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"Because We're Going to Mess Up": Practices for Accountability—Not a Piecemeal Approach

What are we in rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies currently practicing? What practices do harm and, in contrast, which counter harm? How do we disrupt everyday, cumulative, and structural injustices and instead invest in accountability? In addition to asking these and other questions, this article engages four accountability practices that are necessary for countering the ongoing violence of the mythical norm (Lorde), of domination, and of harm within higher education: (1) resisting denial of ongoing harms; (2) recognizing normalized violence; (3) divesting from whiteness; and (4) investing in a consistent, relational approach to seeking justice. These practices help us tap into and amplify the work of BIPOC feminist and womanist educators-scholars-activists (including Ahmed, Gumbs, hooks, Mingus, and Royster) who have been countering epistemic injustice by building linguistic resources and expanding what we can name. These practices are part of a whole in which taking a piecemeal approach entrenches the current state of affairs: white supremacy status quo and normalized violence. Together, these add up to a call for striving toward justice in a sustained, momentum-gathering way.

> *In america, this norm [the mythical norm] is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of*

us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.
—Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" 116

In retrospect, I see that in the last twenty years I have encountered many folks who say they are committed to freedom and justice for all even though the way they live, the values and habits of being they institutionalize daily, in public and private rituals, help maintain the culture of domination, help create an unfree world.
—bell hooks, "A Revolution of Values" 27

Always reflect on what you are practicing because you are always practicing something.
—Mia Mingus, "You can read and theorize all you want . . ."

An Opening Invitation

If we could express one hope at the beginning of this article, it is that we do the work of epistemic validation—that we acknowledge and act on the lessons of our teachers: critical feminist educators-scholars-activists, including transformative justice and disability justice activist Mia Mingus, to whom this piece is dedicated.[1] And we ask: Whom might you also acknowledge and to whom might you dedicate your reading? As Alexis Pauline Gumbs reminds us, through dedication, we make the work sacred. We want to break from our typical conditioned patterns, which can lead us to glance and go—to rush through pieces as though they are just that: pieces. What would it mean, instead, to pause and practice even the act of reading differently? We're asking this question as writers. And we're attempting to write differently, including, you'll note, in breaking from MLA 9 by listing all authors' names for in-text citations. We hope you'll join us in asking questions and seeking possibilities together.

Introduction

The past few years have changed us, as we know they have many people. And the questions that have motivated us as educators and researchers—questions about agency, justice, peace, power, and rights—feel more pressing than ever. We, students and teachers, now live and write within ever-deepening grief, rage, exhaustion, trauma, and distrust fueled by ongoing pandemics and genocides. We witness ongoing calls for collective reckoning met with continued and escalating injustice and witness ever-tightening knots in our stomachs because the surveillance of educators, militarization, and other violences just keep growing. We have lost people. We are not alone in this. How do we intervene into all that's life-denying and build toward what's life-giving? How can each breath—so much more than a metaphor, though arguably the organizing metaphor of these times—breathe life into commitments to justice?

The two of us—Beth and Rasha—come to this work as learners, asking these questions of ourselves and facing them with humility. As educators, we believe that we teach what we most need to learn, so we are in this work as co-learners with you, fellow educators, writers, and researchers. And as learners, we listen to our teachers, whose words in the opening epigraphs capture a longing for accountability, which we understand as rooted in loving relationship and answerability, beginning with ourselves. So, let us share now (and we'll share more about us in a few pages) that as authors—and we imagine this is true for many of you as readers—we show up as people who have been shaped by and feel responsibility to the field of writing, rhetoric, and composition studies. We hope to amplify and align with commitments to justice made actionable both in everyday life and for the long haul. To make commitments actionable, we are learning how we need practices of accountability—practices that support and uplift us *and* practices that interrupt the status quo, which is ongoing oppression.

So, we write and live with longings that we witness others also expressing. These longings are for unlearning and liberating from interlocking oppressions—white supremacy, anti-Blackness, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and attachment to "the mythical norm," as Lorde directs our attention ("Age" 116). These longings are for recognizing, reckoning, and redressing wrongs, for interrupting cultures of domination and truly transgressing, as hooks names intervention into everyday life and institutional structures. These longings are for being accountable in our work as scholars,

where epistemic injustice persists, because, as Mingus reminds us, we are always practicing something. And these practices—ways of being, doing, and relating that shape our lives—restrict or create potential for accountability. So, how do we learn and unlearn what we are practicing? How do we practice values and habits of justice instead of domination and adherence to the mythical norm?

These longings arise from rupture, from being unable to continue life as it is. Neither longings nor ruptures are new to us. Rather, in articulating our personal longings and linking them with Lorde, hooks, and Mingus (and many others), we highlight how critical feminist scholars have long been offering praxis to address ongoing injustice. Similarly, our method is one of praxis—not of selective reading or boundaried theorizing. Instead, we are observing receptive literacies—reading, listening, witnessing, reflecting—as everyday life practices. We are attempting to make sense of what we are learning through productive literacies—writing, speaking, testifying, sharing. In doing so, we hope to co-construct, underline, and amplify what critical feminist scholars teach. We hope to practice a method of accountability by documenting what we are witnessing. And what we are witnessing is that the wisdom of what we need is in the records—all types of records, written, spoken, visual, embodied—yet epistemic injustice continues to interfere with its ready reception and uptake.

