17) writes that “the theories we hold implicitly are the ones that generally guide us most powerfully.” This is to say that just because we may not be fully aware of the discursive forces interpolating us does not mean we are not adherents to and perpetrators of it. We see this point strongest among the college students in Bonilla-Silva’s study. Claims of ignorance such as “I don’t believe that, but . . .” and “I don’t know” were a part of a larger pattern of common semantic moves employing color-blind rhetoric. These moves “act as discursive buffers,” “rhetorical shields to save face,” and are not, asserts Bonilla-Silva, expressions of racist intention but demonstrations of students’ adherence to color-blind ideology (2010: 57, 54).<sup>8</sup> The work of pushback, then, is to destabilize such attempts to save face. Thus, rather than capitulate to being baited into an insult, I push back by posing a rhetorical question that calls out the warrant upon which the student’s inquiry rests. By pushing back I catch the student off guard. His hunched shoulders and mixed expression of confusion and annoyance tell me that he, aside from being irritated by my refusal to acquiesce, is not fully aware of why he posed the question or fully conscious of what he has just communicated. The purpose of pushing back, then, is to direct this student to consider what has for once—most likely the first time in his life—been brought into question for him: the problem of his assumed privilege. For the student, the implicit theory of white male privilege functions as an unquestioned operating system that allows him to feel comfortable about questioning my legitimacy. For the student, this normed frame of reference renders his inquiry unproblematic, hence his genuine confusion and discomfort upon being challenged.

### **Pushback: An Ethics of Pedagogical Care**

Care and goodwill as exercised toward my elevator student is not comfortable; it is downright abrasive. I am clear that I am annoyed, but not dismissive. If I had intended to be dismissive I would have discouraged further

dialogue. However, I did not see how discouraging dialogue would have served the student or others. Instead, I encouraged it by posing a question of my own: “Why do you ask?” My decision to wax sophistic demonstrates what I deem most important at the time, which is that, in the immediacy of that particular moment, the student be given the opportunity to think reflectively about his question. In pushing back I aim to encourage him to consider (for however long we had) any number of underlying assumptions and how they might offend. I wanted him to consider me, himself—*us*—as two human beings who, granted only seconds in a day to stand alongside each other, could do so as *equals*. And while I may not have succeeded in any of those aims because my efforts were thwarted by my white male colleague, my efforts were done in the interest of both myself and my student.

In “Self-Disclosure as Strategic Teaching Tool: What I Do—and Don’t—Tell My Students,” Lad Tobin (2010) discusses the difficulties of determining when to step out of the traditional, objectively sealed posture of the teacher and reveal the very real, very human individual underneath. As he explains, “The relevant question is not whether” sensitive topics like “religious belief, race-related discomfort, sexual history, or personal trauma” are “inherently inappropriate” to have with students. “Instead, the question is whether any particular disclosure on one of those topics helps rather than hinders that teacher’s ability to illustrate a particular concept” (198). However, my painfully constricted rhetorical situation was unsuited for the regular trappings of a day’s lesson. Therefore, I chose to disturb the unconsciously racist sensibilities of the student. My intent was not to shame but to engage the student for his benefit, for my benefit, and for the benefit of faculty women of color who are regularly challenged in covertly violent ways.

The goal of instructing students in the rhetorical is to direct them to think before they speak, write, act, listen; to assist them in their efforts to craft appeals that demonstrate an understanding of their audience; to consider the context of their relative situations; to instruct them in ways to make their ethos legible to others. Most important, the goal of teaching rhetoric and composition is to help students see beyond themselves, to reach beyond themselves, to recognize and connect to the humanity in others. It is to prepare them to be conscious, agent-laden, civic participants. Part of this work requires that we direct students to question, interrogate, and reflect upon how they see the world, how they see others operating in it, and how they see themselves. For many of the students we teach today, rhetorics of multiculturalism and color blindness complicate their ability to see how pernicious systems of power such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and language

constitute their terministic screens, how these systems intersect to constitute their identities, and how these systems work together to privilege a few while simultaneously disadvantaging many. For others, their possessive investment in white privilege is so calcified that helping them see how systems of power interpolate us all is less successful.

