

Speaking Silence: Race, Racism, and Feminism in the Academy

Session Proposal by Patricia Matthew (@triciamatthew)

Michelle Moravec and I are interested in a discussion of the risks of speaking and silence when race, racism, and feminism are the topics of conversations. The starting point for this conversation will be a few blog posts that exemplify both ends of the spectrum—the silence and the speaking. In May 2012, I wrote a blog post titled [Of Clicks and Cliques: White Women, Women of Color, Diversity and Tension](#). Michelle Moravec wrote a response ([because hard questions deserve answers](#)), and we hoped for a dialogue around the recurring tensions between white women and women of color in the academy. The posts were met with silence. Although my post generated 130 visits to my blog in just a few hours and remains the most visited post on the blog, very few women responded, and of those who did (mostly via e-mail), Michelle was the only white woman to respond. Almost a year later we both watched as Tressie McMillan Cottom asked what seemed the most mild of questions about the silence surrounding “The Onion’s” slur against little Quvenzhane Willis: [Did White Feminists Ignore Attacks on Quvenzhane Wallis? That’s An Empirical Question](#). The backlash didn’t just come from defensive white women on twitter but, as McMillan Cottom recounts in a follow-up post ([On White Women’s Anger](#)), from Women’s Studies faculty enraged by her question.

We are interested in a discussion that aims to get underneath both the silence and the speaking (and the shouting). If, as so many have argued, social media and digital communities can be a space for open dialogue, why the silence? Why the shouting? And what do we do with the fact that when a white feminist wrote on the same subject ([On Quvenzhane Wallis](#)) she got a very different response?

Session Notes

Tricia Matthew gives background and context to session, shift in ways race is dealt with in feminist communities. Starts with Lorde:

I wanted to call this panel “The Cold Winds of Self-Scrutiny”

“What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that’s she cannot see her heel print upon another woman’s face? What woman’s terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?”

Participant: “Makers” program on PBS pretty limited in terms of not showing many women of

color, so maybe part of the problem starts at the level of media narrative

Participant: Story of professor who as a woman of color is getting asked to do more classes about race, when white colleagues not getting asked this - a number of microaggressions happening all the time. Faculty who have a theoretical understanding of racism and anti-racist action often don't know how to enact this on a personal level

There is a new book on the market (and we need more-so I hope to see Patricia's book on the market soon) called *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*.

http://www.amazon.com/Presumed-Incompetent-Intersections-Class-Academia/dp/0874219221/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1363454397&sr=8-1&keywords=presumed+incompetent

At many conferences, like NWSA, sessions on race have few white attendees
Lack of respect, lack of awareness that you can work on issues of race and still be an asshole

Tricia Matthew: Women of color often perceived as "bad ass" or needing to be pulled up from poverty but peer-to-peer relationships are much harder and, according to faculty of color, rarely successful. Concern that trying to talk to white women will mean those women won't support faculty tenure process.

I will add that if you speak out, or speak against, you are constantly seen as adversarial. So, you are not calm enough for the department. Or, your "agenda" is different from the department's.

Participant: People do question segregation, but not as much in public
Taking interpersonal conversation and making publicly visible

Participant: Well meaning white women might not understand that women of color may have a different relationship to the academy than white women do, advice may not work the same

Michelle Moravec: There's silence, and *whispers*, offline - can you use online space to move these conversations out of the corners - concern about privacy, impact of attribution

Tricia Matthew: Some of the divide is generational, younger folks may be more receptive to working things out.

Participant: I'm over 50, only learned about white privilege recently from online space.

Tricia Matthew: conflation in term "women and people of color," sometimes assumption in hiring (by white people) that including a white woman or a man of color is equivalent [not sure if I summarized that correctly]

People of Color Zine project - a lot of these issues come up in event planning at colleges - outreach sometimes limited/segregated. Now laying out explicitly the importance of having students of color at events. How to make connections to communities outside academia with projects like zine libraries housed in academic institutions

Tricia Matthew suggests "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant" -

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x/asset/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x.pdf;jsessionid=7532AA7603AEF491DA4F9A70F59AE8A8.d02t03?v=1&t=hed1yt7n&s=ae6878508bafffb8fca38f6ca3f155d647a33975>

Is there a citation or unlocked link for this? I'm getting 403 at Wiley

Ortega, Mariana. "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color." *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (August 2006): 56–74. doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x.

