

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Welcome to Creating Coalitional Gestures, a BIWOC podcast by and for black, brown and indigenous women of color in writing studies. This is a digital space by and for self-identified women, both cis and trans, as well as non-binary scholars of color. I am your host, Iris Ruiz. This podcast is a collaboration between SPARK, Writing and Working for Change series and Scholars in Rhetoric and Writing, in an effort to create resilient strategies. We are pro-black, pro-brown, pro-women, pro-indigenous. We envision this podcast as a healing justice project seeking to transform the impact of BIWOC on the field of writing studies.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Creating Coalitional Gestures will take you on a journey. We will explore what healing means in writing studies, by conversing with scholars, teachers, activists, and writers of color. We gesture towards healing and creating coalitions of women of color in order to remedy the silences, because our culture, stories and unique experiences continue to sustain us. We celebrate our traditions, our struggles, our triumphs, and our world, as many of us are still searching for connection, recognition, belonging and legitimation, while honoring who we are as critical writing studies practitioners who also delve on the margins of cyborg and queer identity.

Don Unger: Hello and welcome. I'm Don Unger a SPARK editorial collective member and an assistant professor at the University of Mississippi. In this introductory episode of Creating Coalitional Gestures, Iris Ruiz is interviewed by her associate writing program administrator, from the Merritt Writing Program at UC Merced, Samantha Ocena. In this interview, Ruiz offers a raw and uncut anti-racist and decolonial lens for thinking about race and writing program administration. She's one of the few emerging scholars researching the relationships among race, racism, history, and writing program administration. In this episode, she provides an honest reflection regarding the many challenges of this work, and she addresses the challenges in an effort to encourage anti-racist coalitional gestures within writing studies.

Samantha Ocena: Today we're talking with Dr. Iris D. Ruiz, a continuing lecturer in the UC Merced Merritt Writing Program. Hi, hi.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Hi.

Samantha Ocena: How are you doing?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Thank you for having me.

Samantha Ocena: Yeah.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Good. Thank you.

Samantha Ocena: So, just to give everybody a bit more about you, Dr. Iris D. Ruiz is the author of Reclaiming Composition for Chicanos and Chicanas and Other Ethnic Minorities:

A Critical History and Pedagogy, and Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy. On top of those two books, she's also recently published, as of this last October, Viva Nuestro Caucus: the Forgotten Pages of Our Caucus, a coauthored work with Romeo García, Anita Hernández and Maria Regidor. Her work in the professional field supports a collective effort for greater inclusion of ethnic minority scholars and publications in the presentation and deliverance at the yearly C's Conference, arguing that C's would benefit from letting lead scholars of color hold more featured panels and leadership positions in order to foster a more inclusive environment.

Samantha Ocena: Recently, Dr. Ruiz was awarded the Writing Program Administrators Journal Kenneth Bruffee Award for her article, Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration, a qualitative study of US college writing programs, co-written with Genevieve García de Müeller. We're meeting up with her today to talk about this award, what it means for the current state of composition studies and possibilities for the future. So we're glad to have this conversation. So I think maybe the best way to start off is maybe for those not familiar with this Kenneth Bruffee Award, can you tell us a little bit more about it and kind of what it means in the greater scale of things?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: So Kenneth Bruffee is a famous kind of rhetorician in the field of composition and rhetoric. And basically what the award does is it acknowledges the best article that's put out by The Council of Writing Program Administrators in their journal. It it acknowledges the best article written for the year. So it's granted on a yearly basis and it is presented at the CWPA Conference. And actually, we were quite pleasantly surprised that we received this award, but we have received quite a bit of support and encouragement from CWPA in doing this work.

Samantha Ocena: Yeah. And it occurs to me, so the second question I had for you was, why do you think that this article was chosen for the award and what does that mean for the current state of composition studies? But it might be better to maybe, can you give us a little bit more about what this article was about, maybe where it kind of came from and I guess the little bit of context in the story about the creating of this article? I'm throwing this question at you out of nowhere.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Yeah, sure. It's actually a pretty interesting story. It's one of great collaboration and thinking about how Genevieve and I came to meet about this, we are both part of the NCTE four C's Latinx Caucus. And we had initially started our communication over the caucus LISTSERV. And oftentimes we do present different proposals or different descriptions of the work that we're working on, and we also bring invitations to people that might want to participate in the work that we're doing and the research that we're doing. And so with Genevieve, she was kind of already working on a proposal for a special issue for CWPA that specifically focused on race and writing program administration. And for some reason, we actually talk about this in our upcoming book-length study