My elevator student was genuinely unaware of what he had said. His reply, “I don’t know, I was just curious,” was honest. Unaware of his adherence to racist ideology, his question was, in a word, innocent. And I knew this. However, the lack of malicious intent has no bearing on the maliciousness of racist ideology, which is, despite the student’s lack of awareness, clearly communicated through his microaggression. That is, while the student might be innocent of conscious intent, cultural logics of racism have their own intent, and this intent, like all adaptive organisms, is self-preservation. Pushback, then, unconcerned with whether attacks are intentional or not, conscious or not, calls out—rather than passively accepts, excuses, or dismisses—racially motivated attacks on the subjectivity of faculty women of color. Innocent or not, such ignorance cannot be tolerated. To not have pushed back would have meant to endorse his thinking. I care too much about my students, myself, and others to let that happen.

### **Pushback: An Ethics of Disciplinary Care**

What I experience in the elevator is tantamount to what black and brown pedagogues experience in the classroom: white students save other white students from being directed to consider their adherence to racist ideology and, in so doing, strengthen the bonds of white racial privilege among them, as well as the histories, habits, and cultural logics perpetuating it. Walter’s interjection could have simply been an effort to diffuse what he might have read as a confusing or uncomfortable situation for the student. He might very well have read my posture as harsh or unnecessarily difficult. Despite what his intentions might have been, Walter’s actions nonetheless demonstrate how efforts to save students from difficult, uncomfortable, or complicated discussions undermine the larger effort of working to prepare them for life beyond the confines of academe. It likewise demonstrates how easily efforts to generate reflective discussion about unconscious adherence to systems of power and privilege are undermined.

Walter’s effort to save the student from discomfort works on multiple levels. First, Walter’s insinuation of what I don’t do, accompanied by the reaffirming glance he gives to the student after telling him what I’m *supposed* to do (“She’s the one who’s supposed to teach you how to write”), rescues the

student from his uneasiness while simultaneously reasserting the insignificance of rhetoric and composition to the academy. Walter's effort to aid the student is done at the expense of my ethos, my discipline, and my effort to teach the student beyond basic classroom lessons. Second, Walter's interjection legitimates the student's sense of entitlement and with it his unconscious sense of racial and gendered superiority. Third, by insinuating what I as a member of my field fail to do effectively, Walter communicates to the student that those who teach rhetoric and composition are considered incompetent by fellow faculty. This is particularly problematic because it licenses the student to respond similarly.

Walter's interjection demonstrates one way in which unconscious appeals to power undermine efforts for pedagogues of color to practice their social responsibility as citizens, as well as their ethical responsibilities as pedagogues. It also illustrates the insignificance of conscious appeals to power. Whether Walter overtly intended to undermine my ethos during my interaction with the student is not of issue. What is of issue, and what I hope to make clear about Walter's interruption, is that whether intentional or not, conscious or not, his appeal to systems of power (race, gender, and disciplinarity) collapses a set of discourses about service (chattel slave, servant) that constrict my efforts to demonstrate goodwill toward the student in the elevator. While delegitimizing my field, Walter simultaneously delegitimizes my voice and insights as a faculty woman of color. His act is therefore doubly damaging in that it communicates to the student that neither myself nor my field have anything of value for him to learn, hence my choice to move from sophistic to candidly confrontational.

My final and most confrontational act—telling Walter to mind his business and informing the student that I find his ignorance offensive—was not done without an awareness of the consequences that might ensue, nor was it done without consideration of how my actions may impact the daily lives of other faculty women of color in the academy or members of my discipline. Rather, my decision to disrupt the “invisibility” of whiteness and academic hierarchy as they operate enthymematically in the rhetorical space of the elevator is guided by a deep resounding belief in (a) the liberating power of direct and candid speech and (b) a pedagogy grounded in the understanding that instigating discomfort and wading in tension alongside those we are charged to serve can be a therapeutic practice for all parties involved. This does not mean that such practice will yield picturesque conclusions in which we all understand the violence of the racial script. As we can see, this is certainly not the case with the elevator situation. What it does mean is that the work we do as pedagogues of varying backgrounds, antiracist activists, and

antiracist allies is messy, complicated, and ongoing. It also means that we need to begin to acknowledge the complex ways in which our vocations and identities mediate the ways we express care.