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As learners and educators, we strive to counter epistemic injustice through epistemic validation. Said differently, using the verbs of one reviewer for this piece, we strive to resurface, assemble, and marshal the visions of what is needed—the wisdom of how to change our practices in a core, not piecemeal, way. In doing so, we hope to connect with other educator-scholars who are also raging and grieving and longing for justice. We act on Audre Lorde's call: "There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt" ("Poetry" 39). And making these ideas, these wisdoms, felt is needed again and again.

We find many examples of this making-felt work. Across critical feminist scholarship, particularly scholarship by Black feminists and feminists and womanists of color, the ideas of *longing* and *rupture* and the paired

calls for *accountability* and *answerability* are clearly discernible threads. For example, in writing studies, hand in hand with longings and ruptures come the calls to "know better and do better" (Pritchard, amplifying Maya Angelou); to "get the frac in" (Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, and Yergeau); and to do more than write statements—with deep gratitude for many recent manifestos, including the 2020 CCCC Special Committee's "This Ain't Another Statement! This Is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!" created by April Baker-Bell, Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, Davena Jackson, Lamar Johnson, Carmen Kynard, and Teaira McMurtry. Together, they testify:

> We are witnessing institutions and organizations craft statements condemning police brutality and anti-Black racism while ignoring the anti-Black skeletons in their own closets. As language and literacy researchers and educators, we acknowledge that the same anti-Black violence toward Black people in the streets across the United States mirrors the anti-Black violence that is going down in these academic streets (Baker-Bell, Jones Stanbrough, & Everett, 2017).

We learn from these methodological moves—witnessing and acknowledging—and underscore the need to intervene. Many current practices (personal, collective, disciplinary, and institutional) do violence. Practices deny life. Deny humanity. Deny breath. Across spheres of everyday life—from education to finance to healthcare—researchers document how practices (seemingly fleeting in their everydayness) cumulate to constrict, shorten, and end lives (e.g., Brown; Metzl; Oluo; Wilkerson). To be more than complicit, we seek to change our practices, asking: What disciplinary, professional, and publishing practices do harm? How do we disrupt everyday, cumulative, and structural injustices and instead invest in accountability?

In what follows, as coauthors, we begin by establishing why we focus on practices and describe how we come to and show up within this work. We then describe four accountability practices necessary for countering the ongoing violence of the mythical norm within higher education. These are:

1. resisting denial of ongoing harms;
2. recognizing normalized violence and its wide-reaching consequences;
3. divesting from whiteness; and
4. investing in a consistent, relational approach to seeking justice.

These four engage the feminist dialectic of both/and by both blocking injustice and building justice. Both resisting and recognizing. Both divesting and investing. These practices are part of a whole—not a piecemeal—approach. One image gifted to us by friend and colleague Candace Epps-Robertson is assembling pieces of broken glass or ceramic into a mosaic. Creating mosaics takes care. It's not possible to rush the process without being cut. But by slowing down, sifting pieces, and considering how pieces fit imperfectly together, it opens up the possibility of creating something new. In contrast to a checklist or piecemeal approach, these practices signal the need for consistent, ongoing practice, especially when and because we mess up. They aren't a comprehensive list, either, but signal the both/and movement needed to reach toward accountability in both the short and long term. For both in-the-moment responses and sustained intervention. Together, these add up to a call for practicing—striving toward justice—in a momentum-gathering way.[2]

Why Focus on Practices?

In the article's opening epigraph, Mingus calls for reflection on practices because practices are not neutral and typically reinforce everyday and structural injustices. To reach toward accountability, writes Mingus, we must "build the skills necessary for taking accountability," which means both rehearsal (try-try again) and sustained critical reflection. We know *accountability* is a word that calls up a lot of heaviness: deep grief and rage over the lack of justice; rage over the flattening or weaponizing of accountability itself; and vulnerability, fear, and shame for the harms we have done and been unable to repair. Often these emotions can stop us from digging deep into the work we are called to do and the interventions we are differently positioned to make. But what if instead of being stuck by emotional heaviness, we are motivated by pleasure (brown), eros (Lorde), and love (hooks)? What if the commitment to loving ourselves and each other drives us toward seeking accountability; overcoming fears, regrets, and shame; and moving toward the deeper breath (Gumbs)?

In addition to recognizing that the only way to accountability is through loving so deeply that it is intolerable not to seek justice, what else do we know about practices of accountability? To begin, we know that practices are repetitive in nature. We do practices over and over again,

and we get better at what we repeat. This means that when our practices perpetuate violence and injustice, we get really good at doing violence—to ourselves and to others—and, hence, avoid accountability. It also means that our practices have a lot to teach us. Practices mirror to us what we value, how we spend our time, and who we recognize as our relations. So, it is worth taking an inventory before reading further: What are some of the practices we repeat often as administrators, editors, educators, mentors, researchers, reviewers, and writers? How well aligned are these practices with our commitments? And what do we wish we were practicing instead?

Practices mirror to us what we value, how we spend our time, and who we recognize as our relations.

To answer these questions, we arrive as co-learners—hopefully with and alongside you—holding space for questions and finding answers through critical feminist scholarship. Our learning process is not one of selectively reading, but of opening ourselves to receive the transformational work of feminist educators-scholars-activists, especially Black feminists and feminists and womanists of color. The work has nourishing energy. It breathes life into possibilities. So, when we are struggling to breathe, here (in the words and company of feminist teachers) is where we find and deepen our breath. Here is where our lungs expand and our voices rise up. Here is where we anchor into commitments, which thread particular practices into a coherent whole.

