The Tone Police's Greatest Hits

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"You Can't Use the Word Profiled" and other favorites from the album series *RhetComp: The Academy Years*

Ibram X. Kendi has said, "Indeed, the heartbeat of being antiracist is confession. The heartbeat of being racist is denial." What solidarity gestures and diversity may deny, equity confesses. This creative approach to nonfiction account of misgynoiracist experiences within RhetComp calls for truth and reconciliation as necessary conditions if there is to be any possibility of equity within the academy. This piece journeys—through a humorous, absurdist—through a humorous, absurdist approach—Black women's experiences in the discipline from receiving essay feedback during a student's undergraduate years as a rhetoric major to quasi-HR's denial of permission to an instructor seeking to use the word "profiled" to describe a problematic workplace interaction. The pretext of civility and professionalism that serves to surveil and discipline BIPOC scholars in the academy generally is just as common in the field of RhetComp. This text explores inequitable dynamics within the context of individual and institutional branding that seem to prioritize merely the optics of diversity.

RhetComp: The Academy Years is a roller coaster of tunes, some that will no doubt make your top ten catchy and uplifting playlist, including "Philosophy Isn't the Only Doctorate" (music and lyrics by Dr. Jill Biden; Treisman, producer[1]) and the groundbreaking "FINALLY Student Evaluations of Teaching Aren't Used in Employment Decisions" (music by lead singer FedUp of the rap group You've Been Served; lyrics by Discrimination Lawyers 'R'Us; Yetter, producer). However, The Tone Police's contributions to this compilation are so dispiriting that the album series is transformed into the worst of the rhetoric and composition genre by far. Each song is its own earworm yet lacks rhyme or reason. No, you can't easily vanquish these tracks from memory. As such, The Tone Police can certainly boast that their greatest hits make a deep impression. Still, the overall mood is a whole lot of teeth sucking. Here is my review of some of the so-called favorites. [2]

"Black Nationalist Type" from the Album *Major*

This song, first released in the late 1980s, begins with a strong electronica groove but then turns to garbage. The song tells the story of a young Black woman, Brianna, during her undergraduate years at a public four-year uni-

versity. As listeners, we eavesdrop on her inner voice as she experiences a racist incident during a required course for her chosen major, rhetoric. Brianna enters the class; she is eager and excited to focus on persuasion, and she is confident that an emphasis on legal philosophy is the perfect preparation for law school. For the essay assignment, Brianna writes a paper arguing that tort law intersects with hate speech (recommended listening: "LGBT Tort" by Love). Brianna is proud of both the work that went into it, the logos, and the originality of her claim.

Before she gets her grade back, Brianna reviews a text written by one of the only two other Black students in the class, an analysis of the rhetoric of graffiti. She thinks it is wonderfully written and insightful, and she never looks at graffiti the same again. Even a simple "Happy Birthday, Erik!" spray painted on a wall in an Oslo ghetto sparks a future conversation she instigates about context, kairos. (She concludes, "Really, the most dangerous folks in Norway right now are us Americans.") Brianna expands her mind—an aspirational goal in every strong liberal institution's mission—and buys into the value of diversity by observing, "What would a girl from the North Shore otherwise know about graffiti?" She thereby moves toward the lie that inclusion is diversity's synonym. In this moment, she is grateful simply to be in the company of brilliance as the music swells into what she will soon experience as a too-common refrain.

The chorus itself kicks you in the nethers. The teaching assistant (TA) permitted to instruct this course gives all Black students the same grade, a low B. On our protagonist's paper, the TA writes, "you sound like one of those Black nationalist types."

This young Black woman persists as a rhetoric major and seems to stay strong in the face of racism. But the department seems not to give an ish about who is teaching or preparing educators to store away their bigoted things. Brianna ultimately graduates from an Ivy League law school, passes the three-day California Bar her first time taking it (during one of the hardest seatings, when the passage rate didn't even reach 55%), and does so well that she is asked to grade the next exam.

However, Brianna is broken in some pivotal places. She is no longer confident that logic can prevail in her quest to better society, and she no longer believes that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. Brianna also feels invisible and that she lacks value in the society she cherishes. The demoralization screams throughout both the music and accompanying lyrics, and the thump of the bass drum sounds eerily similar to tears falling on pavement.

