

Iris Ruiz Ruiz: Hello everyone, and welcome to the third episode of Creating Coalitional Gestures. Today I'll be interviewing Dr. Sherri Craig. Dr. Craig is an Assistant Professor of English, but more specifically, she is an Assistant Professor of professional and technical writing and first year writing. Let's see, she's at the Westchester University of Pennsylvania. Much of her work centers on improving writing and communication that addresses diversity and equity concerns in industry and nonprofit organizations. Currently she consults with an engineering company in her area to examine the lacking inclusivity within their hiring and their retention practices. She hasn't always found a home in the academy. However, Sherri has been a manager in an English tea house and a hotel. She's been a caterer and a server, she was even an ice cream scooper for a while.

You can find her work in *WPA*, Writing Program Administration, and in *the Performative Identities of Lady Gaga*, an edited collection on her Whiteness. Sherri has recently, co-edited the second volume of *Spark* celebrating the 50th anniversary of Black studies and its activist histories and futures. This is available at sparkactivism.com and I am so excited to talk with Sherri today about this as well. Welcome Sherri to Creating Coalitional Gestures.

Sherri Craig: Thanks so much for having me, Iris.

Iris Ruiz: Oh, you're welcome. This is really exciting to be able to talk with you. I've been following you for the last year and we met actually briefly at the Conference on Community Writing in Philadelphia. And I was able to hear you talk about the *Spark* special issue on Black studies. And I was so excited about it, so I'm really excited to hear more about that. Let's go ahead and get right into the questions. We'll start off with some questions about your research and we'll see where that takes us to.

Sherri Craig: Okay.

Iris Ruiz: So getting right into the question, what is the tenor of your research right now? What informs your research and what theoretical framework are you interested in right now?

Sherri Craig: I feel like I'm going to say this is a tough one for a lot of the questions today. But this is a tough one. It's taken me a long time to discover myself and my interests and my tenor, as you so lovely put it. After a rather difficult and somewhat traumatic doctoral program experience, I knew almost immediately, I defended the dis, drank myself quite a bit, walked across the stage and the next morning got on an airplane in that order in three days' time. And I knew by the time I got on the plane that I didn't want to follow the path of my graduate research. And I'd rather dislike the person I had become at my former institution. I really didn't realize I was so disconnected from my work until my campus visits that I tend to say now that if you don't know who you are, a campus visit will tell you pretty quickly.

And I didn't recognize myself. So the tenor of my research right now is very much one of discovery. I'm only two years out of my PhD program and it didn't do the good job of tending to myself during that program. So when I think about my research now, I think about the work that I do and the research that I chase is simply just what calls me in the moment. I feel very improv with everything that I'm doing and everything that I'm reading and leaning towards both personally and professionally. My biggest thought right now is, "What do you want to read

Sherri? Now, just go write that." And in many ways, right that, R-I-G-H-T because it's not there oftentimes, which is a big critique of mine in grad school. And it's a big critique now, is that the things I want to read, I'm just not finding in writing studies, I'm just not finding in rhetorical study and I want it there. So if it's going to be there, I've got to find it there. If it's not there, you got to make it.

Iris Ruiz:

Thank you. I've actually heard that quite a bit with respect to comp/rhet and writing studies, as far as the availability of scholarship on critical race theory. Some of the work that I know that you told me that you like, and that you're interested in such as Black feminist thought. And anything that focuses on praxis, but while also focusing on race. I was just wondering if you could just reflect... You said you're only two years out of your PhD program, which is, wow, that's not long at all, so that experience is still pretty fresh with you. I was just wondering if you could expand just a little bit on how that disconnect happened? How do you think it happened? How did that disconnect, when you went on the job market? And how do you think that happened and what do you see? How can you reflect on that?

