

*The Journal of
Multimodal Rhetorics*
Volume 5, Issue 1



**More Examinations of Invisible
Labor**

Book Review

Rhetorical Crossover: The Black Presence in White Culture

Burrows, C. D. (2020). *Rhetorical crossover: The Black presence in white culture*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Although teacher-scholars in rhetoric and composition have done much to push against systemic racism in US society, racism remains a serious problem in the discipline. Citing problems such as conflation of race and whitewashing that further marginalize Black students, scholars like Vershawn Ashanti Young (2016), Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams (1999), and Staci Perryman-Clark and Collin Craig (2016) argue for teachers, scholars, and allies to position Blackness at the center of scholarship and pedagogy in the field in order to address the systemic and structural racism in US schools. Evoking April Baker-Bell's work on Black linguistic justice (2020), the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus issued a list of pedagogical demands set against institutionally racist and oppressive practices (2020). In the education system, Black people are confronted with pedagogical versions of the Black cultural literacy as they negotiate racist constraints.

Cedric D. Burrows, building upon important work and research by scholars of color in rhetoric and composition, uses his *Rhetorical Crossover: The Black Presence in White Culture* to advocate for "audience" and "revision" of Black rhetorical presence in the white mainstream as antiracist strategies (Young; Inoue; Royster) that center Blackness in higher education and beyond (52-53; 70). According to Burrows, Black rhetorical presence is a reality where Black people's rhetorical and cultural practices and experiences are foregrounded and displayed in different modes (18). Burrows examines how Black rhetorical presence, rooted in African American culture, interacts with and challenges whiteness in western culture. He names the movement of Black rhetorical presence into white mainstream as "Rhetorical Crossover" (19). He argues that when Black rhetorical presence "crosses over" into white culture, it is subjected to a Eurocentric lens, thereby becoming whitewashed. Burrows asserts that this whitening/whitewashing process subjects the unique cultural features of Black rhetoric to alteration and erasure. Nevertheless, through the concept of rhetorical crossover, he demonstrates the uniqueness of Black rhetorical tradition in a dominant white culture to promote social change and survivance. The reality of Black people's negotiation of the complexities and constraints established by systemic racism provides a contextual framework for understanding "rhetorical crossover" (22). Basically, this book illustrates strategies of survivance as grounded in Black epistemologies; African Americans produce knowledge and achieve agency in response to racism (Perryman-Clark & Craig 8-9). Using Black people's experiences of rhetorical crossover in the media, popular culture, and textbooks, Burrows offers an insightful framework for antiracist

pedagogues and the African American community with which to challenge the whitewashing of Black rhetorical presence when it crosses over into spaces occupied by white audiences.

Throughout the book, Burrows presents the everyday intricacies and complexities of the narratives and realities constructed by both African American and white communities whenever Black culture interacts with white culture. He does this by foregrounding the discussion of each chapter with personal and cultural stories that inform his purpose to challenge racist institutions and dehumanizing narratives (xii, 139). For example, he uses textual threads to uncover the whitewashing of Martin Luther King Jr.'s texts and proposes how such texts can be taught to highlight their "knowledge of multiple rhetorical dimensions" (65). Burrows uses Afrocentric theories to ground his conceptualization of "Black rhetorical crossover" with the aim of giving credit to the pivotal role that Black rhetorical traditions play in US rhetorical traditions. What makes this book so intriguing is Burrows' ability to highlight how the dominant narrative seeks to erase the dignity of Black people while showing how Black people have been pushing back and transforming racist narratives to reclaim their humanity and identity (xii). Burrows coins important concepts, such as "cultroscripting," to examine the rhetorical crossover of Blackness into the white mainstream.

In chapter one, the author uses the case of Dinah Washington, an African American singer who was arguably "the Queen of Blues" (23), to illustrate how Black people engage in a five-stage rhetorical crossover. These stages include learning the rhetorical features of the Black community, gradually developing a desire for a larger community including the white community, achieving success but becoming altered through "whitescripting" and "whitescaping," and losing mainstream popularity while attempting to maintain popularity in the home community. "Whitescripting" refers to the phenomenon of altering African American discourse to "fit" into white discourse (21,45), while "whitescaping" is centering whiteness in the visual reality of African Americans (20, 71). Burrows asserts that white culture only accepts certain forms of Blackness that can be whitewashed.

Chapter two examines how the African American community adopts the concept of "cultroscripting" to respond to the whitescripting of Black rhetorical presence. Burrows' term, "cultroscripting," refers to the phenomenon of decentering whiteness and centering all cultures while acknowledging their influences and values (45, 55). Through illustrations, Burrows raises serious concerns about how textbooks are whitewashed and how composition teachers, especially white teachers, employ problematic practices and frameworks to teach texts produced by African Americans. Extending the concept of listening, Burrows takes up Royster's argument in "History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives in Composition Studies" that people who enjoy privileged positions need to acknowledge "the historical and cultural underpinnings" of Black people's work and to apply listening strategies to address Black rhetorical presence in white mainstream (68-71). By cultivating antiracist responses, cultroscripting helps in this work by reinforcing antiracist and social change approaches, for example, as explored in *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center*, edited by Staci Perryman-Clark and Collin Craig (2019).