The song's swell ends abruptly on a high note, suggesting that it is for the best that our protagonist began to learn how much emotions actually run the human show; this particular knowledge is über important for any rhetor or rhetorician. Further, Brianna's post-graduation opportunities do not seem

negatively impacted by her experiences within her major. Maybe that is the message of this track. Yet this song is so painful. I hate it. Can I get it out of my head? No—so I guess, in capitalist terms, it is well done. I hate this song all the same.

"No Respect" from the Album *Macro, Not Micro*

Brianna's TA and her ilk are the people who oversee RhetComp today, as department chairs, program directors, deans, and more. Perhaps with that connection in mind, twenty-five years after *Major*, The Tone Police revisit the classroom in the song "No Respect," this time featuring a Black female educator named Elda. Like Brianna, Elda experienced an ish-ton of bullshit from instructors as an undergraduate student.

The opening lyrics are in Elda's own voice, sharing a personal story in a professional development workshop in answer to the prompt, "What was your most impactful writing experience?" Elda tells us of a professor during her undergraduate years who said he knew what grade a student would earn "just by looking at them"...which seemed to always mean BIPOC did poorly. The presenter asks Elda, "And what was the impact?" Our hero shares the pain, anger, and ultimate acceptance that credentials aren't always indicative of what they're supposed to mean. "I realized that even academics can be…." she hesitates, unsure of the right word. "Assholes," a colleague offers. "Yes," she laughs. A member of her cohort—nicknamed "Big Macro"—then feels it's her moment to dispute the account, telling Elda the takeaways are incorrect. "Actually," our champion retorts, "my eighteen-year-old self absolutely did conclude thusly."

During a break in the workshop, another colleague chats Elda up in the hallway. The music, which has been what I would call salted opera, gets even more salty as Big Macro interrupts without the niceties common in civil society. Big Macro yells in Elda's face about the story she shared during the workshop. The colleague Elda has been speaking to simply walks away, not intervening in any way to stop the abuse. Big Macro ends her tirade with, "You seem to have no respect for academia, so I don't know why you're in it!" Weeks earlier, Elda had pointed out that Big Macro had chastised others' pedagogical practices by relying on flawed research without meaningful sample sizes—something she also did during her dissertation defense. There is a hint in the lyrics that Big Macro's fury may also be fueled by that. After the workshop blustering, Big Macro's face balloons to bright red (think rot Luftballon), and she storms off into the bathroom. Elda keeps her cool…on the outside.

"No Respect" includes Elda's reflection—years later during the 2020 pandemic—that this experience was one of many persuading her that working from home is the best thing that could happen to her, because she doesn't have to

interface with hostile coworkers (recommended listening: "Microaggressions at the Office" by Miller). During professional development the year prior to Big Macro's outburst, every single seat but one was open during lunch, and, being friendly, Elda asked whether she might sit next to the lone occupant. "Of course!" Elda put her bag down in the chair and got in the queue for the buffet, and a colleague (who, it will surprise no one to learn, was a white male) started yelling that he was intending to sit there. He stomped over, put her bag on the ground, and promptly sat his ass down in her seat with, yes, every other of the forty seats still open, including the one on the other side of the now duo'd occupant…who said and did nothing in response to the scene. Elda picked up her bag and lost her appetite—in the reverse order, actually—and skipped lunch. She shook with a rage she felt she could not express. Like Big Macro, here was yet another colleague who sparked fury that had nowhere to go.

After the Big Macro incident, Elda receives an email with the subject "All good today??" It starts: "I thought I passed you in the hallway this afternoon while some shade was being thrown. Everything OK?" Elda answers honestly, "No, I am not okay (the shade was completely out of line)." She is appreciative of this lone coworker, a white woman, who reached out and bore witness. The harassment was not Big Macro's first, although by far the most abusive, so Elda levies a complaint against her for creating a hostile environment. After months upon months of delay, the employer finally conducts what it calls an investigation and concludes Big Macro is an equal opportunity harasser. So there is no finding of discrimination. Although Big Macro only bullies women—she also told a different colleague, "How would you know?! You're just a rich Jew"—the racial affronts are deemed beyond Blackness. The staccato hammers it home that Elda is viewed as Black only (Truth! Ain't I A Woman?), so Big Macro's obvious gender discrimination goes over the investigators' heads.