We therefore share the belief that commitments to social and racial justice matter and need to be made actionable both in the everyday and for the long haul. We have written together about this in "Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable" (with Thomas Ferrel and Neil Simpkins). That piece attempts to articulate the both/and dialectic of working to understand injustice (critique against) even while visioning and mobilizing toward the ought to be (critique for). Similarly, we share commitments to practices that center recognition and transformation of *power over* (toward *power with*). In many ways, our story begins and ends with commitments to justice. These commitments—and real ethical and communicative dilemmas, especially in addressing epistemic and linguistic injustice—are what brought us together during graduate school. They are the basis of our long friendship. When asking "to whom are we accountable?" we typically name not only each other but also our elders and ancestors, others in our communities, and the deepest commitment to know and strive toward justice. And these commitments teach us how the stakes differ for us within a cross-racial

partnership, even as we share unlearning around our identities as financially secure cis women.

We're positioned differently to intervene into the mythical norm and racial caste system in United States higher education: Beth as a white american who has stepped outside higher education and can choose when and how to speak within the discipline, and Rasha as an international scholar whose research is monitored and credentials often questioned. Rasha explains that, depending on the form she fills out, she's either Arab-Muslim, Middle Eastern North African (MENA), person of color (POC), white, or alien. In the United States, she lives precariously through forms. Across teaching, research, and service, so many of our experiences differ, revealing the ways whiteness works; for example, we have lost track of the times white colleagues have approached us, only to talk with Beth. These different positions mean that our responsibilities for and potential practices toward accountability frequently differ, though they arise from shared commitments.

We share here a bit about our relationship because practices without relations do not give us enough: enough grounding, enough support, enough courage to strive toward accountability. Relations not only give us the motivation to seek accountability and keep us accountable, but they also work across micro, meso, and macro scales. Who are we in relationship with? Whose work do we amplify and lift up? Whose work grounds and lifts us up, especially when we feel deflated or burned out/up? In contrast, which relations ask for our compliance in ways that undercut justice or mandate complicity? And which relations would we need to *break* in order to practice accountability?

As we grow into lived understandings of this work, we must recognize—repeatedly and consistently, as part of a methodological accountability practice—how much we are influenced by and always needing to acknowledge more deeply BIPOC feminist and womanist educators and activists, including Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldúa, adrienne maree brown, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, bell hooks, June Jordan, Mariame Kaba, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Audre Lorde, Chandra Mohanty, Cherríe Moraga, Toni Morrison, Ijeoma Oluo, Loretta Ross, Alice Walker, the Combahee River Collective, and many others. We acknowledge, too, public scholars doing critical race theory over time, including James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Resmaa Menakem, Malcom X, and Sojourner Truth, as well as critical educators Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, and many writing studies scholars

who teach us how to live out our commitments. Among these scholars are Cedric Burrows, Tamika Carey, Christina Cedillo, Candace Epps-Robertson, Lisa King, Aja Martinez, Elaine Richardson, and Jacqueline Jones Royster. Each helps us understand the ideological nature of practices. Each of these people—and collectives of people—directly counter epistemic injustice by building linguistic resources and expanding what we can name. We name here some of our many teachers, knowing that even as we strive to #CiteBlackWomen and name the relational webs that co-construct these understandings of practices for accountability, it is also true that acts of inevitable and complicit omission do harm. And what we seek to practice is both breaking from the practices of epistemic injustice and repeatedly doing the work of epistemic validation, troubling who counts and is counted and deserves accountability.

To be clear, the root of *count* in *accountability* is more than lyrical or metaphorical. We cannot recognize who doesn't count, who's not deemed worth counting, who's not someone to whom we must be accountable. Isabel Wilkerson in *Caste* describes dehumanization as "a karmic theft beyond accounting" (330). Practices of accountability, therefore, also involve both naming the impediments to accountability and asking: What—and who—needs reckoning? What—and who—must be remembered, listened to, and acknowledged? These questions are why we begin our set of practices with (1) resisting denial of ongoing harms and (2) recognizing normalized violence and its wide-reaching consequences.

Practice 1: Resisting Denial of Ongoing Harms

> *What do I do with teachings presented to me again and again that I ignore because I'm afraid?*
> **—Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, "Developing a Relational Practice: Snakes, Dreams, and Grandmothers" 546**

We begin with the practice of resisting denial of ongoing harms because, as Bobbi Harro explains, people are conditioned to deny much ongoing harm. Denial is a trained behavior and not only individual, so resisting denial involves unlearning social conditioning. One representation we appreciate is Bobbie Harro's "cycle of socialization," which illustrates how the messages and mechanics of oppression are reinforced repeatedly through intimate relations and institutions alike, through the media and the state,

through language and thought patterns, and much more (46). With oppression saturating life, denial happens because injustice isn't even recognized. Denial also happens because it is so painful to recognize ongoing harms or to feel repeatedly victimized. Harro names, for example, the emotional core of socialization as ignorance, insecurity, confusion, obliviousness, and fear. When we recognize denial as an emotion—part of the emotional core of continued oppression—then resisting denial is more than an intellectual action. As a practice, resisting denial engages the question Riley-Mukavetz asks about fear and the related desire Mingus names "to get skilled at talking about and dealing with shame, guilt, trauma, hurt, and anger" ("On Collaboration").

