

Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

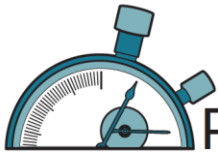
"They Call Me Dr. Ore"

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"They Call Me Dr. Ore"

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Roderick A. Ferguson said it: "It's a strange thing to find yourself as a character in the book you just wrote, especially when the book is neither fiction nor autobiography."¹ The book I had just written wasn't so much a book as a brief affirming of the connection between lynching, American citizenship, and American civic identity. It's hard to dispute: America's tradition of lynching parades the colorline logic of the social contract in ways that force us to question who "the people" really are and the ways in which America's narrative of progress eclipses the continued and sustained racialization of American civic belonging. I'd sent the manuscript out Spring 2014 with a note to the press that the conclusion wasn't complete. "There's something missing. I don't know what it is but I trust I'll figure it out by summer's end," I told the editor. How was I to know that I was what was missing from the book?

It was the first day of Summer Session A, and I had just wrapped up a three-hour seminar introducing students to the history of rhetoric. Class had ended a few minutes early, so I invited students to ask any lingering questions before we concluded for the evening.

Number 2 Male, 1: "So you have a PhD?"

I chuckle at the first question. "*So you have a PhD?*" is a classic question. College students of color don't ask me if I'm qualified to teach them; rather, they tell me that they've never had a

black professor before and ask me what it's like. White students, on the other hand, never fail to go straight for my credentials. It's a given. My students, all of whom were white and male, looked confused by my laughter. This tickled me even more. Usually I get Phyllis Wheatley'd just shortly after class introductions. This time, however, my students were polite enough to hold interrogation until the end of class.

Me: "Yes. I have a PhD," I reply.

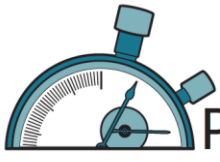
Number 2 Male, 2: "Where did you go to graduate school?"

On account of today being the first day of classes and a strategic awareness to be generous now as a provision for checking bullshit later, I answer simply.

Me: "Penn State."

Passive aggressive whiteness is the practice of the day, and I find myself learning more and more how to take this bullshit in stride; battling an epistemological system that assumes me always already "out of place" is a constitutive feature of my lived experience and, thus, a chief component of my rhetorical situation. This is my life behind enemy lines, a life constrained by quotient attacks on my humanity, civic personhood, and body.

When I announced that I'd be taking the job at Arizona State, friends and colleagues joked about my need to be careful. "Do you have your



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papers?" was a question I was regularly teased about, given that Arizona had just passed Senate Bill 1070, a bill that rendered non-whiteness—specifically, brownness—as "reasonable suspicion" to stop, interrogate, and detain drivers. I asserted that I'd be fine. "I pass the brown paper bag test," I joked. SB 1070 follows suit with Stop and Frisk legislation, except it specifically targets brown bodies, as these are the bodies considered within the broader context of Arizona border politics as "bodies out of place." While I knew Arizona was dangerous, I nonetheless considered myself "safe." In my mind I was less likely to be policed because unlike the Mason-Dixon of home, Arizona's border politics demanded brown bodies, not black ones. Or so I thought.

Class ended and I began my way home. I take the light rail to and from work, and so made my way down College Avenue towards Tempe Transit Center. The road was closed off to oncoming traffic in both directions, signs were everywhere along with makeshift walk-routes to help pedestrians avoid dangerous sections of ongoing construction for the new School of Sustainable Engineering and The Built Environment. I was crossing the street when a car entered the corridor. I figured that the driver hadn't noticed the "Road Closed" sign that secured the street from automobile traffic. I guess he didn't see the "Road Closed" sign just behind me either. What happened next was confusing.

I had stopped crossing the street when I saw the car bolting down the corridor. The car stopped just after I did. For a moment we were both idle. I assume that he saw me, given that he stopped, and so I signaled with my hand whether or not it was okay to continue crossing.

Me: *"Can I go, do you want to go?"* I gestured with my hand. He didn't acknowledge me, but instead sat there looking at me.

I pointed to the "Road Closed" sign behind me thinking that he would see it and buck a U-turn, like all the other drivers who blew past the first "Road Closed" sign before realizing that there was nowhere to go but back the way they came. He still didn't move. He just sat there looking at me. It wasn't until I proceeded to continue crossing that he threw on his lights, sped up, and stopped directly in front of me. It was then that I realized it was a police car. Shit made me nervous cause it didn't really make any sense. The way he waited to rush me, throwing on his high beams, siren, and stopping the front door directly at my waist was unnerving. Folks looking to intimidate and spook are the ones who rush women crossing the street, not cops.

