

After Quiet: The Black Writer in Spaces of Privilege

written by Ruth Ellen Kocher | April 8, 2016



On March 30th the annual Associated Writing Programs Conference and Book Fair took over the Los Angeles Convention Center, right next door to the home of the Lakers, of indomitable kinesthetic genius and ferocity due in large part to the athleticism and resilience of black men and, by proxy, the many black women who raised them. As writers, we found ourselves virtually in *their* house. We languished in the expanse of that space and within the orbits of our own privileged literary lives. And yet it was within that space that I was once again reduced to a locus of servitude, as have so many black female bodies before me. On two separate occasions during the 5-day conference I found myself face to face with a white conference participant who, despite wearing the same registration badge and lanyard that I visibly wore, assumed I was an employee.

The first incident happened in the Westin Bonaventure. I'd given a panel early in the morning, "Reverberant Silence: Making and Meaning A New Silence." The panel felt like a hit. We filled meeting rooms 501 A, B, and C. My presentation dealt specifically with the silence of black protest by way of Kevin Quashie's research on quiet. He illustrated his notion of "quiet" with reference to the 1968 medal ceremony for the 200-meter race after which Tommie Smith and John Carlos took the medal stand, bowed their heads, raised their arms, and presented the arena with what now is a ubiquitous symbol of black power, the clenched fist. Afterward, I headed back to the hotel to meet up with my publisher from Noemi Press. As I stepped off the elevator, a white man and a white woman passed me getting into the elevator. They both held an AWP Conference tote. We all wore our registration badges and lanyards. As I stood in the hall looking for the room number on my phone, the man stepped back out of the elevator and said, "Excuse me. Do you work here?" I was caught off-guard but not enough to escape the sinking feeling of invisibility. "No. I am registered for the same conference you are." I pointed to his bag and looked down at the lanyard, clearly displayed, hanging around my neck. He responded, "Oh," and retreated to the elevator. An apology would have been of little consequence in the end but it would have been a respectable offer on his part.

By the time the doors closed, I had rehearsed at least three responses that would have been more cutting and less accommodating. But each one of those comments was part of the black woman's script I've spent a lifetime trying not to rehearse. The script persists. We've seen it many times. The stage lights come on and the angry black woman hits her mark. *Look at the camera and say something sassy.* My anger means that I become a walking cliché and so I remind myself: *You've published seven books. You are a Professor of English.* I posted the moment on social media in some hope that white writers in my community would see the post, read my hashtags (#Self_Interrogate; #Evolve) and perhaps, reconsider the next time they find themselves face to face with a black woman wearing black on black at a writing conference with hundreds of writers wearing black.

The next day, I signed books. Afterwards, I left my bag at the press table and headed for the women's bathroom. On my way there, a woman walking directly towards me began asking for directions. As we stopped almost toe to toe with one another I began to answer her. As I adjusted my badge she said, "Oh, you *don't* work here," and walked away, again, unapologetically. It was approximately 23 hours since the last time a white AWP participant had mistaken me for an employee. I stood there for a moment and looked down at what I was wearing. White on black. I looked around and saw people passing in every direction wearing the poets' uniform, black on black, and the more formal academic poets' uniform, white on black. For the record, the employees at both the hotel and the convention center didn't wear black on black nor white on black unless they were waiters and those individuals wore nametags pinned to their chests. I went to the bathroom grumbling. I stood at the sink cursing under my breath. As I headed back to the booth I ran into an old friend who asked me how I was doing, I responded, "Frankly, I want to punch someone in the face." While my sentiment was inelegant, it was the most accurate description of how I felt. I had a need to occupy this space with offensive visibility.

Later, I thought about the quiet protests of Tommie Smith and John Carlos. I could not imagine how to affect to any efficacy that sort of quiet, a quiet that contained movement and dynamic statement in the face of overt expressions of racism. There is no safe response to a member of my own community who sees first my black body and next (if ever) my registration badge and lanyard that should say, "We are the same." Because I am subject to the projection of an imaginary space of racial positioning fashioned from white privilege, my expressive reaction to white reduction, or lack of expressive reaction, can ultimately have no consequence to the insular landscape of supremacist interiority the white body chooses to inhabit.

Once again, I posted the incident on social media, a bit more resolute, a bit less angst-ridden. My anger had given way to hurt as the weight of ownership predicated on expectation subsumed me and instigated a melancholy I could not shake. This space occupied by writers, presses, publishers, professors – this was my house and in my house, I resisted being made to feel abject. I am not sure I've succeeded.

On social media, I began to receive comments on my posts that prompted me to ultimately delete them. One white writer and editor told me about her sister

who'd made the mistake of wearing red to Target and was mistaken as a clerk. A white male writer thought that remembering my good manners and being accommodating in such circumstances really contributed to "good will." I wanted to say, "Get back to me when your red-shirt-wearing sister is mistaken as a clerk at Target when she is standing in a crowd of 1500 other red-shirt-wearing people," or "My manners will never cure the condition of my black body and the ownership of that body as it is continually re-appropriated to a point of disjunction that manifests as servile otherness." The woman I am set out on this course of civil education, of diplomatic cultural translation, contrary to Thomas Jefferson's assertion that such civility does not inhabit the black body. The project girl who lives inside my head conceded to Jefferson and said, "Fuck them." My post deletion led not to the "quiet" that Quashie characterizes as "the full range of one's inner life" but instead to the "silence" he calls "motionless and still," and that Audre Lorde says "will not save you."

There is no conclusion to this essay. I expect tomorrow will be eclipsed by the reductive rendering projected onto another black woman somewhere, perhaps at another conference or in a mall or a drug store or at a movie theater. You, my self-appointed and so-named white allies, will continue to respond with stories of selfhood that mean to equalize us in our adversity but instead expose your inability to understand that our adversity is simply not equal. Such "identifying" asks me, once again, to inhabit a space of whiteness that simultaneously refuses me. Asking me to inhabit that space is another way to refuse my space, which is to say, you dare not imagine the true impact of racialized occlusion because you would then have to concede to your own racial bias. The black woman I am asks white writers to conclude here, to create an ending that resolves our common conflict. Evolve. Self-interrogate. The project girl in my head screams, "Get over it, already."