Sherri Craig:

I had stumbled my way into a doctoral program. There was a point where I was working at Northern Arizona as contract faculty and my WPA at the time, a wonderful man named Dr. Greg Glau is like, "What are you doing here? You're too smart, you're too good. Go get a PhD, make money, do research." And I did and I loved it. I wrote my letters, I got my statement of purpose. I wanted to study Black comedic performance, particularly on stage and orality and really connect historical understandings of that to contemporary performances. And I was really excited and then I went to my program. I was less excited, I felt isolated. There's only so many times you can hear, you're one of a few Black people to ever come through the program. And that it had been a dozen years or so before with the last one that had come through and they had brought two of us, my dear friend, Talisha Halitwanger Morrison.

And there's only so many times you can hear that before you're like, "Well, I guess I'm not doing this Black comedic performance because no one's there to support that vision and those dreams and that understanding." So I found myself digging into something that I found lacking, which was mentorship and support in particular for Black students. In particular for graduate students, not just at my doctoral program, but I think it's a glaring error and absence in many doctoral programs. So I started chasing that and I ended up writing a dissertation that had no mentions of race whatsoever and that's mostly true. There's a very small paragraph footnote in my introduction that discusses the difficulty of being a Black woman, doing these interviews. And talking about mentorship and training and support for graduate students and writing programs to all white participants who were tenured. And who were administrators and who had been in the game for 20 years and shit and how challenging that was. For me, that was the most interesting paragraph in this 100 page long document, it was shocking.

So, now when I think about what that disconnection happened and when it happened, it happened at a point where I felt like I was in survival mode. How do I do the work that's expected of me? And how do I get out intact again, not realizing that at the moment I was not intact. It just felt like it, I had lost a piece of myself. So now when I think about the theoretical frameworks that informed me at the time and inform me now, as you said, it's absolutely Black feminist thought. I don't think you can be a black woman and not look to Black feminist thought. I don't think you can be in this world and not feel called to critical race theory. I'm also very much critical of Black feminist thought and the idea of feminist, which

has not had a room for many women of color, especially Black women. So pulling towards Walker's womanism, even though Walker's deeply problematic for me in many ways.

I appreciate the community aspects and the relationing and the support that comes out of womanism that we sometimes don't see in Black feminist thought. And sometimes don't see certainly in feminism. But then thinking about storytelling and thinking about counter-stories of course, from the brilliant Dr. Aja Martinez and Dr. April Baker Bell. And the Black storytelling practices and histories, I think narratives and our stories are so deeply rooted in there. Which is why I continue to try to tell less than a shiny story about graduate school and earning a doctorate as a Black woman at a historically white institution.

Iris Ruiz: Yeah. Well, I commend you for making it through.

Sherri Craig: Thank you.

Iris Ruiz: Because I know quite a few people who have had experiences in terms of a lack of mentorship, and sometimes that can be a really crucial part of finishing up the program.

Sherri Craig: Well I left. One of the things that... Well, I say that, I left the area. I didn't drop out, but I got a fellowship and I moved four or five states away and did not engage with the program in my last year outside of my defense. It was wonderful and healing and difficult, but one of the only ways I made it through was to completely remove myself from the system, from the program.

Iris Ruiz: Okay, great. So you got a fellowship and then you felt that you were able to reflect a little bit more during that year that you were away and to be able to finish. Then you said you went into the job market and you felt a little bit of disconnect there. I wonder too about your dissertation, looking back on your dissertation, you said that you have this really short part, which is footnoted in your dissertation about your positionality. And that's something that's interesting because I wonder why you decided to footnote it. And we don't have to spend a whole lot of time on it, but we understand that in the field, it's usually common practice to give a little bit of background about your positionality. So I just wonder was that, do you feel like that's a representation of the program in which you were in, in terms of footnoting that?

Sherri Craig: I didn't want to include it at all. I didn't want to include it because as I was writing the dissertation and I'm on market and doing campus visits. No matter what my job talk was, no matter what conversations about my dissertation, my research, my potential for scholarly excellence. No matter what conversations we have, it would default to, "Do you want to teach African-American rhetorics?" Or "tell us about race?" Or making my raced body the center of research, which at the time had nothing to do with race. So I felt resentful that oftentimes we don't ask white scholars, "So tell us about your whiteness? Do you want to teach this canonical, all white course? Is that really where your heart is? Are you going to leave us because you're white?"