Although Elda's employer told another Black female worker to apologize for clapping back at a racist comment from support staff (accusing her "ghetto South Side Chicago coming out"), bosses are certain, "We can't ask Big Macro to say she's sorry." Instead, they grant Big Macro a leadership role, which she leverages into a position at an institution in the U.S. South. Our stereotypes of the South are stoked until listeners can only presume Big Macro feels warm and fuzzy canoodling fellow misogyracists while promoting the self-serving lie that she is a BIPOC ally. There is no karma that Elda can cling to for comfort.

"No Respect" is a song that, like "Black Nationalist Type," is unforgettable, but it lingers in the memory because of how foul it is. These tunes have no happy endings, and sometimes the music itself takes a weird turn that the ear just can't reconcile. Both songs flip the bird to the pentatonic scale. In my opinion, the artwork for The Tone Police's album covers should each simply

introduce one more line on the arm of someone trying to deaden the pain. These tracks are equally cringeworthy.

Elda's doctorate positions her to teach in a RhetComp program, so you'd think the song would be a lovely exploration of how Elda incorporated awful college experiences and how vigilant she is about not mirroring the same in her own teaching. Certainly, there are elements of such in the lyrics, but this song does not focus on Elda's proactive behaviors. Instead, it shines the spotlight on a crappy workplace experience that, when added to Elda's history as an undergraduate, makes it perhaps worse than "Black Nationalist Type." Check that. It definitely is worse. Can I give it negative stars? It is hands down negative.

"Even You" and "Your Tone" from the Album *Surveillance*

Two tracks from The Tone Police's album *Surveillance* make it to the *RhetComp* series. Both are like nails on a chalkboard scratching the message "we are watching you." The first paints a picture of a new hire, Tesha, who reads *Presumed Incompetent* in preparation for teaching writing at a four-year university (Gutiérrez y Muhs, et al.). As a Black woman, Tesha knows she will encounter hostilities from supervisors, support staff, students, and colleagues, and she tries to prepare herself as best she can to weather the impending storm. She ain't ready. Tesha is saturated with aggressions, including from a white male student who during office hours leans into saying 那个 (pronounced *ne ga*) as an example of how miscommunication can happen—which Tesha is certain was his way of calling her the n-word without risking discipline (recommended listening: "Failure to Communicate" by Flaherty). The weight of this adds to the excess scrutiny she receives from peers who seem certain she was not hired for her actual skills. Colleagues share advice about the basics when Tesha poses nuanced concerns. "I'm still trying to figure out how to motivate students to deeply engage the homework" is met with "Try referencing the homework in class so that students might be embarrassed into doing it after everyone sees them struggle answering questions." Really. Reference the homework in class. As if Tesha never would have thought of that.

At the end of that first year, her students win writing prizes and publish their essays in undergraduate and national journals. One of her cohort tells Tesha, "Even you are doing better than I am." The chorus is a compilation of these types of one-liners, and while not as terrible a song as "No Respect," "Even You" is definitely a track to ask the AI monitoring your living room to skip.

"Your Tone" is challenging in many of the same ways. Like "Even You," it is a country song that leans heavily into the fiddle. The protagonist, a Black woman, tutors in a writing center. Despite the known bias in student evaluations, she receives glowing comments on feedback surveys. Her first appointment is par for the course, and she joyfully awaits the next. The schedule is

open, however, so she chills in the room, working on other tasks but staying available for any drop-ins. None come. Later, she is reviewing email when she sees a message sent during her first appointment that a second tutee wanted to meet remotely. Another room had apparently been set up to host virtual tutoring. There are follow up emails that ask her whether she will be joining the session. She wonders why no one bothered to simply come to her room and tell her about this anomalous appointment. She therefore asks as reply, "Why didn't someone just come to my room and tell me there was another appointment somewhere else?" The response suggests that "it might be helpful" to review the handbook, which clearly states tutors are to remain available during their shifts. She replies that she was available—in her room, in fact—so that section of the handbook is not particularly helpful. She then gets an email from the writing center director requesting time to talk.