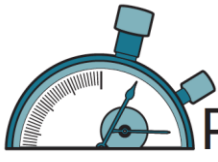
Me: *"What does he want?"* I thought. *"Is there something going on at the light rail station?"*

I was walking in a corridor notorious for rape, so I thought that perhaps the officer, who didn't identify himself as an officer except to throw on lights and obstruct my way home, might be there to warn me of danger up ahead. But that wasn't the case.

Ferrin: "Do you know the difference between a street and sidewalk?"*²

I was blasting Kendrick Lamar's "Good Kid," but I knew I'd heard him despite "step on his neck as hard as your bullet proof vest, he don't mind"¹³ flowing through my BeatsbyDre.

Me: "What?" I asked confusedly, removing the left earbud and leaning forward.*



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As I leaned forward, I turned my head north. A fair complexioned woman was crossing the street just in front of the northernmost "Road Closed" sign. *If this is a gender-thing, then why didn't he stop her?*

Ferrin: "Do you know the difference between a street and the sidewalk?"*

I was taken aback by the question. Of course I knew the difference between a street and the sidewalk, but was that really what he wanted? Just to the right of me were two white males crossing the street. *I know this can't be about jaywalking. If so, then we'd all be getting snatched up.* I'm not one to jump to conclusions, but it doesn't take long to assess the situation. It was clear: the darkest body—one African American woman in a black dress, with an orange briefcase, and a polka-dot lunch pail crossing a campus street at night is, despite the white bodies alongside her, the more visibly *seen*.

Needless to say, I didn't make it home that night. Instead I spent over nine hours sleeping on a jail cell floor with a stale roll beneath my head for a pillow because rather than acquiesce to the ways in which white parades as blue, I transgressed. As my father criticized, I was not a "lady in the street."

Me: "Do you always accost women in the middle of the street like this and speak to them so rudely and with such disrespect as you just did me?"*

Ferrin: "What?"*

Me: "Do you always accost women in the middle of the street like this and speak to

them so rudely and with such disrespect as you just did me?"*

Ferrin: "Okay!" he shouted while throwing the car in park.*

The force with which he shifted into park made the car rock and the uniformed white man in the passenger seat next to Ferrin visible. His colors suggested that he wasn't a policeman but perhaps a transit officer. Transit officers don't carry guns. It was at that point that I knew I was in trouble. I had just sassed a white boy in blue in front of his white boy subordinate.

Ferrin exited the car. He was like a tall puffed-up tree, which bothered me because it suggested that he wasn't there to help me but hurt me. Officers of the law don't accost women at night, insult them, and then demand their license without ulterior motive. Nothing about the way the encounter began felt right, and nothing about the setup did either—the passenger seemed passive, Ferrin was clearly posturing, and Ferrin consistently misapplied the law, all of which made me question whether or not either of them were actually officers.

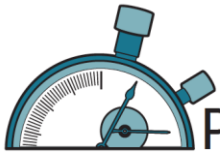
Ferrin: "Give me your license!"*

Me: "Give you my license? For what?"*

Ferrin: "Give me your license or I'll arrest you for failure to show ID."*

Me: "Give you my license—you haven't even told me what I'm in violation of!"*

Ferrin said that I was obstructing a public thoroughfare and that he'd arrest me for failure to show ID, but it didn't make sense. The logic was all-wrong and I didn't have a problem with



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telling him that.⁴ When he realized that intimidation wasn't working, he made one final demand.

Ferrin: "You have one more time to give me your license or I will arrest you for failure to show ID!"*

Me: "Man, FUCK YOU! I ain't givin' you SHIT!!!"*

It was at that point that he grabbed me. The rest was, as too many black folks already know, history.

mouths and drink their drinks as black women like me get choke-held and spun to the ground. My dress goes up when I hit the ground; the other officer knees me in my back as Ferrin partially dislocates my right shoulder to handcuff me. I scream because I know no one can see me on the ground. I scream because I've been taken down. I scream because I have no other means of expelling my rage and awareness that it will be my body along with Trayvon's and Michael's that will conclude the manuscript. I must be the one to get away if I want to live to speak another day. And so, rather than continue to fight back, I scream.