As Tobin makes clear, there are a variety of ways to convey personal values while teaching, all of which come with pedagogical risks as well as rewards. The lesson as I had envisioned it for that moment in the elevator did not anticipate Walter's interruption, mainly because I did not anticipate that my efforts to exercise pedagogical care and goodwill would be illegible to Walter, an individual who regularly made efforts to let me know that he was racially conscious. Consequently, the way I exercised care toward the student in the elevator is decidedly different from the way I exercised care toward my white male colleague, Walter. The difference is due to the layered nature of the exchange and Walter's choice to relieve the student's dis-ease by reasserting the discourses of white male privilege and disciplinarity while inside the elevator. The care exercised toward Walter, however, was not in service of Walter. It did not seek to provide for him in any other way than to let him know that his insertion was not appreciated. On the contrary, the care exercised toward Walter was in service of myself, my discipline, and my elevator student in that it was an act intended to reassert my humanity, to safeguard the vitality of my profession, to incline the student to think before he speaks, and to help him recognize that white privilege is not recognized by everyone.

### **Conclusion**

The elevator situation constitutes an interesting rhetorical occasion for examining the ways intersecting notions of service converge at the site of a faculty woman of color. For me, the conditions of my race, gender, and disciplinary status bound up in the narrow and short-lived space of the elevator, coupled with a rhetorical posture intended to solicit discomfort as a means of encouraging reflection, were undercut by a more normed presence: white privilege. Under the guise of elevator etiquette, white privilege manifested discursively as an "absence of explicitly racist rhetoric" that affords "the racial nature of coded appeals a certain plausible deniability" (Alexander 2012: 48), a kind of plausible deniability that I aimed to—within the devastatingly short period of an elevator ride—unsettle by pushing back. My experience in the elevator is tantamount to what many brown and black pedagogues experience in the classroom: white students save other white students from being forced to acknowledge the racism within and, in so doing, strengthen the bonds of white racial privilege among them. As captured in this narrative, I did not "succeed" in making a pedagogical intervention. I trust that, due to Walter's

interruption, nothing about the student's mind has been affected by our exchange: the conviction he had upon entering the elevator is most likely the same conviction upon which he exited.

So what was the gain? What does pushing back in both physically and ideologically tight spaces such as a university elevator get us? For me the gain is pedagogical and personal. Pedagogically, the desire to place myself in the service of my students and academe means that every day presents an opportunity to stand alongside others and work collaboratively to address the challenges of sustaining a more democratic academic institution. Krista Ratcliffe (2005: 110) reminds us that "the past is not simply a series of fixed points on an abstract historical continuum but rather a series of inscriptions not just in discourse but in our material bodies, inscriptions that continually circle through our present and inform our identities, inscriptions that will control us if we do not acknowledge them." Following Ratcliffe's insight, I argue that those of us resting at the intersection of multiple forces of oppressive service, and those of us who are not, take into account the ways in which histories reverberate and intersect in academic space. I argue that we do more than simply expound upon the intricacies of discourses. Pedagogy and scholarship are more than waxing theoretical about discursive power, identity, and literacy. We need to work more conscientiously to put our understandings of race, power, and discourse into practice. A step forward toward a more embodied understanding of how power operates has the ability to help us walk alongside one another as we walk alongside our students.

Ratcliffe's point regarding how the past continues to reverberate in the present captures the importance of acknowledging how we look, how we perceive, and how our interactions with one another follow dangerously oppressive scripts. It also reminds us that the resonating power of the past in the present demands that we exercise a more expansive understanding of pedagogical care, one which acknowledges that multiple forms of historically and socially situated difference will in turn produce historically and socially situated expressions of investment. Personally, as a rhetorical posture, push-back grants me the ability to return to my elevator student and Walter the burden of their whiteness. What I gain by doing so is—if only for a brief moment—the opportunity to unsettle damaging imaginings of my ethos as well as that of faculty women of color. My rhetorical act of sassy defiance was intended to communicate to both the student and Walter that, pedagogue or not, whether servant or paid slave, today's lesson will not begin with my deference to a gendered, raced, or disciplined script. In other words, the day will not begin on historically normed terms of engagement.