of this article. We talk about more about kind of the background of this study and what happened with that particular proposal. So I don't want to really get into that now.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: But when Genevieve presented the proposal and as the leader of the People of Color Caucus for CWPA at that time, she told us that it was not accepted. And so as an incoming leader, I was incoming as a leader for the NCTE CCCC Caucus that year. I asked her if she'd be interested in putting the proposal forward to the CCCC's research initiative grant application that would then be granted at the CCCC in 2015 and 2016. And we actually did, we're really pleasantly surprised that we received the funding to continue this research forward. Not necessarily in a special issue for CWPA, but in an actual funded study that we'd done specifically for CCCC. And then that's kind of how this study got off the ground because yeah, we were both interested in the relationship between race and writing program administration.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: I've been interested in the history of race within the field itself and had already done my research in that area. So it kind of made sense to collaborate with Genevieve. And we were really pleasantly, I guess, surprised that this work was recognized. And when we were granted the research initiative grant, it was Joyce Carter who was the chair of CCCC at that time that said this is exactly the work that needed to be funded and it's exactly the work that needed to be focused on at the time. And we're pretty certain this is the first study of its kind within the field.

Samantha Ocena: Cool. Can you tell us more about this is exactly what's been needed. What do you see as the thing that's the exact thing that we're needing at this time?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Well what we've kind of found, myself as a historian of the field and Genevieve is somebody who's looking specifically at qualitative data and the way that race functions within programs. I think, as I mentioned, this particular study is the first of its kind. And we also mentioned in our article that although rhetoric and composition as a field/discipline has considered historically the relationship between race and college writing instruction. So when we talk about the history of the relationship between race and writing college instruction, we're looking at things like African American vernacular, we're looking at things like English as a second language, we're looking at populations like Generation 1.5. And we're looking a little bit at, just starting to look at a little bit at the white meritocratic discourse that is basically the foundation for teaching first year composition.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: So we've already started to definitely uncover and archeologically consider those relationships. But what Genevieve and I have found through our research was that there hasn't been a specific study that looks specifically at the role of race within writing program administration and within the various elements of writing program administration. And the article is largely structured around considering that particular history, race and writing program administration, but also the various functions that race could play within the various factions of a

writing program, such as the pedagogical training, faculty development, assessment procedures and student support. And those are the four areas that we talked about and those are the four basically, guiding principles that divided the data and also categorized the data. And we organized it in that way. But for the purposes of moving forward, I wanted to consider within the book-length study, the relationship between race and curricula and curriculum design and the ways that writing programs go forward with our particular curricula, with an anti-racist agenda in mind.

Samantha Ocena: Cool. I guess when they're choosing this, what then does it mean that this was chosen? What do you think that that's saying about where we are with current composition? I guess what I'm trying to say is, do you think this is signaling a change or do you think it's saying we need to change? Or do you think it's like, do you get what I'm saying? To have this be chosen for this award for the year, what do you think that that means for what's happening in composition studies?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: That's a really good question. I think it's good to give a little bit of context of what happened the year before this article was chosen for this particular award. And so in 2018, the NCTE CCCC Latinx Caucus put out a letter, a joint statement in support of a boycott of the CCCC Conference because many of the C's members were claiming that C's was unwilling to move the conference from a location that was blatantly racist. Especially towards African Americans, which at that time was Kansas City, Missouri, actually Kansas City, Kansas. Let me backtrack. It was a policy called Senate Bill 4, which was in Missouri. So it would actually be Kansas City, Missouri, sorry for the confusion. And so when the word came to our caucus LISTSERV, as the caucus leader of that time, we decided we were going to go ahead and put out a petition like letter.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: It definitely had enough signatures to where we feel it made an impact. It was I think about 800 signatures or so from very influential people in the field. And we ultimately, our position was is that we would boycott the conference if they were unwilling to move it from that location in which that Senate bill explained that it would be very hard for anybody who experienced racism within that region to claim discrimination. And so when we saw that and the fact that that many of the members were already complaining on social media and saying no way that they were not going to go to that conference if the conference couldn't value their safety. Right?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: So basically what ended up happening was there was quite a big number of people who decided not to show up to the CCCC Conference in 2018. And in addition to that, so it coupled with that was the creation and implementation of what was called a social justice action committee that was put in place that particular year by Asao Inoue, who was the Chair of C's last year. And I think he's outgoing now, but he put that together and interestingly, many members of the Latinx Caucus actually helped to organize that particular committee as well as the events that occurred with that committee. So not only did we advocate for

boycott and many of us did boycott, but we also contributed to the events that took place through the social justice action committee. So we didn't want to just leave the organization and not contribute anything in terms of how we move forward in this particular position.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: And so that was the year before we received this award. So I think that was kind of a wake up call for the field that there are definitely faculty of color who are not willing to participate in a professional organization and a professional conference solely for the purpose of professional advancement and recognition if the conference was not willing to pay attention to many of the concerns of racially minoritized populations. And so it brought forward a red flag with the organization. And so we received it in 2019, which is really interesting because the summer of 2019 is when we received it. The whole writing program administration LISTSERV went through a type of revolutionary, I guess, paradigm shift one could say, that people have termed the WPA Feminist Revolution.