In chapter three, Burrows examines how white and Black communities use whitemaking and Afrocentricity, respectively, to create visual realities of Black presence in American society. Whitemaking constructs a “visual reality” which presents Black people as mono-dimensional and dependent on White people; this construction allows white people to “remain sympathetic” even though Black people are victims of racism and police brutality (71). To deconstruct whitemaking, Black people engage in Afrocentricity. For Burrows, Afrocentricity is creating visual reality of African Americans and reinforcing the historical relevance of the visual with the aim of promoting harmony (71, 97). Afrocentricity allows Black people to construct a multidimensional African American reality which strengthens community and emphasizes historical influences guiding even today’s pro-Black movements (Burrows 71). By analyzing African American movies, he discusses how whitemaking and Afrocentricity help Black people respond to whitewashing and construct a reality where they “control their own identities” (97). This chapter interrogates some underlying flaws in racist tropes such as “Angry Black Person” (80).

Burrows uses chapter four to examine the whitemaking of Black people in relation to socio-political and socio-economic issues. To help his audience have a better understanding, he uses stories from his lived experiences to illustrate how the mainstream equates Blackness with incompetence and victimization (99). In response, African Americans adopt the concept of Afrocentricity with the aim of regaining their voice and agency to speak for themselves, reaffirm their humanity and identity, and reclaim their centered position in American history (99-100). Burrows defines Afrocentricity as the phenomenon of Black rhetorical presence challenging systemic and institutionalized racism. This chapter will surely prove relevant to scholars who are personally familiar with the social injustices meted out to marginalized people.

In the concluding chapter, the author builds upon W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of “double consciousness” to explain how African Americans pay the “Black tax” to become successful as they cross over into the white mainstream. Burrows walks the reader through the many different characteristics of paying “Black tax,” which include presenting an acceptable form of Blackness to the white world, appreciating the generosity of white society for allowing Black people into its institutions, and taking on the labor of solving racism and discrimination (131-139). Burrows breaks down each characteristic by again offering examples from his lived experiences. This approach makes his book interactive and relational.

In this book, Burrows explicitly demonstrates how Black people employ knowledge rooted in Afrocentric theories to negotiate whitewashing of their Black rhetorical presence in the everyday world. Personal stories and cultural narratives create room for a much-needed framework to explore marginalized rhetorical presence, Black community literacy, and resistant rhetoric for the purpose of “collective empowerment and social change” (Shimabukuro 21). Burrows uses storytelling as a methodology to illustrate subversive strategies that teacher-scholars of color and their allies can engage in with their scholarship and teaching within racist institutions and beyond.

Though this book seems to be concentrated more in rhetoric and composition, it can also serve as a valuable resource for educators, scholars and activists on antiracist work, scholarship, and pedagogical practices beyond academia. Furthermore, this book challenges white institutions to learn about African Americans and their rhetorical presence with the aim of decolonizing themselves and decentering the deep-rooted racist ideologies that drive institutions. This book has major implications for African American rhetorics and rhetorics of marginalized cultures more broadly. Burrows' call to action for educators reflects the proactive stance of the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus leadership who calls on us to break the silence regarding racism in US classrooms and society and recall Blackness and Black rhetorical presence from the margins.

— **Roland Dumavor, Michigan State University**

REFERENCES

- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Craig, C. L., & Perryman-Clark, S. M. (2016). "Troubling the Boundaries Revisited: Moving towards Change as Things Stay the Same." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 39(2), 20-26.
- Inoue, A. B. (2015). *Antiracist writing assessment ecologies: Teaching and assessing writing for a socially just future*. WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press.
- NTCE/CCCC Black Caucus. (2020, July). This ain't another statement! This is a demand for Black linguistic justice. Retrieved February 10, 2020, from <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice>.
- Perryman-Clark, S. M., & Craig, C. L. (2019). Black matters: Writing program administration in twenty-first century higher education. In S. M. Perryman-Clark & C. L. Craig (Eds.), *Black perspectives in writing program administration: From the margins to the center* (pp. 1-27). NCTE.
- Royster, J. J., & Williams, J. C. (1999). History in the spaces left: African American presence and narratives of composition studies. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(4), 563-584.
- Shimabukuro, M. (2015). *Relocating authority: Japanese Americans writing to redress mass incarceration*. University Press of Colorado.
- Young, A. V. (2019). A forenote from an angry man: Blackness should always be center. In S. M. Perryman-Clark & C. L. Craig (Eds.), *Black perspectives in writing program administration: From the margins to the center* (pp. vii-xiv). NCTE.



Roland Dumavor is a graduate student and a First-Year Writing instructor in the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures department at Michigan State University. He is interested in research and service work which focuses on creating space for the voices of under-represented/underserved/marginalized communities and empowering them through writing/literacy. While he hopes to continue to explore his interests in social/criminal justice, community literacy/writing programs, he also explores and engages in scholarly work in areas that include multimodality, cultural rhetorics, environmental rhetorics, and Indigenous rhetorics. His focus in research work is greatly influenced by Black/African experiences, theories, praxis, methodologies, and approaches.