For many of us the greatest risk, both professionally and personally, is unsettlingly the problematic imaginings of the students we serve and the faculty and staff with whom we work. I recognize the importance of playing the game and following the rules, of staying in my lane and not making waves. These postures of acquiescence work to keep people safe in spaces where they are unsafe. However, role-playing has never been my strong point, and as a black woman operating in the historically and politically racialized space of the American university—a space known for its implicit and explicit modes of violence against faculty of color (Collins 1986; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008; Ford 2011; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012)—this can indeed cause me problems. More aptly put, my unequivocal response to both my white male faculty member and the white male student is, in a word, dangerous. The ways in which I could be reprimanded abound. As Richard Dyer (1997: 4) reminds us, there are risks involved in making whiteness strange. However, as Fannie Lou Hamer intimated well, there comes a point where one becomes “sick and tired of being sick and tired,” a point where silence and acquiescence to gendered scripts, hierarchies of discipline, and customary performances of the color line can no longer be embraced. To continue to embrace such oppressive and suffocating forces is to consent (consciously or otherwise) to slowly killing oneself.<sup>9</sup> In this instance I chose otherwise and instead employed a method that, while transgressing intersecting forces of service, likewise aimed to offer my elevator student an opportunity to exercise greater social and civic responsibility, as well as maturity.

## Notes

1. Walter is a pseudonym.
2. I am reminded of bell hooks’s notion of the “oppositional gaze” articulated in the chapter of the same name in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992: 115–32).
3. George Yancy makes a similar observation in *Look, a White!* (2012), where he describes the elevator as “a microcosm of some of the dynamic processes of a larger, systemic form of colonial invasion” (16). Hip hop artist and author Questlove of The Roots also offers an observation about how the elevator exacerbates the overdeterminism that comes with being black in America (see Thompson 2013).
4. To be clear, the pedagogue and slave were two separate and distinct social stations in America; there were no pedagogue-slaves in America, not officially, anyway: it was illegal to educate slaves. Laws against educating slaves began shortly after 1739 when a slave named Jemmy led a rebellion against slave masters, overseers, and their families residing along the Stono River in South Carolina. As a result, South Carolina became the first colony to prohibit slave education and assemblage; legislators attributed the

cause of the uprising to Jemmy's literacy. In 1755, Georgia followed suit, with Virginia trailing soon after Nat Turner's 1831 slave revolt in Southampton County. And while public universities like the University of Virginia and University of North Carolina employed enslaved and free blacks to serve the needs of the colleges and their students, these servants, unlike the pedagogue-slave, commanded no respect, nor did they teach—as slaves of African descent, they served and little more. For more, see Wood 1974: 308–30; Wax 1982; and Smith 2005.

5. Octavio Pimentel's (2013) autoethnographic paper "Giving Voice: The Latin@ Voice That Is Often Ignored at Best" highlights this point. As he demonstrates in his paper, it is the combination of Pimentel's race and the legion of keys that dangle from a belt loop on his pants that invite students and fellow faculty members to conclude that he is a janitor rather than an associate professor of English. This reading of "service" and "servant" prevails despite Pimentel's seven-year employment at a state university in the American southwest.
6. My use of the term *sensibilities* is not an effort to attribute conscious intent to the student's actions but instead is meant to reflect an awareness of the student's unconscious habit, one that illustrates his complicity with white racial privilege, power, and systems of racialized disadvantages.
7. Williams (1991) conceives of jaywalking as an explicit act of transgression against laws and codes that oppress. While she does not theorize this practice as a uniquely or specifically black embodied rhetoric, we can identify its strategic deployment by members of aggrieved communities as representative of their understanding of the relationship between race and power in America.
8. Bonilla-Silva's (2010) seemingly dubious point about intentionality highlights a tension in the work of critical race theory. The question of individual intention is usually avoided because of its difficulty to prove, particularly in a post-civil rights society where overt acts of racism are shunned. Additionally, claims of individual intention fail to account for the covert and insidious ways in which racism structures contemporary social life. However, as an ideology and thus political instrument, cultural logics such as whiteness *do* operate along a spectrum of intent in that their central focus is self-preservation. Jim Crowism, multiculturalism, color blindness, and claims of postraciality seek to secure white racial dominance through adaptation to social and cultural shifts in attitudes toward race.
9. Here I echo and embrace Rachel Alicia Griffin's (2012) awareness that to not explicitly talk about black womanhood and its relationship to the academy—to openly "talk back" to the violence done to women of color in the academy—is to die a slow death. I reject that option.

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