Like denial itself, resisting denial is a practice—and one that involves a lot of questioning, unlearning, and building and strengthening emotional literacies.

Like denial itself, resisting denial is a practice—and one that involves a lot of questioning, unlearning, and building and strengthening emotional literacies. Paired with the cycle of socialization, Harro's "cycle of liberation" indicates that unlearning is also cyclic in nature (53). Actions like integrating new ways of knowing and coalescing with others must be maintained and repeated. When we are conditioned toward oppression, we need a lot of counter-conditioning even to imagine justice. When reaching toward liberation, felt emotions include developing self-love, self-esteem, hope, support, security, and a spiritual base. Harro's naming of a "base" (Harro 53) is significant to us because resisting denial is a foundational or groundwork practice: a base for other accountability practices. Consider, for example, how a house's foundation stretches underground. Though it's easy to ignore what's happening foundationally when it's hidden, the integrity of the foundation determines the depth, breadth, form, and shape of what's possible above ground. Could we also get underneath the feelings that arise, the thoughts that repeat, and the (in)actions we take, like builders who assess a house's foundation before remodeling?

Efforts toward accountability never thrive in denial, so we begin by looking within, underneath, sideways, and backwards. Where, when, how, what, whom, and why do practices harm? And which of these practices have long been taught, bartered in, and used to discipline and define disciplinary spaces? Such work involves recognition (the counter to denial) that the field's roots are anchored in white supremacy and related "Western dominance in interpretive authority" (Royster, "Disciplinary Landscaping"

149). The field's origins and practices are rooted in anti-Blackness and white supremacy—a theme highlighted in the hashtags #CommSoWhite and #RhetoricSoWhite: "#RhetoricSoWhite functions as a call for rhetorical scholars to examine and come to terms with the articulations of racial power that have permeated the field since its inception" (Pham 489). It is as Royster explained twenty years ago now: "disciplinary practices have built up a high intolerance to the assigning of value and credibility to any site, focal point, theory, or practice other than those whose contours are already sanctioned historically within the circle of understanding" (150). Denial is a practice with a vast political economy and exclusionary reward system.

Relatedly, Sara Ahmed teaches that "emotions do things" (*Cultural Politics* 119), and one of those consequential things is to ignore teachings. Riley-Mukavetz names this, too, in her poignant question about fear, which can prevent listening and learning. Plus, fear is often entangled with other emotions that do not register as fear or that actually hide fear from us. "Fear works to create a sense of being overwhelmed" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 119), and when we are overwhelmed, it is easier to bypass questions of complexity and complicity. Instead of registering the fear underneath overwhelm, we seek a clear answer or direction. Dismissively, many people say things like "let's prioritize" and "let's move on." These manifestations of denial lead to comfortable one-off actions that shut down discussion, unlearning, and recognition. Denial can manifest in other ways as well. Mingus names shame, guilt, trauma, hurt, and anger, and Vincent N. Pham names resistance to coming to terms with the racial lineage imagined as the discipline's roots, foundations, or base.

We begin with acknowledgement of these truths and the emotional core of this work because denial is a practice rooted in unrecognized, suppressed, or disowned emotions. Denial can be as much about a lack of noticing, feeling, or relating as it is lack of knowing. Resisting denial is affective as well. It can include focusing on emotions and noticing when they motivate and demotivate us to act toward justice. What do we feel, for instance, when we must repeatedly affirm our own and each other's humanity? When claims of grievance are deemed burdensome excess and the voice of the claimant is something to be squashed? When claims of grievance and life are crushed under the knee of the police officer? When the refrain "I can't breathe" reverberates across space and time? When expression is constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic because it exposes not

only the precarity of crumbling health systems but also the everydayness of being expendable and excluded? The who-how-why-when-where-what of expression is the focal point of rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies. Could staying with such questions potentially shift our practices?

Denial and resisting denial are both practices. And to resist denial, recognition must be centered. Amid silencing—outright refusal to recognize the roots and ongoing violence of oppression/aggression—no accountability can be sought. Many habits, systems, and everyday ways of being/doing/relating both deny ongoing harms and block accountability. Joining scholars in and out of the field, we again underscore that, as Harro illustrates, people in racial capitalist colonialist contexts are born into a world with oppression already in place and inherit this conditioning. People are therefore conditioned away from accountability. So, how do we resist denial? How do we disrupt professional practices that normalize non-listening, non-feeling, and non-recognizing? How do we repair epistemic injustice? How do we recognize normalized violence and its wide-reaching consequences?

Practice 2: Recognizing Normalized Violence and Its Wide-Reaching Consequences

> *In America, a culture of cruelty crept into the minds [and] made violence and mockery seem mundane and amusing.*
> **—Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, 342 (ebook)**

Generations of scholars have testified to normalized violence and how the mythical norm manifests in everyday acts: in exclusionary hiring; in blocked access to mentoring; in (a lack of) retention and promotion plans; in discredited expertise in conferences, editorials, publications, and committees; and in numerous gatekeeping practices that pit excellence against inclusivity. The "Conditionally Accepted" series in *Inside Higher Ed*; the edited collections *Presumed Incompetent* (and the follow-up text *Presumed Incompetent II*) by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris; and other numerous sources, including by Baker-Bell; Burrows; Flores; Martinez; Pritchard; and Wanzer-Serrano, to name only a few, provide evidence for wide-reaching epistemic and linguistic injustice. As a practice, recognition invites attention to and ultimately interruption of ongoing patterns of harm. It invites pausing, breathing,

feeling, witnessing, reflecting—opening to both receive and rewrite the many stories of normalized violence. What more would you name? What stories would you tell? We imagine you practicing recognition by naming additional examples and consequences while reading the next few pages.