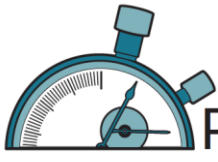
My name is Ersula Jawanna Ore, but America calls me Number 1 Female⁵, Strong/Angry Black Woman⁶, "the prickly professor,"⁷ black bitch, and "Dr. Whore"⁸ because these are imaginings White Democracy needs to sustain itself. If I can be certain about anything, it's that an intelligent, unapologetically self-respecting black woman is a marketed problem in America, another kind of sacrificial lamb. Stereotyped as hot-tempered, angry, and too smart for their own good, black women like me get spread across cars in the dead of night as a sea of white onlookers picnic at a pub feet away and watch.

Me: "I'm not invisible! I'm not invisible! Don't stand idly by and let this happen! I'm not invisible. I know you see me!"⁹

I don't shout "HELP!" because I know that assistance from others is not an option for black women in the street, particularly when those women are tussling with white men in blue uniforms. I shout that I'm not invisible several times but no one moves except to stuff their

The months that followed my assault and unlawful arrest were perforated with black bodies in the street, with Ferguson burning, my hometown of Baltimore erupting, and Charleston mourning. I watched as courts nationwide justified the murder of black citizens under the guise of democratic justice and as children nationwide learned that the best way to survive white America was to follow the example of a 5-year-old girl and play dead. I watched because watching was all I could do. Felony charges and national attention have a way of tying your hands, keeping you silent, and making you fester over the hypocrisy of American democracy.

My name is Ersula Jawanna Ore, and I'm the one who told a white man with a badge and a gun to go fuck himself all the while remembering how Jordan Davis' "Fuck You! Turn that shit up!" got him riddled with bullets; all the while knowing that black bodies enacting self-respect and civic personhood end up hanging from trees, raped,



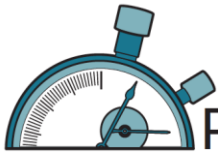
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jailed, murdered in jail, and dead in the streets. I am still not whole, still not healed, but I am, unlike so many others, still alive. My name is Ersula Jawanna Ore, and I am here to say the names of those who can't:

Aiyana Stanley-Jones	Tanisha Anderson	Sandra Bland
Renisha McBride	Michael Brown	Zikarious Flint
Mya Hall	Tamir Rice	Jeremy Lake
Eric Garner	Ramarley Graham	Yvette Smith
Freddie Gray	Tamon Robinson	Walter Scott
John Crawford	Rekia Boyd	Jonathan Ferrell

Endnotes

1. Ferguson, Roderick A. "[Self-Portrait 2015](#)." *Bully Bloggers*. Bully Bloggers, 12 May 2015. Web.
2. *Indicates that the dialogue presented transpired before Ferrin ordered ___ to turn on the dash cam and begin recording.
3. Lamar, Kendrick. "Good Kid." *good kid m.A.A.d city*. Interscope Records. 2012.
4. "Report of Administrative Investigation, Re: Arizona State University Police Department ASUPD IA No. 2014INT-008 (Officer Stewart Ferrin)." 2 Dec. 2014.
5. Common police jargon for "Black Female" is "Number 1 Female." "Number 2 Female" is code for "White Female."
6. Morgan, Joan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000; Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000; Beauboefu-Lafontant, Tamara. *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009; Harris-Perry, Melissa. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011; Walker-Barnes, Chanequa. *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014.
7. Stern, Ray. "[No Respect: A Prickly Professor's Violent Arrest by a Badge-Heavy Cop Brings out the Bully in ASU](#)." *Phoenix New Times*. 8 Apr. 2015.
8. From teaching high school and college, I have regularly "accidentally" been referred to as "Dr. Whore" rather than "Dr. Ore" during times when students feel as though I've overstepped my "place." When checked, the common report is "No, No. You heard me



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wrong, Dr. Ore. I said, Dr. ORE, not DR. WHORE." I've come to read "Dr. Whore" as synonymous with "Bitch," which is often forwarded when I refuse to acquiesce to the assumed superiority of white students.

9. Stern, Ray. "[New Videos Released of ASU Professor Ersula Ore's Arrest](#)." *Phoenix New Times*. 19 Feb. 2015.



Ersula Ore teaches courses in, contemporary rhetorical theory, critical theories of race, and first-year writing at Arizona State University. Her work has appeared in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *Pedagogy*, and the *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*. Her manuscript, *Lynching: A Rhetoric of Civic Belonging*, is currently under review.