

## Book Review *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition* by Erec Smith

Joshua Barnes Indiana University of Pennsylvania

**H**ow can it be possible for disempowerment to be mistaken for empowerment? Isn't the dichotomy between the two abundantly clear? Erec Smith thinks not. Smith's ethos as a Black professor of rhetoric and composition places him in a unique position to critique anti-racist pedagogy. It is not his perspective that racism is not present in the academy: far from it. He has been the recipient of prejudice and discrimination from his graduate work all the way to his teaching. In his book, Smith includes personal experiences and anecdotes that help to illustrate his perspective. As a Black rhetoric and composition instructor in the majority White institution of York College of Pennsylvania, Smith has experienced these issues firsthand and has found that anti-racist pedagogy alone, which he argues can lead to a lack of academic rigor, is not necessarily the appropriate answer.

Smith's main argument is that anti-racist pedagogy in rhetoric and composition often inadvertently disempowers students by ignoring important aspects of empowerment theory. This pedagogy instead encourages marginalized students to embrace their positionalities as the center of all arguments and to fall back into positions of victimhood. Smith explains that this "victim framing" creates "disempowered entities in need of enlightenment instead of empowered agents with self-efficacy and a desire to broaden the interactional and behavioral components of empowerment" (88). This victimhood allows students to escape from proper academic scrutiny which, in turn, reduces academic rigor.

In his introduction, Smith begins his critique with a vignette in which W. E. B. Du Bois recounts an experience in a composition class at Harvard. In his first essay for that class, Du Bois had railed against racist issues present in society at the time and had let fly his own colloquial grammar and syntax. This first effort was met with a failing grade. From this experience, Du Bois noted, "[he] realized that while style is subordinate to content, and that no real literature can be composed simply of meticulous and fastidious phrases, nevertheless solid content with literary style carries a message further than poor grammar and muddled syntax" (Smith xix). Du Bois realized it was imperative to adapt to "standard English," or what Smith prefers to call the "language of wider communication" (LWC) (5), rather than insist on communicating in the vernacular he grew up speaking. Using Du Bois as an example of code switching, Smith addresses the present climate of code meshing taught in many quarters of the rhetoric and composition field. According to scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah, Asao Inoue, and others, rhetoric and composition instructors who require their students of color to adapt to the LWC engage in a form of racism because this adaptation automatically alienates students' home dialects. As such, they propose that students in rhetoric and composition should be encouraged to inject their writing with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as well as other dialect forms. In writing and speaking this way, anti-racist scholars argue, students embrace

their identities as students of color and feel a sense of empowerment. Their home dialects are no longer “othered,” and they are encouraged to express themselves as they are comfortable.

Taking aim at anti-racist pedagogy in the field of rhetoric and composition, Smith begs to differ. Smith describes how anti-racist pedagogues encourage “the primacy of identity,” which he notes is “the recognition and expression of identity takes precedence over other considerations and is almost immune to critique” (3). This primacy of identity, coupled with prefigurative politics, leads to a “narrative of victimhood” (18). As a result of this victim narrative, students are encouraged to code mesh. Any and all critique of this code meshing from an academic and rhetorical theory perspective is discouraged. This is where Smith takes issue, since the nature of all academic discourse is the ability to think critically and ask questions. Smith argues true empowerment comes from scholars standing up under close academic scrutiny. If this scrutiny is absent, is this truly empowerment?

Smith goes on in subsequent chapters to explore empowerment theory. He cites a wide variety of scholars and discusses their definitions of empowerment, among them psychologist Marc Zimmerman, who noted empowerment is established by three factors coming to fruition in people: the intrapersonal, the interactional, and the behavioral. These factors coupled with agency are essential for people, in this case young college writers, to feel truly empowered. Smith argues that anti-racist work in rhetoric and composition stems from a feeling of not being able to make meaningful change and therefore falls back on “performative change or the silencing of supposed dissenters while having no real plan for social or institutional progress” (29). He quotes activist Bob Wing, who was writing about other activists who stop short of real change: “If winning feels impossible, then righteousness can seem like the next best thing” (29). It is this sense of victimization that Smith takes issue with, as it will not allow true academic scrutiny. To question the sacred victim is to tread on the holy and therefore is inappropriate.