What more would you name? What stories would you tell?

We want to recognize here that among the many consequences of normalized violence are reward systems that shift credit from BIPOC authors to white authors who name-drop or term-drop. This happens repeatedly and is a form of normalized violence intertwined with others. Quoting Alexander Weheliye, Darrel Wanzer-Serrano describes the related and reinforcing problem that "theoretical formulations by white European thinkers are granted a conceptual carte blanche," while "those uttered from the purview of minority discourse that speak to the same questions are almost exclusively relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnographic locality" (471). These forms of normalized violence are also evident in the complementary and seemingly contradictory folding-in and discrediting of Black women's expertise, as Jacqueline Jones Royster testifies when describing reiterative and demoralizing invalidations ("When" 30–31).[3]

Invalidations are especially consequential when they result in unteething and watering down explanatory and analytical concepts—terms, frameworks, extended studies, and even colloquialisms. For example, we have witnessed numerous conference presentations in which the word *intersectionality* pops up not as a verb or call to action, but as a flattened noun or celebratory adjective: forms that diffuse the term's interventive investment or potential. One speaker (a white woman) exclaims: "we're all intersectional!" Another (also a white woman) names "intersectional feminism" when focusing on the experiences of white women in higher education. In contrast, Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term's creator, offers a multidimensional frame and analytical apparatus that highlights the complex nature of injustice faced by Black women. Key to Crenshaw's argument is critiquing the far-reaching consequences of "single-issue analyses." To center the scale and harm caused by multiple oppressions, Crenshaw uses the metaphor of an accident at a four-way intersection:

> Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes,

> from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. ("Demarginalizing" 149)

In presentation after presentation, Crenshaw is neither acknowledged nor is her work clearly cited (of course there are exceptions, as the editors note). Is it surprising, then, that the analogy of the car crash—and, more importantly, the understandings of double discrimination and double jeopardy—is forgotten?

This decontextualization, as one of many examples, is telling and has far-reaching consequences. Instead of intersectionality being honored as an epistemic and methodological intervention that names the collision at the intersections of oppressions and charts the pursuit of justice, it is dropped as the current cultural capital (or, as an early reader put it, the moment's fad). Hence, intersectionality's actionable meaning is vacated and replaced in contexts inhospitable to social justice aims. Like walking in space, the term goes and takes us nowhere. Stand still!

Decontextualizing and related unteething happen repeatedly. For example, at the 2015 National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Conference, feminists of color, including co-chairs Adela C. Licona and Vivian N. May (a white feminist working in partnership) and keynoters Sara Ahmed, Karma C. Chávez, Nirmala Erevelles, and Mia Mingus, offer *precarity* as a framework for understanding the structural, relational, and material conditions of systemic inequities. Then, this structural understanding of exploitation or differential precarity gets flattened into a shared condition for all women and stripped of recognition of differential risks, resources, and in/securities that result from structural exploitation. Similarly, political and ideological histories are lost, for example, with language like *women of color* (with gratitude for Loretta Ross retelling the origins of this term predating *people of color* and *BIPOC*). This decontextualizing and unteething happen, too, with words appropriated, co-opted, and weaponized—from *microaggressions*, to *accessibility*, to *solidarity*, to *critical race theory*. One reviewer mentioned the word *accountability* itself as an example, and we absolutely agree. Such stripping, flattening, co-opting, and even weaponizing happen time and time again. And these acts prevent both recognition and accountability. To cite Ahmed: "They [white women] claim our work as a way of not doing the work" ("After").

Indeed, the unteething—and related practices of decontextualizing, watering down, flattening, stripping, appropriating, co-opting, and weaponizing—limits the liberatory potential of the linguistic resources that are unteethed. These practices of normalized violence undermine contributions of BIPOC scholars. They also hide that what we need is literally already in the records (again, many sorts of records—from, for example, Crenshaw's extensive endnotes tracing historical lineages to Ross's repeated storytelling, sometimes video recorded). Recognizing the records is a practice. Recognizing invisibilized scholars is a practice. Both reach toward accountability. And the acts of forgetting, invisibilizing, and failing to cite, to acknowledge, and to recognize are all practices that block accountability.

Who benefits from these varied practices of normalized violence? The status quo benefits the most; the scholar cashing in on the cultural capital benefits some; the discipline certainly loses. It is not just that credit has shifted from the author to the name-dropper. It is also that liberatory potential is deflected and much-needed knowledge is unteethed. Is it any wonder, then, that BIPOC scholars repeatedly point to cultural and intellectual theft? How can communicators and educators of communicators be better witnesses? What wounds, traumas, and hurts—personal and collective—must we recognize and, relatedly, remember, repair, and redress? How could we do more to interrupt violence—structural, cultural, and direct violence, to cite Johan Galtung? How could greater recognition also lead to greater willingness to divest from the systems that perpetuate ongoing violence, including the ideology and both structural and everyday enactments of whiteness?

At this point, the two of us need an intermission. Truly, violence is visceral, as feminists have named time and time again (e.g., Royster, "When" 31). Accountability practices are visceral, too. A lot of emotions and sensations come up. Among other somatic experiences, we can't breathe easily. Our chests and throats contract, our backs ache, and our guts rumble. Our bodies remember moments that underlie each pattern we write about and attempt to describe. In comparison to embodied experiencing, words fall flat. We invite you to take the time, space, and attention you need: listen to your nervous system and honor what you need before continuing.