Samantha Ocena: Oh wow.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Because it started off with blatantly calling out sexist behavior on the list, towards a white woman claimed feminist on the list. And that's where it kind of started. And then from there, there were various conversations about the role of African American vernacular within writing pedagogy. And then later on with the call for proposals for the 2019 C's conference, with that particular call, it brought up another racialized conversation about code switching and the role of African American vernacular in the CFP. And that really caused just a lot of people coming out of, I would say the woodwork, because these are people that don't necessarily participate in the LISTSERV because they have often have felt silenced by the LISTSERV and they say it's mostly for the white male professors as a space for them to interact but not necessarily paying attention to women as much. But definitely not to people of color. So that was a really big kind of revolutionary moment for the field, those two back-to-back. And I would say that it was definitely kind of a building up effect for the field to kind of have a wake up call to pay attention in various ways to people of colors' concerns. And it's definitely has had a growing effect in different organizations as well beyond C's.

Samantha Ocena: So now it seems like that nationally, that there's a shifting happening with the tension that happens whenever there's a shift of the change move. I was talking to somebody the other day and they were talking about, "Your generation seems more to push against some of these things that happen with people of color and women in the professional world." Where this was just, especially in academia, this was just the expected way. Like of course these types of discriminations would happen and of course these types of statements would happen, but I never wanted to make the waves. And that, "Your generation," she said, "Is more about pushing against that." And it seems like that's kind of what you're talking about here is there's a push for, this is no longer okay. Like we've been quiet about it and we're speaking out now.

Samantha Ocena: Do you feel like this article that you wrote is kind of writing into that or like looking to push that forward? I know with the book that you just mentioned, an anti-racist pedagogy, I think definitely is. Do you think that the article was kind of beginning that push or was it like, I'm all in already on it?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: It was definitely at the beginning of the push because since that was 2015, 2016 and then we had 2017 was, I think that was the bridge over from the grant, over into the boycott in 2018. And so in 2017, I actually did write also an article through Latino Rebels, which is titled, A Decolonial Conference Review. And in that review, it's basically a conference review, I do call out some of the scholars there for their inattention to people of color within their presentations, within their research. And it just kind of goes back to what composition scholars are trying to bring attention to right after the civil rights movement. And so, being a historical kind of scholar that I am, looking back at civil rights and its effect on composition studies was kind of like, "Okay, now where are we at now in the 21st century?" And 2017 seemed to be kind of the year to do that because we were in Oregon. And Portland, Oregon is a very kind of white city.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: And it was very apparent that with being a leader of the Latinx Caucus, I'm trying to figure out ways to bridge our presence there with the mainstream kind of happenings in the conference, because the Latinx Caucus has often functioned in an isolated manner. And our concerns have not necessarily ever been central, but they became central in 2018 because we had that role in the boycott, but also the role in helping to organize the SJAC. And so I think all of that exactly what you're saying was kind of building up to, in addition to the WPAL revolution. It's kind of all building up to, yes, we definitely need a book-length study on it.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: And Genevieve and I have been here and there doing interviews with different WPAs across the nation all during this process, in which is very evident that within each campus that we have a really a closer look at, that we're finding out what some of the racial climates, the racial bias that takes place there and attention to anti-racism and inattention to diversity and equity hiring practices. And all of those things are becoming evident as we look at some of the really honest forthcoming interviews that we've done so far. So it definitely needs to be a book-length study.

Samantha Ocena: Yeah, great. I mean, it seems like an obvious answer, but what do you see as the hoped kind of outcome of this big project that's coming out of this article that won this award?