"We strive to give everyone the benefit of the doubt," the talking-to begins, "and no one was criticizing you, so your tone…." "I'm going to push back on the 'tone' characterization," our tutor retorts. She doesn't say what she wants to about the purported giving of benefits of doubts being a joke when she did not police anyone else's tone or presume they meant malice—that was the other side of things. She also doesn't mention the stereotyping of Black women when it comes to anger being projected upon them. We kind of want her to, but she doesn't. "I was direct. That is all," she says. (Recommended listening: "Angry Black Woman" by Walley-Jean).

Despite what it misses, this riff is by far the most satisfying of this track. But like all numbers by The Tone Police, it sours. "No one is trying to gaslight you," the director asserts after trying to gaslight her and adds, "Please make sure you check your email during an open session." We presume neither our tutor nor the director is given a name because this interaction is classic Tone Police: duplicated everyday with countless Black women—no matter where they work, in whatever capacity—who are disciplined in myriad ways if they don't communicate in a manner that others won't find intimidating. This, of course, really just means overly compensating with sweetness for the stereotypes projected upon them (recommended listening: "Microaggressions Self-Defense" by Byrd).

"SELMA Was a Terrific Film" from the Album *Hiring*

This song is The Tone Police's one high note. Because of the band's other works, listeners—at least I will speak for myself—keep waiting for it to go south. But the entirety is actually satisfying. The story: a Black candidate for faculty leadership in a rhetoric department is vehemently opposed by one white male whom we suspect simply doesn't want a Black person to have the power to tell him he might have to do anything differently. A Black woman—because isn't

it always a Black woman?—heads the effort to combat the racism she believes is feeding the challenge. In addition to the open opposition, she is particularly struck by an anonymous colleague's racist Google Doc comment answering the question of whether the candidate is suitable: "SELMA was a terrific film."

The verse of this song is in the form of a letter the woman submits to the committee chair:

> I am writing to clarify my support. While I understand a colleague asserts that there is no support for this candidate, that information is incorrect. [riff of specifics to a trip hop beat] Additionally, I am concerned that racial bias is influencing the vehement opposition. The assertion that this candidate received the greatest number of negative comments on an anonymous online document—even if true—may simply evidence implicit bias rather than meaningful reflections about qualifications. I suspect that comments that would more directly demonstrate such bias were not included in the summary provided the Committee (for example, "SELMA was a terrific film."). That our department has no history of engaging in bias training suggests further that colleagues would not have insight into the role of their biases and therefore no understanding of how to counter them. I do not believe the information provided the Committee was objective, and I do not believe that, in this circumstance, the information represented to the Committee truly reflects our collective sentiments, certainly not my own. I look forward to the opportunity to work with this candidate and am available if you have any questions or concerns.

The chorus "SELMA was a terrific film" is truly mesmerizing because it has absolutely no connection to any other lyrics around it, presumably just as on the Google Doc. There are no statements about Oscar-nominated movies, no discussion of civil rights movements, nobody named "Selma." Despite this outrageous comment from someone charged with educating young minds, the story ends well and the candidate obtains the leadership position. Therefore, the slight does not impact her as negatively. It gets an eye roll, but that is all.

There are terrible songs from The Tone Police's album *Hiring*, but at least the *RhetComp* series chose just this one to showcase. Grateful to put my fingers in my ears for the others. It's bad enough that, to review the albums in full, I had to listen to "And I Am Telling You, I'm Not Staying" from *Retention*. The joke told between two of the song's characters—both writing instructors—is hard to stomach, because it is couched in their recognition that they are both biracial. After yet another Black colleague quits, they quip, "There is now only

one Black person working here between us." What a gut punch (recommended listening: "Retaining Each Other" by Fries-Britt and Kelly).

Oh wait. The entirety of this "SELMA" tune is not satisfying at all. There is a secret ending that reminds me of Tool's 1993 debut studio album *Undertow*, where the dead space after the end of the 9th song, "flood," ticks as empty tracks until number 69 plays "disgustipated" (listed as track 10 on the CD's insert). Disgustipatingly, there is more to "SELMA Was a Terrific Film" than successful bystander intervention and the achievement of a leadership offer to an academic of an underrepresented demographic. After a minute of silence—long enough for you to be confident the song has ended well—the music picks up again with this particular leader throwing the Black woman who advocated for him under the bus on numerous occasions. For instance, he vigorously denied the veracity of her complaint about an untoward poster positioned in the workspace, not knowing she had a photograph of it before it was torn down. She stays silent in order to, she believes, save the face of the larger Black community, but she questions her decision in a musically frenzied refrain and resents her role in her own oppression (recommended listening: "Black Fatigue" by Winters 112). This song leaves a film that is not at all terrific.