Participant recommends Jay Smooth's "How to Talk About Racism" - "I think what you *did* was racist" instead of "I think you *are* racist" - "Have to think about race consciousness as dental hygiene - ongoing process

<http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxHampshireCollege-Jay-Smooth>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4>

How to deal with being Called Out: <http://timetravelhouse.tumblr.com/post/45089313962>

And of course the CLASSIC: "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh

<http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>

I think it's such a great idea to try to collect some resources about fostering cross-racial feminist dialogue/solidarity to that can us reflect personally and have more sustained conversations!

&

Applied Research Center - <http://www.arc.org/>

Participant: engaging in anti-racism is like dental hygiene -- you don't brush your teeth once and forget about it! you have to keep at it every day

This was a favorite comment! Let's all remember to keep doing the work of LEARNING

Participant Concern by white people about being racist or being perceived as racist, fear of conflict - layers of academic institutions and professional spaces and personal interactions Online, feminism is not linear - can't assume a common set of knowledge - this can lead to burnout! How to build continuity?

Online platforms not good at ongoing conversations. Also systemic conditions of academia encourage competition

Participant: Not just afraid of being racist, we *are* racist & benefit from white privilege

Participant: Can be useful to know that other people are awkward

Participant: Sometimes we minimize pain in a rush to talk about strategies. It so often falls on people of color to explain racism. Racism has negative physical impact on bodily health. White women are often very verbal about feminist work digitally, to the extent that they're bullying and causing embodied harm. People are constantly making assumptions based on race & appearance about impacting how words are read/understood. Desire to avoid spaces where racist conversation will happen for self care.

Strategy at Crunk Feminist Collective is tell our stories, say stories matter, someone else's work to make that powerful for them - cannot always do the labor of making anti-racist work palatable for white people

Participant: We're always embodied people doing digital work

Tricia Matthew: No one sees themselves as one thing, but people interact in the world and it's not that they necessarily *identify* as being marginalized, it's that they *are marginalized*. For example, consider the assumption that black faculty can inherently teach African American literature because of identity.

Participant: Also assumption that people can't teach African American literature if they're not black

Tricia Matthew: These interventions are well meaning, and fear of discomfort is common, causes stress

Participant: These conversations are important, even when you say things wrong, because they're how you learn

Participant: These conversations keep happening, and I'm really tired, even though they're necessary. Story of materials about race being taken off women's studies syllabi because they make white students uncomfortable. Potential of the internet is that you can engage in these conversations even if you're geographically isolated.

Participant: Just because someone identifies / looks like a feminist, or is in a feminist role, doesn't mean they're acting feminist, we need to examine how we're looking at that person, what they're agenda is

Participant: Everyone comes into the room with their own insecurities and their own background, how to have conversations that make these concerns and histories visible. Desire to be called out, learn.

Tricia Matthew: This is a process that goes on, maybe each time we get closer to where we want to be. Read! Ask faculty of color about their research. We want people to treat us like colleagues. Online repository of conversations about race. And there's a gap between theory and practice - being self-conscious, making mistakes. Not about being a bad person. Mistakes will happen. You can learn.

Tricia Matthew telling a sweet story about having her first trans student and having to do so much learning and processing and going through so much anxiety -- "My god, this is what white people go through every day!"
But yeah, engaging in that process is just part of being a person in the world.

Participant: Importance of being in the room where the power is, in the hiring process, etc. Conversations will be different if people of color are in the room.

Strategy: Use the metaphor of racism as a "university" and breakout into "departments" to discuss how racism has different constituencies with different issues that affect other members of the campus, i.e. staff, faculty, students, administrators of color.