Practice 3: Divesting from Whiteness

> *[I]t's the historical structure of our institutions and norms and policies that have privileged white methods, white theories, white voices, and (at the end of the day) white able-bodied cisgender men.*
> **—Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, "Rhetoric's Rac(e/ist) Problems" 470**

> *While white supremacy culture affects us all, harms us all, and is toxic to us all, it does not affect, harm, and violate us in the same way. White supremacy targets and violates BIPOC people and communities with the intent to destroy them directly; white supremacy targets and violates white people with a persistent invitation to collude that will inevitably destroy their humanity.*
> **—Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture Characteristics"**

Whiteness has many dimensions: ideational, affective, relational, and performative, among others. Even as it saturates everyday life and plays a central role in the ongoing harms and normalized violence addressed in practices one and two, whiteness is also hidden in plain sight. Methodologically, we learn from BIPOC educators-scholars-activists who have long been decoding whiteness through the critical edge of double consciousness, repeatedly gifting teachings, and doing so at great risk (e.g., Wanzer-Serrano). We also learn from white educators-scholars-activists who are engaged in personal unlearning work while building language and understandings of whiteness, typically in relationship with BIPOC teachers (e.g., Okun). In this section, we again engage in the dialectical relationship of recognizing and resisting, asking: How can we better recognize whiteness and resist it through a sustained practice of divestment?

To begin, divesting from whiteness entails practices of detangling, detaching from, and dispossessing "both an ideology and a property object" (Newsome Bass). As activist Bree Newsome Bass explains, "People can hold one, both or neither. Someone may never physically pass for white but still subscribe to ideological whiteness. Someone may experience the benefits of being racially white but reject ideological whiteness." Because it is both an ideology and property, we find that when talking about whiteness, people

can feel defensive (under attack) or disengaged (off the hook). People can feel confused, frustrated, protective, overwhelmed, angry, and so deeply hurt. Responses depend on many factors, including racial positioning, lived experiences, political and spiritual beliefs, and understandings of the word (*whiteness*) and world (*white supremacy culture*).

Rather than reacting from an either/or place or finding ourselves stuck in intense emotions, we again invite the stance of both/and and encourage emotional grounding. Attending to whiteness is another moment to build on Lorde's understanding of the mythical norm, which explains how the normative construction of whiteness is where "the trappings of power reside" ("Age" 116) and to build on Mingus's reminder that we collectively cannot live within pervasive systems of oppression and violence without doing and saying oppressive things, hurting each other, and colluding in violence or accepting violence [read here: whiteness] as normal. That normalization is part of what links whiteness, white supremacy, and white racial identity.

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue explains: "Whiteness, White supremacy, and White privilege are three interlocking forces that disguise racism so it may allow White people to oppress and harm persons of color while maintaining their individual and collective advantage and innocence" (15). The call to divest from whiteness, therefore, is clearly for people with white racial identity. The deepest responsibility lies with white people because whiteness is so intertwined with white supremacy and white privilege + power. *And* the combined normalization and invisibilization of whiteness also point to its systemic and structural nature. The ideology of whiteness is deep and wide within disciplinary practices, so the call to divest is deep and wide as well.

To divest from whiteness, especially as an accountability practice, we (as co-authors) begin by accounting for dimensions of whiteness. We ask that you, too, consider what additional dimensions you'd name and want to recognize and want to be recognized by others in our discipline. Three initial dimensions include (1) structural advantage, (2) standpoint or perspective, and (3) cultural practices; these three underlie white fragility, writes educator Robin DiAngelo, drawing from sociologist Ruth Frankenberg's research in whiteness studies (56). We would additionally name that whiteness manifests through (4) concentration of *power over* and attachment to hierarchical standings (supremacy and domination); (5) a set of interactional patterns (such as valuing perfectionism, invoking either/or binaries, insisting there

is "one right way," and prioritizing quantity over quality) that are characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun); and (6) denials or obfuscation of these multiple practices. Together, these dimensions lead to the continued privileging of "white methods, white theories, and white voices," as Wanzer-Serrano names in one of our epigraphs (470). Together, these dimensions do repeated harm, as Tema Okun, who has worked closely with and learned from BIPOC colleagues, including Kenneth Jones and Michelle Cassandra Johnson, also explains in the epigraph. Together, these dimensions brew "a cancer, a dis-ease, an addiction, an infliction, and it infects everything with and without our awareness" (Okun).

Such practices of whiteness—these and many others—block recognition of both/and complexity and multiple ways of being, doing, and relating in the world. They deny whiteness's existence, often through consistent inconsistencies.

Whiteness shows up in numerous ways, including as platitudes and niceness instead of true sustained connections. Whiteness shows up through prioritizing appearances and keeping things ordered, tidy, and sanitized instead of attending to conflict and injustice. Whiteness shows up through exertions of "white time" aligned with "university time" (Ore, Wieser, and Cedillo), as both prioritize institutions over people, calendars over context, and white people's comfort over true human well-being (including well-being for white people). Such practices of whiteness—these and many others—block recognition of both/and complexity and multiple ways of being, doing, and relating in the world. They deny whiteness's existence, often through consistent inconsistencies.