"Got Milk?" and "You Shouldn't Have Left" (parts 1 & 2) from the Album *Denial*

It's hard to tell if the untoward poster in "Got Milk?" is the same one referenced at the end of "SELMA Was a Terrific Film." It would make sense, even if the set-up doesn't. Are these real-life anecdotes? I guess they have to be. *RhetComp: The Academy Years* required nonfiction stories embellished musically. The reason "Got milk?" has me suddenly questioning whether it is actually fiction is because it tells a story that sounds out of the 1940s, not the 2010s when it is supposed to have occurred. A rhetoric and composition program is housed in a building with a lactation room. I guess a lactation room isn't very 1940s, but stay with me. The room is obviously not visited by the majority of staff. One day, the door is left slightly ajar, and a curious staff person peeks in. On the wall is a poster of what is described as a mammy milking a cow. Text overlay reads, "Got milk?" The peeker, a BIPOC woman, is outraged. She reports her concerns. The poster is taken down. Then the denial sets in. Managers argue, "It wasn't a mammy." "It didn't say got milk?" "It wasn't misogyracist." None of the deniers will share an image of the poster to back their claims. The peeker is interrogated: "What were you doing in there? You're not breast-feeding. You don't even have a kid." And just like that, it becomes her doing. If she had just stayed where she was assigned, there wouldn't be an issue. It's her fault. We know from "Your Tone" that marginalized employees can be exactly where they are supposed to be and still be responsible

for any tensions (recommended listening: "Not So Safe a Space" by Nuru and Arendt). In "Got Milk?" the cause of any perceived incivility or unprofessionalism is the BIPOC employee supposedly drifting out of her lane.

The album *Denial* continues this theme with parts 1 and 2 of the song "You Shouldn't Have Left." Part 1 is the shorter of the two. It tells a story that takes place in a writing program. A white woman and her Black female colleague disagree about whether essays should be evaluated differently depending upon a student's background. The white woman asserts that lowering the bar for BIPOC and low-income students is more equitable. The Black woman believes all students can rise to the occasion (recommended listening: "Over-Accommodation" by Tarr). One morning, the Black woman is absent to speak on a panel about white supremacy. (Irony.) The white woman takes the opportunity to create a handout that argues her personal perspective, and she distributes it as if it represents the Black woman's stance as well. When the Black woman returns, she pushes back about the document, and the white woman retorts, "Well, you should have been here, then." The Black woman explains to colleagues that the handout does not reflect her opinion; the white woman rolls her eyes and does not speak to the Black woman for weeks.

A short time later, a survey of the writing program is distributed among its employees. In the anonymous feedback is a criticism of "wannabe woke white women" and their behavior as colleagues. The Black woman believes the statement has been attributed to her given the timing of some shade from multiple peers. She remembers one coworker who, in a previous year and referencing another anonymous survey, approached her, saying, "I know you are the one who wrote the comment about diversity." For both situations, a white coworker confesses to this Black woman that they are the person who levied the criticisms. She feels helpless to illuminate any misunderstanding as these confessions always occur in private conversations. She succumbs to a growing need to distance herself from her work environment.

Part 2 is the last straw. She is excited to attend an on-campus screening of *Bessie* and gets to the venue early. It is a cozy room with chairs and couches arranged facing a small screen. She places her coat on a couch in the back, toward the end near the aisle with an unobstructed view. Making her way to the buffet, we listeners flash back to "No Respect" and worry that this song will find this Black woman being similarly screamed at by a white male coworker who has planted himself in her seat while she steps away. Instead, she returns to her seat without incident and places her bag on the floor at her feet. The room starts to fill including VIPs and their friends. She chats with colleagues, and one, who is co-hosting the event, suggests he introduce her to the crowd right before the screening starts so that she can tell them about a related event she is organizing. When the time comes, she walks up, delivers her spiel, and

returns to her seat to find a white woman sitting on her coat in casual conversation with another white woman across the aisle.