Smith argues that this victimization, in the sense Wing describes, is not true academic discourse. On the contrary, through the proper use of empowerment theory, marginalized students can be encouraged to escape from the semblance of empowerment offered by the role of sacred victimhood espoused by the anti-racist pedagogues. Following the example set by Du Bois in the introduction, students can be empowered by infusing anti-racist pedagogy with empowerment theory to produce more rigorous academic discourse in the field of rhetoric. Smith does not for an instant argue an absence of racism in academia, or in the modern world for that matter. He simply takes issue with the weakening of academic discourse in rhetoric and composition brought on by the preponderance of the primacy of identity coupled with the sacred victim narrative added to prefigurative politics. The empowerment promised here, Smith argues, is actually and unintentionally disempowerment, or what he refers to as “trickster racism” (95).

Through Smith’s explanation of anti-racist pedagogy and true empowerment, it is easy to see how disempowerment and empowerment can be mixed up. Teachers at all levels have to be continuously engaged in the process of self-reflection. We encourage it in our students, and we must demand it of ourselves. This is a powerful, thought-provoking book, and it should be read by any and all teachers of rhetoric and composition. Smith has thoroughly researched the topic and calls upon his vast experience to speak into the topic. Instead of falling back into the victim narrative, rhetors

need to consider the *kairos*—the fundamental question of time, place, audience, and subject—to communicate effectively. This is true for all writers and speakers, regardless of their status. Harkening back to W. E. B. Du Bois and his pragmatic approach in the introduction, Smith notes how effective DuBois was in recognizing rhetorical situations and adapting his communication style to them. This is the heart of academic writing and the process all academic writers ought to embrace.

*A Critique* is a bold book, considering the day and age in which Smith is writing. Some could hear a different message than he intended. However, Smith is uniquely positioned to critique anti-racist pedagogy as a Black pedagogue himself. He does not shy away from “speaking truth to power” or, as a colleague referred to him, “dealing swords” (viii). Readers of the book will appreciate his boldness. Smith builds his argument logically by laying the groundwork of prefigurative politics and primacy of identity present in anti-racist pedagogy at the beginning. He then explores empowerment theory to arrive at the argument that anti-racist pedagogy in rhetoric and composition does not accomplish the goal of empowerment. He suggests fostering students’ agency by using project-based learning to allow for truer empowerment. Smith’s unity and coherence are very strong; he has clearly read far and wide, and he has incorporated his sources quite effectively.

However, this is not an easy book to read. On one level, Smith’s tone is conversational, but his language and syntax are deeply academic and can be challenging for readers, who may struggle unless they are very familiar with the topics being discussed. Smith also deals with questions of race and language that may cause some readers to squirm, but this discomfort is exactly the place where those readers should grow. A final drawback to the book is that it is limited to the world of rhetoric and composition and must be read as such. It would be very enlightening to expand it further beyond the field, but this was not Dr. Smith’s intention. This book will inspire readers to examine their own views of how to teach rhetoric and composition.

Speaking for myself, a White, middle-aged teacher of rhetoric and composition, I found this to be a very eye-opening and challenging book. It was eye-opening because Smith addressed pedagogy that I was not altogether familiar with in ways I had not considered. Smith challenged me to wrestle with very large ideas and sent me scurrying to read many other authors to address my knowledge gap. For me, this was a fortunate byproduct of the book. As with all good books, I am not the same person having read it as I was when I first started. In many ways, I recognize that while trying to overcome my position in the hegemony and to confront anti-Black racism, I have inadvertently added to the problem. This book has challenged me to think through how to maintain academic rigor as well as to empower all my students. I highly recommend it to instructors on all levels.

## Works Cited

Smith, Erec. *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*. Lexington Books, 2020.