The multiple dimensions of whiteness also exacerbate epistemic injustice—both unearned epistemic excess for white communicators (explained well in Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* and Oluo's *Mediocre*) and presumed epistemic deficit for BIPOC communicators (explained well in *Presumed Incompetent I and II*). In *Rhetorical Crossover*, Cedric Burrows describes how the features of whiteness put the onus on Black communicators to navigate minefields of *whitescripting*, *whitescaping*, and *whitesplaining*. The three terms highlight patterns of epistemic *power over*: *whitescripting* as "rephrasing African American discourse into a white discourse," *whitescaping* as "placing whiteness in the forefront of visual images that feature African Americans," and *whitesplaining* as "narrating events about African Americans while ignoring the racism that surrounds the narrative" (20). All are exertions of power through expectations for Black communicators to

"water down" their rhetorical presence and therefore be "non-threatening." Black communicators, then, must pay a "Black tax" when entering white spaces, which requires incredible toil and takes an incredible toll (Burrows).

Through these examples, we hope to reiterate that whiteness does harm and normalizes violence in everyday enactments, repeatedly. Whiteness not only underlies overt and explicit racism but also underwrites and authorizes exclusionary and normative ways of being in disciplinary spaces. These norms contain and constrain, while also giving epistemic excess and license to run (over) others. Because whiteness takes up and claims space and time and sustains itself by hiding, it becomes so saturated in everyday life—and academic discourse—that it has total plausible deniability. By design, whiteness flourishes by consistent investment in innocence and denial (of fact, of responsibility, of hope or opportunity). It's near impossible to determine where it begins and ends.

Like pressing a brake is an action to stop, divestment is an action: to stop. As an active stance, divestment includes and exceeds individual actions. It's also related to not barreling through intersections, remembering Crenshaw's metaphor of the four-way traffic accident. Divesting from whiteness, then, involves unraveling how whiteness is woven throughout and exceeds exclusionary citational practices, stylistic tendencies, professional networks, language and writing practices, and structural advantages. A core practice is asking about everything and acting on the answers: How is whiteness showing up here? Another practice is refusing to be fascinated by a small piece of the puzzle to avoid seeing the whole. Instead of fixating on a single small piece, we can keep inquiring about how the pieces fit together and what image those pieces create. For example, discussions of white fragility oftentimes focus only on emotions, though we know that fragility is just a partial description indexing many structural, historical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, ideological, relational, and somatic layers. So we must constantly ask: Who and what benefits from this fragmented logic? From the rush to simple solutions? From premature celebrations of crossing something off a checklist? As an accountability practice, divesting from whiteness is part of a dialectical pairing, matched with the need to invest differently. While blocking the harms of whiteness, what are we also building?

Practice 4: Investing in a Consistent, Relational Approach to Seeking Justice

> *How has Black Lives Mattered in our research, scholarship, teaching, disciplinary discourses, graduate programs, professional organizations, and publications? How have our commitments and activism as a discipline contributed to the political freedom of Black peoples?*
> **—Baker-Bell, Williams-Farrier, Jackson, Johnson, Kynard, and McMurtry, "This Ain't Another Statement!"**

Tied with divestment from whiteness, a consistent and relational investment in justice is essential when striving toward political freedom, liberation, repair, and, hence, accountability. It is within this consistent, relational approach that we can counter violence by recognizing differential needs, risks, and contributions. Doing so can't be a one-size-fits-all approach. It can't be a one-and-done practice.

Time and time again, we witness the rush to antiracism workshops, invited speakers, and reading groups as Band-Aid approaches, dealing with institutional racism as though it can be remedied by a one-time encounter with Other(ing). We see in this rush the continued investment in whiteness and the desire to restore the status quo with minimal investment in doing the deep work. No alternatives can emerge if we hold on for dear life to the current political economy, which hinges on whiteness. So, we must ask, time and time again, not only what are we against but, truly: What are we *for*?

Modeling the work that is needed, generations of scholars (again, particularly feminists and womanists of color) have been naming and tracing the contours of a consistent, relational, justice-oriented approach: an approach that is visionary while grounded in truths. These educators-scholars-activists are detangling and resisting the vocabulary of whiteness while shifting the epistemic landscape; they are doing work that has always been risky. Within this context, we are learning relational practices to counter the dysfunctional relations of *power over*, as expressed in one-up/one-down, superiority/inferiority, and dominance/subordinance. Hand in hand, we are learning the relational practices of *power with*, building toward recognition, affirmation, connection, solidarity, and belonging. We want to lift up three inspirations for these relational practices from the current generational wave.

First, in "Relational Literacies and Their Coalitional Possibilities," Adela C. Licona and Karma C. Chávez teach us about coalitional subjectivities and possibilities. They underscore practices informed by women-of-color feminisms and literacy studies that depend on deep familial and community knowledge, intergenerational affinities and coalitions, and radical openness to reimagining. These practices must "intervene into the delegitimation of particular bodies/bodies-of-knowledge" and prioritize relations and relational literacies (96). As Licona and Chávez explain: "Relational literacies (as both practices and events) imply, create, gesture toward, engender, and enable coalitional possibilities and also re-imaginings and so radical openness (see hooks)" (104). In doing so, Licona and Chávez link citational justice with coalition-building, threading in lineages of knowledge, whether through remixing or reimagining. As a way of countering normalized violence, we imagine relational literacies as a starting point for practices that disrupt the mythical norm and strive toward justice.