This Black woman's mind starts racing, and she begins making calculations about what her response should be. She stands still, staring at this white woman who audaciously sort-of asks, "I was hoping I might sit here." The white woman we believe is in the VIP entourage and has a brace on the leg she has extended over the length of the couch. VIP + leg brace + no other long couches. The calculations continue. The white woman finally whines to the Black woman who stands as a statue, "I can find another seat I guess."

"No," our hero answers, "I will move." She tries to give the white woman the benefit of the doubt, sympathizing with the temporary disability and the difficulties attached. One of her colleagues sitting in a hard chair across the aisle says, "Come sit by me." "Absolutely," responds our hero as she picks up her bag and says to the white woman, "Please give me my coat." Make no mistake, our hero is greatly tempted to scream at this white woman about the nerve of sitting on her coat, almost as strong as the urge to leave the event entirely and go home.

As she settles in, the movie begins. From the front row, a call to the white woman who stole the seat on the couch, "Are you coming back up here?" "No," the white sham answers, "I have a seat back here!" then whispering to the white accomplice across the aisle, "This seat has a perfect view." Our hero would rather we call her a sucker as she sits in her hard chair with a partially obstructed view, boiling in a killing rage. Unlike bell hooks in the chapter "Killing Rage: Militant Resistance," the bystanders say nothing (hooks 8-20). They did not say anything when this white female sat in a Black woman's seat—on her coat—with the woman's bag at her feet. They said nothing when they observed the Black woman speechless and still. They stayed silent, permitting this Black woman to pay the price of misogyracism that she has no doubt paid over and over again. "You Shouldn't Have Left, Part 2" is another of The Tone Police's tracks that makes all of us want to crank death metal while speeding down the freeway with the windows open…which is how our hero ends every workday from that moment on.

"You Can't Use the Word *Profiled*" from the Album *Discipline*

It is at first hard to make the connection between the song "You Can't Use the Word *Profiled*" and the album title, *Discipline*. In some respects, I suppose all micro-aggressions and macro-hostilities are meant to correct behavior (recommended listening: "Unjust Universities, part deux" by Ritter). Or maybe this album is The Tone Police's way of highlighting Black women's restraint, their self-control when venom is sprayed in their direction. Or perhaps *Discipline* is a nod to the field itself, as this story takes place in a rhetoric department.

The protagonist in this tale is a new hire, Meredith, an enthusiastic instructor who brings small gifts for colleagues on holidays and shows up to work each day with a huge smile and sparkle in her eyes. She approaches custodians, groundskeepers, colleagues, and everyone she encounters with deep investment. Meredith makes eye contact, asks about their well-being, and always says her excuse mes and thank yous. Support staff are not this civil. They are a duo who chastise Meredith when she is not around. "Who does she think she is?" coupled with talk of arrogance and the like. No surprise: Meredith is Black. The support staff's supervisor, also a Black woman, overhears them and watches. She observes our hero's kindness, over and over again, and thinks, "I want to slap her in the face for being so nice to them."

The supervisor tells department leadership of what she has observed and tells her subordinates that they better cut it out or the next time she hears their crap, she will write them up. She believes leadership will follow up with Meredith, but she is mistaken. They decide to stay silent; pretend nothing happened; say nothing to Meredith; and forego interventions, acknowledgement, and remedy. Meredith is not aware that any conversations are happening. Eventually, our hero tires of what she knows is misogyracism. One of the support persons confesses to Meredith that she failed to inform her of important information because "I was afraid you'd be angry." Our hero has had enough and reaches out to quasi-HR, a middle-manager who is the first point of contact when there are departmental issues. Tightening his white lips (okay, they must actually be pink), he asks this Black woman—who has been nothing but vibrant—"What is the problem?" "Of the latest," Meredith begins, "I wish not to be profiled as angry before I even open my mouth…" He interrupts, "You can't use that word!" We listeners need not hear the rest of that story to know how poorly it goes.

Meredith's light begins to fade. She stops bringing little gifts. Her smiles no longer reach her eyes. She completes all of the tasks she can on her own, avoiding asking for support from those whose job it is to do just that. Years pass, and leadership never reaches out to her about this experience or any other misogyracist incident. Instead, the quasi-HR lummox is given increasing responsibility, which he leverages into a lucrative move to a technology company.