So I felt really resentful on the job market and when preparing my materials. So I included it as a footnote almost as a thumbing my nose at the request to speak to the issue in the first place. The dissertation that I wrote, which was on mentoring, training, and support of graduate students in the writing program, practica, had

nothing to do with race. I didn't talk to graduate students. I only talked to administrators and yet I was being asked to speak to that area, my own positionality. And what I found out through talking about my work and thinking really critically about my work. For the first time, I didn't feel like I got real critical engagement about my dis until the job market... I found out and I really, truly honestly believe now that what we think about as mentorship is too often just whitewashing, especially for students of color. And oppressive and riddled with white supremacists' histories and futures.

And really, I found my blackness was being erased for professionalism, being raised for collegiality, being erased for performativity that is not my loud Black ass. And I'm still working on that resentment that I just can't be a scholar in this field. I have to be a Black scholar in this field, except for now I feel resentful that I've given up so much time being that Black scholar and fighting for these issues. And now trying to find myself within these conversations, it in some ways feels like, "too little too late Craig, get your shit together." But it also feels really empowering because now I know I'm doing it for me. And not because of expectations that have been laid out for me to navigate a system that was never made for me to succeed within it.

Iris Ruiz:

Okay. Well, thank you for sharing that part of your journey with us. I think that's really important for people to think about, as a scholar of color within writing studies. What does it mean to be pushed towards always having to examine the world and examine praxis from a racialized position? When, other scholars don't necessarily have to think about that and then doing it because you want to do it. There's a difference there, doing it because you want to do it. And you realize there was some missed opportunities and we have to ask why did we decide those missed opportunities. But let's go ahead and move on a little bit. I think you've touched on a little bit in terms of the direction or the transition that your research is taking, now that you've had a chance to look back and reflect.

So bringing it a little bit now more to the present, and you've had this experience as a professional and now in the field. What do you have to say about the relationship between your research and the current political climate? Or in what way do you see or not see your research being implicated, in your perspective, on current politics in the United States?

Sherri Craig:

I'm so glad you're asking this question. In fact, I've been working from a position of anger, which I love, I absolutely love it. And I'm deeply, deeply moved by Audre Lorde's uses of anger, in particular, use of anger towards racism, but just walking around the world angry. And I laugh when I say that because maybe in the 2016 election, early 2017, I remember a bunch of people walking around like, "I'm angry. I should be angry about Hillary. I'm angry." And I'm like, "Well, who the hell gets to be angry?" And as a Black woman, I'm an angry Black bitch all day, every day and I own that. I love that, but how do we get to walk around the world and demonstrate and use that anger and be angry? So I've been thinking a lot about what would it mean if everyone who was really angry, demonstrated their anger.

And not in safe ways, but in these really like, "I'm going into the streets and I'm setting Target on fire. I'm angry." Or I'm going to... I saw a picture of this woman in Portland with a hockey stick batting away, tear gas. That's some anger in there, I want... What would that look like? How productive would it be if we lived in that moment of anger? So a lot of what I think right now is happening in my

research is looking to historical and to contemporary representations, demonstrations of fed-upness.

Iris Ruiz: I like that word, fed-upness.

Sherri Craig: I'm just sick of it. I am fed up and filled with fed-upness. And I want to make anger as this productive, beneficial thing. Not only for healing oneself and owning that anger and talking through it and finding outlets for it. But for recognizing it and not tamping it down. I heard this wonderful term called emotional constipation. That most women of color walk around the world, and emotional constipation is something happens you tap it down and you tap it down and you tap it down and you tap it down. So you get stuffed and it's this really interesting idea that you get so stuffed that you're just uncomfortable. And you'll do just about anything to get it out, which is a nice graphic image, but it feels that way. It feels like there's just women of color walking around and maybe this isn't you, but it's definitely me and some of my friends. Walking around constipated by their anger, constipated by their sadness and their grief and even their joy.

