“Y’aaaaas,” “Okay nah,” and other Black Woman Utterances About a Proposed Cultural Production Approach

JONI BOYD ACUFF
The Ohio State University

I’m a wanderer when I read. I am animated when words make the hairs on my arms raise. I ask questions mid-sentence. I write personal stories in the margins. I scratch out words and replace them with other words that help me make sense of the author’s writing. I yell out “y’aaaaas” in agreement, and I mutter “umph” when I am provoked. This is my process. When I then write, using what I have read and internalized, my emotional bursts are tempered, muted…institutionalized, and what I present to the world turns into “scholarship.”

When asked to do a response to Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2020) paper, I felt honored to know Rubén trusted me to take great care when reflecting on his words. At the onset, I was ready to sit down, read his words carefully, and then write a 2,000 word response that asked questions, tackled his propositions, and reflected on his conclusions and implications for the future. It was sure to be a solid piece of scholarship. However, after internalizing his work, I felt called to respond much differently than with a traditional academic paper. Specifically, while reading, I recognized that, while Rubén suggests a recasting of “the arts,” “the arts” can be replaced with any other institution that signifies “the presumed superiority of European cultural sensibilities and affective ways of knowing and, by extension, of whiteness as a way of being” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 8). This includes the institution of “the scholar.”

I was inspired to reject the master narrative and engage outside of the institution that communicates to me, a Black woman, that I cannot write “True dat!” in a paper because it does not fit into the way “the scholar” has been culturally defined, practiced, and valued. As Rubén, I believe these discourses make clear that whiteness is at the helm; therefore, my response to his work actually activates his propositions and works to delegitimize the discourse of “scholarship.”

I created three visual representations of my raw engagement with the material. I did not translate it into “scholarship.” It exists as this Black woman’s authentic engagement with the proposed orders of cultural production. In the images are my wanderings, curiosities, provocations, connections, and delights about Rubén’s assertion that utilizing a cultural production approach situates creative symbolic work at the heart of all learning. You will find excerpts of Rubén’s paper overlapped by assertions, questions, and stories. You will witness my shouting. You will participate in my sense-making of his proposed “orders.”
Acuff • “Y’aaaaas,” “Okay Nah”

Image 1. “First thing first, yaaaaas!”
Image 2. “Don’t believe the hype”- Public Enemy circa 1988
Acuff ♦ “Y’aaaaas,” “Okay Nah”

Image 3. “Can my mommas shrimp and grits recipe be considered cultural production?”
References