This song is well-written, tells an emotionally compelling story, and should never be heard during the winter holidays or by anyone who cares about Black people if they're listening with a stash of opioids or sleeping pills within arm's reach.

From the Album *Retaliation*

There are several tracks that make the *RhetComp* album series from The Tone Police's *Retaliation*: "7pm Class," "Grunting 101," "Introduce Yourself, Why

Don't You?" and "Why Don't You Quit?" They each tell a story of what happens to individual Black women teaching in writing and/or rhetoric programs and departments after they protest hostile environments. The quick synopses:

"7pm Class" - The protagonist is the only one of a large department who is assigned a late-night course to teach. She ends up proactively securing another classroom space on campus at an earlier hour so that she doesn't have to end her workday in the dark.

"Grunting 101" - A department chair chooses to slight the protagonist of this song, grunting at her instead of conversing when she greets him in the tight hallways of their office building. He demands that when she wants to speak to him privately she leave his office door open as if she is somehow a threat.

"Introduce Yourself, Why Don't You?" - A supervisor fails to introduce this subordinate at an awards event although he introduces all of the other speakers, which requires she then take the podium and introduce herself.

"Why Don't You Quit?"- Last but not least, this most irritating and painful song, like trying to get cholla cactus spines out of your skin without tweezers. It begins with an investigation of a retaliation complaint. The evidence is super obvious, but one can easily predict that, like most institutions, the investigating university will conclude that retaliation hasn't been proven. It makes one wonder whether the standard of proof employed in these cases is actually "beyond a reasonable doubt," rather than "preponderance of the evidence" as it is supposed to be. HR meets with our protagonist, Sandra, and goes over the allegations. There are many on the list, all of them clear, direct, absent conjecture. The white investigator—after reading them off one-by-one—looks up at Sandra, who has endured a hostile environment for half a decade, and asks, "If it's so bad, why don't you quit?" Sandra is stunned. "You sound like Donald Trump when he said Ivanka should quit her job if she is sexually harassed or find a new career." The HR investigator is "hurt and offended" by the comparison, and the focus of conversation turns toward his feelings (recommended listening: "Hopes She Would Quit" by Close).

Years later, Sandra is accidentally provided a draft of the investigation's findings, which is date-stamped the morning before this conversation occurred. It references another HR attendee who, in fact, had gone on medical leave before the meeting happened. The draft concluded that retaliation could not be proven. So yes: before talking to Sandra—in a discussion that focused on the one remaining investigator's feelings instead of the facts and evidence—the decision not to find retaliation had already been made. According to this track, it is likely enough that when retaliation became a legal cause of action decades prior, the university's HR had determined that its departments would never find such a violation.

This song reminds listeners that reparations can't get here soon enough (recommended listening: "Reparations" by Davis). And it reminds this reviewer: I don't want one more Black person to have to find a way to deal with white supremacist capitalist patriarchal bullshit in this apartheid nation we pretend is a democracy.

Forthcoming Album: *Truth and Reconciliation*

There are more favorites from The Tone Police in the *RhetComp; The Academy Years* series. "Solidarity Gestures" from the album *Optics* offers a number of bursts cross-genre that mostly highlight more examples of diversity without inclusion (recommended listening: "Diversity Doesn't Stick Without Inclusion" by Sherbin and Rashid). There are lyrics about the interpersonal: a weekly lunch break trivia game in a writing program for which the host never asks the one Black woman who works there what categories she'd be interested in, even as he makes the rounds past her office to inquire with everyone else. There are stories about the otherwise mundane: a Black woman in a rhetoric department is told she is not permitted to be an editor for departmental websites even though she chairs the committee creating content. A year later, a white male joining the same committee (not chairing) is granted that authority.

There are many more songs that highlight what seem at times purposeful divestment from solutions within the RhetComp field. In one we hear a professor at a meeting work through the acronym "STEM" beginning with "sexy tranny." A member of leadership simply turns his back to this professor and looks out the window. In another, a supervisor sits with a small group of subordinates as one of them ends a story about another, "with her tits up to her chin." The supervisor claims not to hear. In others, academic staff experience physical affronts including one Black woman whose colleagues seem to think it's alright to grab her clothes, pulling her jackets open and seeming to inspect her wardrobe…perhaps resisting touching her hair. These songs all suck.