And not really being able to express those things with their whole bodies and their whole sense of selves. So I've really been thinking a lot about our current political climate and how we are creating more room to be angry. And we need to find more ways to allow ourselves to be angry Black bitches, to be feisty Latinos. To be whatever stereotype of thing given to us, own that shit, buck up, let's go into the streets. So I'm also feeling like my research and what I'm writing and what I'm thinking about a lot is what does it mean to be anti anti-racist? And I don't say that as I think anti-racism is bad, but how quickly it's become a buzzword, how quickly it's become empty phrases of, "Oh, now everyone's read [Ibram X.] Kendi and is like, I'm anti-racist." I'm like, "No, you're not, you just know a new word. You're like a kindergartner, where now everything you say is that thing that you just learned. You're not anti-racist, you don't know what this work looks like."

"You don't know what it's like to live in this moment, doing this work in your career for your lifetime. Now you're, anti-racist go sit down. Stand up, go sit down with your people. Don't come sit down with me. Don't stand up with me."

Iris Ruiz: I love it.

Sherri Craig: I almost feel anti anti-racist, but in the same way, it's been an anti-diversity. "What is diversity? Get out of here? Inclusivity, you just learned that word, you don't know what it means, you're not black if you did. Equity versus equality, bitch." It's a little difficult for me thinking about the relationship between my research in the current political climate. Because, to think about research in the current political climate also feels comical to me. It's hot out there. The world's on fire, to think about research, to think about those productivity is tough. I'm angry about it.

Iris Ruiz: Yes, please. And I love the way that you're expressing that the praxis is definitely there. I think a lot of us could share that sentiment, to be angry and to embrace that word *bitch*. What does that mean to be empowered right now? What does it mean to be able to express yourself without fear of being labeled as an aggressive person or somebody who is threatening? I think a lot of us are feeling that way as well at the same time, exactly what you're saying, being embedded in these initiatives that they really sound great on paper. They do. So, where do we

go from there? And you mentioned this thing about productivity, that productivity is bullshit right now, productivity is-

Sherri Craig: Maybe it's because I haven't been productive.

Iris Ruiz: What do you mean by that? I know we're trying to survive every day, we have these deadlines and you recently released a special issue on Black studies. So we know you've been somewhat, we know you've been productive, so talk a little bit about what that means to be productive right now.

Sherri Craig: Much in the same way that I think everything feels right now, how could you not? How could you not want to enter these conversations? But also there's so much beauty and creativity that comes out of moments of resistance and moments of challenge and difficulty. We get some of the best art, we get some of the best poetry, some of the most creative, beautiful clothes. We get this renaissance of really, really lovely things in the hardest and darkest of times. So I feel almost as tough, impossible juxtaposition between productivity is a lie, productivity is so rooted in white supremacy. So rooted in capitalism, so rooted in someone else telling you what is and is not good enough.

But how could we not feel capable in this moment to create really beautiful, meaningful things out of our pain, out of our trauma. Out of the challenges of being alive in this moment where people are dying all around us for all sorts of reasons. So in editing the special issue/ volume, depending on who you talk to, it was one of the hardest tasks that I've had to complete, both as a person and a professional. We pushed the deadline. The initial deadline was December 2019 for pieces to come in with the expected publication of March 2020, just in time for C's [conference]. And by the time we inched close to that, everything had fallen apart. We were staring at... It was Mad Max out there. People searching for water in the desert wearing bad-ass clothes. And it was like, me and my co-editor editor Karriann Soto Vega, how could we ask for reviews right now?