Dr. Iris Ruiz: That's an excellent question. We really appreciate the participants being forthcoming. I will say that some of them have not made a commitment yet to really trying to grapple with some of the racial bias that is taking place in the program, either on a professional level or in terms of student support, or in terms of curricular development, and their support for faculty of color in general. But through the interviews I will say that some of them have also

realized that this is taking place to where they might not have thought about it before. And so that's a really big step forward is to kind of just get people to think about it and to also realize that writing programs can not necessarily function as they have been functioning ever since the beginning of the field and around 1950. They can't necessarily just only function on white, meritocratic discourse or Aristotelian logic, current traditional rhetoric or kind of the older modes of teaching writing without considering the role and the histories of people of color.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Because as our demographics are shifting and as it is clear, I think as you mentioned with this, within this particular historical moment, within this political climate, it is clear that people still have their very ingrained racial biases that need to be addressed. And they definitely spill over into the classroom. They spill over into institutions of higher education and they're very, very present within writing programs because writing programs are involved in that whole maintenance of culture, cultural creation, the maintenance of white meritocratic discourse and practice. And so yeah, we definitely see ourselves as an intervention trying to expose the limitations of that approach, and the limitations within the scholarship of the field that have not necessarily, I don't think, arrived at the moment they wanted to arrive at, that they expressed, that scholars expressed right after the civil rights movement, after assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Samantha Ocena: You kind of tapped on this already, but this question about, given all of this problem, right, there's the problem of the past. But there's also the problem of the present and the difficulties that people have in transitioning and even recognizing or even wanting to be open to recognizing, right? Where do you feel like we need to go? And maybe, what do you see as the biggest obstacles around there and how do we get there? I mean, that's the biggest question that there possibly can be, but feels like it's really at the heart of the work that you're doing.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Yeah, I mean, I'll just mention a little bit about Genevieve and I and the way we're trying to approach our local writing programs, our local institutions and our role within our local theory and our local professional context. It is apparent, I think it was mentioned earlier today in one of our meetings, that Genevieve recently was a victim of a hate speech, hateful threat that took place at Syracuse University where she's at. And basically, it was a reference to her racial identity. And she's been very vocal about that and she understands the context of the institution that she's in, that she had to push very hard to get a response from the chancellor that dealt with her safety, as well as just acknowledging this hate crime that took place against her. And so she realizes the uphill battle kind of that it takes to encourage people to acknowledge the issues of race or racial bias or racial hate crime. And their institution is still very much within the turmoil of their black student union having demands towards the chancellor that have not been met yet. And then that's where she's at, kind of locally speaking.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: And then for myself, within the context of the Merritt Writing Program, without getting into too much detail about it, is that we were fortunate to have a WPA that came in last year, well actually for the last two years, who came in very committed to diversity and equity initiatives. Which was great because as I was going through writing up the article, seeing how the WPAL was going through this revolution, our program was also being altered in a way in which it had never been before to consider the importance of diversity, equity and inclusive initiatives. And so we now have a person who is a chair, who is very committed to these initiatives taking on this role specifically within a writing program.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: I just want to mention that one of the findings in our article, however, is that it is often people of color who take on this work. And the work can be very taxing emotionally, psychologically, even physically. The reason why we make that clear is because we want administration to understand that this work is very important, that it should be valued and that it definitely should be taken into consideration as labor that is valued towards, for example, promotion and tenure, merit or any other considerations that are similar to promotion and tenure for contingent faculty for example. And so I think it's important for us to consider that the labor often does take a toll on its leaders and often the leaders are scholars of color, so far. So hopefully what we would like to see is other writing programs taking on the initiative of clearly and openly, but also in a sustained manner, taking on diversity initiatives at various levels. And actually, we had mentioned in the article, at the level of pedagogical training, at the level of faculty development, at the level of student support and at the level of assessment practices.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: And so if writing programs can put that commitment on their agenda, knowing that it's not going to happen overnight, that's what we would like to see. We would like to see that as it's starting off in various kind of just spread out local context where we'd like to see it grow into different programs that wouldn't necessarily see themselves as committed to social justice or DEI initiatives, but to see themselves as able to do this work. That it's work that can be then and that there's progress that can be made even if it seems like they don't have any idea or clue where to begin.

Samantha Ocena: Thank you so much for talking with us about the work that you're doing. It's really exciting and we're excited to have you part of our Merritt Writing Program.

Dr. Iris Ruiz: Thank you so much. I appreciate it. It was great talking to you.

Samantha Ocena: Thank you.

Sherri Craig: Thank you for listening to the CCG BIWOC podcast. I'm Sherri Craig an Assistant Professor of English at West Chester University in Pennsylvania, and co-editor of the SPARK 2020 special issue on black studies. I invite you to stay tuned for our next podcast with Alexandria Lockett, an Assistant Professor of English as

This transcript was exported on May 07, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Spelman University. She will be discussing some of her latest work and pedagogy as a writing studies BIWOC practitioner at a premier HBCU. You can find us sparkactivism.com/CCGpodcast.