Some of The Tone Police's tunes include brief glimpses of white males speaking truth to their own demographic power. When a Black woman with an EdD is hassled by RhetComp colleagues on the regular for needing to get a PhD, he snaps, "They have never told me I need to get a PhD, and I only have a Master's. It's because you're Black." Another white male tries to enlighten his peers in a communication program about the differences in student respect depending upon who is teaching, sharing an anecdote of co-instruction with a Black female colleague: "They automatically listened to me, and they dismissed her regularly." Those who wish to seem progressive nod. These are some of the same colleagues who later engage in similar behavior with this Black instructor as those students.

For all that The Tone Police explore, there are no songs on any of its albums in which anyone whose misogyracism actually harmed a Black woman admits that they were wrong, that they stereotyped her, that they behaved abominably. Like doctors who admit bias in medicine generally but deny that they or any of their peers ever engage in such—even as they personally deny Black patients opioids or diagnose stress disproportionately in females whose ailments confound them (recommended listening: "Chronic Pain" by Morales & Yong; "Doing Harm" by Dusenbery; and "Judas" by Tarr)—these academics who nod in agreement about the fact of inequitable dynamics always fight to save their personal, and sometimes institutional, brand. It is never they who have committed a specific, bigoted act. Their 'isms exist only in the abstract. You wish that they would make up their minds then. If every single individual moment of micro/macro-aggression is just a misunderstanding on the part of marginalized folk, then perhaps The Tone Police need a song that lyrically highlights privileged academics' unspoken belief that these 'isms do not exist and the research is erroneous. They can't have it both ways.

Of course, these marginalizations do occur. But the task so many of The Tone Police's antagonists are invested in is the obstruction of any notion that they personally have oppressed anyone. There are no apologies, no ownership of actions, no "Yes, me blurting you weren't allowed to use the word profiled was racist af, and I am going to tithe 10% of my earnings to BLM and work on my willful ignorance." The Tone Police are clear in their storytelling: the Black woman is considered the real problem. She interprets actions incorrectly, and even if whatever happened is demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt, she is responsible—for making sure others feel okay about it, for giving the wrongdoer a pass, for not causing a scene. These dynamics guarantee that freedom is not promised by any future…unless The Tone Police change their tune.

Word is that the band is working on a new album that musically hearkens back to Stevie Wonder's "Songs In The Key of Life." The title track "Truth and Reconciliation" begins like Linkin Park's "Wretches and Kings" from *A Thousand Suns*. Instead of Mario Savio's "bodies upon the gears" speech, we hear Ibram X. Kendi say, "Indeed, the heartbeat of being antiracist is confession. The heartbeat of being racist is denial." (Women's Leadership, 10:12-10:20). This album remixes all of The Tone Police's tracks but with changed outcomes. Not only do the bad actors apologize with full ownership of the wrongs they committed, they offer suitable reparation and/or restitution, a step that Dr. Harriet Lerner deems essential to any true apology (Brown's "I'm Sorry" with additional recommended listening: "Effective Apology" by Carter). In order to resolve past harms, The Tone Police is choosing to write songs showcasing truth and reconciliation rather than calling for a clean slate or unity—refrains that benefit oppressors only.

At least I hear that's what this new album will be about. I long for a number of choruses that scream, "Stop being so f'ing racist!" but, of course, that is unlikely. Screaming isn't right for every genre. Such lyrics also would neglect the misogyny that serves as an essential ingredient for much of The Tone Police's *RhetComp* toxins. The band also needs remixes that address other songs from previous albums including, "Perpetual Foreigner," "You're So Articulate," "Where Are You From?" and "Who Would Have Thought You Were Gay/So Old/Disabled!" (recommended listening: "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life" by Sue). The Tone Police have got a lot of / ˈ*rītiŋ* / to do! But the band is hopefully opening a new door, and we eagerly welcome them through.

Notes

1. References not otherwise cited in-text are hereinafter incorporated with a "producer" credit or as "recommended listening."

2. All anecdotes/interviews/testimonio, infra, are on file with the author. Minor details including names have been altered so as to provide parties relative safety. Many thanks to reviewers including Matthew Davis, PhD, and editors Ersula Ore, PhD, Christina Cedillo, PhD, and Kim Weiser, PhD. Gratitude also to Black women who gawd-derned get it done every day.

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