How could we ask for revisions? How could we ask for, "Get this to us by Friday." Quote unquote from authors who were predominantly women of color, who were spanning graduate student status to chairs of departments. Trying to figure out the world and the world's in chaos, the world's on fire. And we're like, "But you promised us you'd write this thing." So it was very hard when even myself, I struggled to wake up and turn on the computer and get the work done. And it felt very hypocritical for me at least, to show up in a productive way and not just turn on the news and sit in it and turn off the computer and sit in it. And sleep and try to eat and try to drink water, well plans anyway. I think that this idea of productivity right now, it's comical, but how could we not?

In the work that we did for the volume, I'm very pleased with it. I think it's... *Spark* is relatively new and the work that we did for it is really special and I'm grateful for all of our contributors and all of our authors and for Karriann Soto Vega. And for Don Unger, who's a great friend and a great leader. Thinking a lot about trying to get that thing done because we needed those voices. We needed those pieces from these Black authors and all but two of our authors and contributors for the volume are Black. So, really thinking about what our responsibility was to them, to our field, to ourselves. And I hit publish on that web volume and I must've slept for three days.

Iris Ruiz:

I don't know, I imagine, oh my goodness. Everything that you've said just reminds me of how we've been going through these waves. Waves of where we had these things that we were working on and then exactly like you said, we turned into Mad Max and everything kind of fell apart. But at the same time, we're going into this new era... It's not really new, but it's more pronounced with the Black Lives Matter movement. So we're like, "Okay, we were working on that." It goes back to your point where all of a sudden it's passé to be anti-racist, but you were already working on this. As I said, I mentioned I met you there in Philadelphia, you were already working on this. And we were just so excited about it and now it's like, yeah and it's Black Lives Matter 2 now.

And we're thinking about that, it is like part two. And we could say it was probably more than part two, but just within this particular moment. I imagine that the challenge is there, I think what you said was beautiful about how in these times you see some of the most beautiful and genuine pieces of art, pieces of poetry, literature. And going forward, it's something that we need to keep paying attention to and then hopefully just put at the center. So thank you for sharing that experience with us and I'm really excited to look at it. And I hope everybody who's listening will also take a peek at it and see what's going on there, share it, maybe include it in your syllabi.

Share it with people, share why this is amazing. It's something we haven't had yet in the field, and we need to be paying attention to how the scholars are committing themselves to activism. Let's go ahead and talk a little bit about any other collaborations that you might be working on. I know you're saying productivity is difficult right now, but after this issue on Black studies, I know you're not done, I think you're just starting.

Sherri Craig:

I've really been thinking a lot about how we understand productivity and how we understand scholarship. For those of us who are at primarily teaching institutions. I have a four-four load meaning a hundred plus students a semester and productivity and publication is absolutely a part of my life and these projects are important. But to carve out space in my brain for that, to carve out space in my schedule for that, it's just a different conversation for other people who are given time and given space. So I'm sitting and teaching right now, right this moment but I'm sitting in a space where I'm actually hoping to do more collaboration work with this engineering firm that I'm working with. And their communication practices and thinking about the role of Black bodies in corporate America and preparation and professionalization.

And all of this coded, couched language, which ultimately means nice and kind and white within these fields and what that means, both speaking from industry. It's one of the things that I'm most passionate about as someone who hasn't always found a home in academia. What does it mean for people who have... and I say this jokingly, at least as much as I can, who have real jobs. What does it mean for them? Because I know what happens with me in these spaces, when I hear *collegiality* and I hear *professionalism* and I hear *niceness* and *civility*. But what does it mean when we see that in an industry? So working a little bit with them and part of my agreement with them is that we will be working on some writing because I can't just do this work. That's one of the collaborations that I have going on right now that I'm thinking about.

But other than that, I'm honestly a little collaborated out. And I don't say that because I detest collaboration. I love working with other people and bouncing ideas off of others and trying to push my own knowledge forward and my own

comfort forward. But after doing the special issue where I felt like there were one too many hands in the pot, I need a moment to sit with my own research. The things that I'm really interested in.

Iris Ruiz: It makes total sense. It makes a lot of sense.