Second, in "Developing a Relational Practice," Andrea Riley-Mukavetz describes respectful, reciprocal, relational practices that are land based and part of a constellated network of accountability to all beings, not just human actors. Riley-Mukavetz challenges us to question our orientation to practices: "It is easy to write joyfully about the practices that are easy and uncomplicated (are there practices that are easy and uncomplicated?), but what about the practices that scare us, challenge us, leave us with few answers or unarticulated meanings?" (546). Developing a relational practice, then, necessitates moving toward what scares us, challenges us, and leaves us uncertain. Such practices would break from myths of certainty (whose certainty, anyway?) and from the dominance of logic- or reason-based arguments (again, whose reason, reasoning, and reasons have mattered?).

Third, beyond rhetoric and writing studies, adrienne maree brown amplifies Octavia E. Butler and the work of translating intergenerational wisdom and visions: "It is imperative that we uplift leaders willing to name the manmade apocalyptic conditions we are in, willing to act on humane and earth aligned beliefs, willing to govern, willing to dream" (brown). We are reminded of willingness as an anchor, along with dreams, visions, and longings toward the recognition and honoring of leaders: These are all relational practices. We are reminded that practices need the both/and of staying with the critique against injustice (naming apocalyptic conditions) and the critique for justice (actions and visions that manifest dreams).

Practices of accountability, therefore, need to be consistent and relational, blocking injustice and building justice, open to learning and unlearning, unbounded by borders (or bordering practices), and invested in reckoning and redressing wrongs. Regularly, we can ask: What relations motivate us to seek accountability and keep us accountable? In contrast, what relations *de*motivate us? When, where, how, and with whom are we enacting or withholding/denying visions of justice, now and for the long haul?

Practices for Accountability

Because we're going to mess up. Of that I am sure.
—Mia Mingus, "On Collaboration: Starting with Each Other"

These four practices—(1) resisting denial of ongoing harms; (2) recognizing normalized violence and its wide-reaching consequences; (3) divesting from whiteness; and (4) investing in a consistent, relational approach to justice—are not new or newly proposed. Rather, they are made possible by a lineage of educators, scholars, and activists critiquing disciplinary practices and by elders and ancestors in the work of naming epistemic injustice and enacting visions of justice. These writers teach us that reaching toward accountability is a recursive process; it involves changing our core dispositions and ways of showing up in the world, in the discipline. Accountability cannot be a one-and-done practice, and practices require practice: rehearsal, repetition, and re-vision.

Throughout this article, we have asked questions of ourselves and hope you as readers may take up these and ask many more questions as well. Questioning is powerful. Like pressing a brake, questioning can stop us in our tracks, unravel assumptions, interrupt social conditioning, highlight commitments, help us resist overwhelm, and offer insights—and even dreams and visions—that systemic oppression obscures. Questioning is sure to illuminate many more practices.

As we consider our academic/disciplinary responsibilities, we ask again: What are we for? What and who will keep us accountable? How are we living out commitments to justice? As Lisa Flores writes, "Racial violence moves with shape-shifting swiftness, across time and place; its moments may appear disconnected from each other. They are not. This violence shares

a fundamental grammar—a rhetorical logic. Racial rhetorical scholars can trace it and name it" (17). We hold this vision and ask that we invest more in tracing the fundamental grammar, rhetorical logic, and shape-shifting swiftness of violence. We ask, too, how we can pair this investment with the both/and of shifting from practices that block accountability toward those that build accountable relations. In this work—today and for the long haul—we hope to be good learners in practices of accountability.

Before closing, we want to check in: What are you feeling (heart)? What are you un/learning and thinking (head)? What are you called to do, longing to do, or ready to do (hands)? We know that as academics, we are trained to intellectualize matters. But as we've tried to express throughout these pages, a lot of emotions and embodied sensations necessarily (and often surprisingly) come up through this work. So many times, Rasha has turned to Beth to say, "This hurts. *It just hurts.*" And so many times, Beth has stumbled over words to finally let out an exasperated "Aaaggghhh!" We imagine you might want space to process, and hopefully you can do this with others who share longings, commitments, and engagement in learning practices of accountability. (To learn about taking action with others, check out Mingus's work on pods, an alternative to a loose sense of community that focuses on concrete, accountable, relational support structures, through SOIL: A Transformative Justice Project.) Because, as Mingus reminds us, "we're going to mess up." Our sincere hope is that you will join us for the ongoing learning and unlearning, feeling and doing, repairing and trying again. For finding another way forward. For being for and with each other.

Notes

1. Our title comes from Mingus's "On Collaboration: Starting with Each Other," to which we return later. We are grateful to Mingus and dedicate this work to her.

2. A note about accountability: We appreciate Mingus's four parts of accountability: self-reflection, apology, repair, and changed behavior. As a definition, these four parts teach us that accountability is multifaceted, practiced over time, and happens in relation. Shallow relationships without care are one way to block accountability. Focusing on the single act of apology is a second way. Seeking comfort instead of acknowledging conflict is a third. Mingus writes, "Accountability does not have to be scary, though it will never be easy or comfortable. And it shouldn't be comfortable. True accountability, by its very nature, should push us to grow and change, to transform" ("Four").

3. For more about how invalidations operate in writing studies as a form of cumulative and consequential microaggression, see also Rasha Diab and Beth Godbee, with Cedric Burrows and Thomas Ferrel's "Rhetorical and Pedagogical Interventions for Countering Microaggressions."

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