Sherri Craig: But I feel like doing things like this, writing the introduction to *Spark*. I've been writing smaller pieces for other people, which is interesting as a way of collaborating to have others be like, "Will you write this thing for me?" But if I spent the next year not collaborating on anything, I probably would be okay.

Iris Ruiz: Yeah, I know what you mean. The pace has definitely slowed down for some of us and we have to think about self-care and paying attention.

Sherri Craig: It would be nice to be on my own deadline for a little bit, instead of things that I've promised others, I will write with them. Or things I've promised others I will engage in thinking projects with.

Iris Ruiz: Some of us are dubbing this moment, "the moment of great exposure." We're learning a lot about a lot of different elements that surround us right in our environment. And then people are being welcoming of us too. And when I say us, I mean BIPOC especially like you said in the industry because our talents are definitely coveted right now because we understand what these experiences are about.

Sherri Craig: I had worked with this company last year, just momentary, for a day I went in and then after, as you say "BLM 2", after the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, they reached out and wanted to make it more long-term. It's a blessing and it's a curse to be in this body, to have this knowledge and to have this interest in expertise. Because I just feel like you're being tapped and seen in a way that isn't necessarily comfortable right now.

Iris Ruiz: Yes, definitely. So we have to learn about putting those boundaries up around us as well. And I think one thing that I'm able to empathize with you on is how we also need to be paying attention to ourselves. And why did we come into this field? What did we really want to do going back to the Black comedic project that you were [crosstalk 00:35:15].

Sherri Craig: Did we have a sense of what reality was or what it could be? I think I'm living right now in a moment of what it could be? I feel excited about what it could be. I've talked to students who are current doctoral candidates or who are just now entering programs and I'm like, "You're Black. Yes, do it. You're Latinx, you're indigenous. Yes, get in here we need you, are you done yet?"

Iris Ruiz: I know, right?

Sherri Craig: It has felt so lonely. But I feel like in the last five or six years, there's just been so many amazing young scholars, new to the field scholars. Or long to the field who are just raising their voices and being known and I'm so excited for that. Because it's starting to feel like the field that I want to be a part of instead of one that I joined.

Iris Ruiz: Yeah, exactly. I know you mean. And the more of these projects that come out the better for us. And we want to... I think, I don't know how you feel about it, but we're continuing to try to challenge this idea of the special issue. And just make this-

Sherri Craig: Were at the special seminar, right, that stuff.

Iris Ruiz: Yeah, definitely. We need to work more on those coalitional relationships for sure. That's cool. I know, I think about it too. The young scholars coming up and the work that they will do and who they'll be engaging with and things like that. Let's go ahead and close up here, if there's one suggestion that you'd give fellow academicians during this time of uncertainty. With regards to personal healing or personal growth or reflection. Or if you want to talk about in terms of the professional aspect, anything. What would be one suggestion that you'd give?

Sherri Craig: I'm going to cheat and give two... Because, that's my nature: rest. Rest your body, rest your heart, rest of your souls. Rest is resistance, we are not made to grind ourselves from dusk until dawn every damn day. Rest, take care of the self, take your ass to bed and then to make love. I mean that literally, if that's your prerogative and I mean that figuratively too, do work that fuels you, make art, make beautiful things. Write things that you love, and you can be proud of, don't run away from it. There may not be a space for it right now, but hold onto it. There will be a space for it in the very near future. And I hope that people like me and senior scholars in the field and well-established, been out here for a minute and are shaking some stuff up, are making room for it. So, make love and rest.

Iris Ruiz: It's beautiful. Thank you so much. Thank you, Sherri for joining us today.

Sherri Craig: Thank you for having me. I probably cursed a bit too much and I hope they at least get a few bleeps in there but-

Iris Ruiz: I'm sure everybody will forgive you, we need that sometimes.

Sherri Craig: They know my number. If you've met me, you know this is not an act.

Iris Ruiz: All right, Sherri. Have a great evening.

Sherri Craig: Thank you so much. You too.