

AFTERWORD: NARRATIVES THAT DETERMINE WRITERS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE WRITING CENTER WORK

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Recently, I took over as my campus' writing center director. I'll be honest. I haven't worked in a writing center since I was a graduate student at Oregon State (that was in the early 90s). I have a lot to learn. While I've helped assess and review the writing center at Fresno State and the one I'm currently directing, I haven't read carefully in the literature for two decades. This summer has been one of rereading the literature on writing centers, and reading newer scholarship (to me). When I left writing centers and its scholarship in the early 90s, the discussions were about encouraging writers to take control of the consultation, to find ways to have them read and write on their drafts. It was about collaboration, agency-building, and student control. I remember working hard to find ways to be collaborators, not teachers, to have the writer read and mark on her draft. But we never talked about race or racism in writing center practices, never discussed the ways whiteness and whiteness saturated writing centers and their practices. While in 2007 Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet identify the limited ways that writing center training texts address race and racism, the discussions I find in the literature today are ones that at least approach such concerns. These more recent discussions are ones about multilingual writers, diversity in writing centers, and the complexities around working alongside the growing numbers of international writers in U.S. colleges and universities. Many of these questions were initiated by Nancy Grimm in 1999, with other voices contributing important ideas, such as Victor Villanueva's on the new racism, Paul Kei Matsuda's on "the myth of linguistic homogeneity," Vershawn Ashanti Young's on "code-meshing," Ben Rafoth's on engaging with multilingual writers in writing centers, and of course, Greenfield and Rowan's important 2011 collection, *Writing Centers and the New Racism*. But as Geller et al. discuss, there still is much work to be done around identifying white privilege and, I'll add, white language privilege, in writing center practices.

I am encouraged by this special issue. It continues these discussions, applying them to graduate student writers in writing centers, looking mostly at multilingual graduate students and graduate students of color. But what encourages me most is that there are

several scholars of color contributing. We need these voices since scholars of color haven't been a part of writing center discussions much over the years, as far as I can tell. The issues explored fall into roughly two groups for me, which provide a way to construct a possible narrative to guide future work. Several articles narrate graduate student experiences and efforts in which writers succeed despite the system, not because of it. Alvarez, Aguilar, Brito, and Salazar discuss their own community building in response to being marginalized because of their Latina linguistic heritages while writing their dissertations. Similarly, Epps-Robertson recounts her frequent trips home to a familiar and safe community, a community shaped by racialized dispositions and languaging that helped her "write herself home" and into her dissertation. Bell and Hewardine discuss their affinity group of two that provided support for them in their doctoral programs, while Kells's "cultural ecotone" describes a graduate student designed and operated community writing center in downtown Albuquerque in which graduate students exercise agency and control. These are stories of succeeding despite male-centered, heteronormative, white, middle class educational systems and language norms. We need to understand the variations on this theme in and around local writing centers, so that writing centers—or more crucially, the students in them—can shape institutional pathways for themselves to explore and express in a multitude of ways, in a multitude of Englishes, Englishes that are celebrated and rewarded in the system, not punished by it. This work is surely more than typical writing center work, as Kells' article suggests it could be. What this theme, to me, suggests is for writing centers to be revolutionary change-agents in the institutions and communities in which they are situated. It means they facilitate structural changes in society, disciplines, and the institution itself. Yes, I think, writing centers are more than centers of writing, but centers for revolutions, for social justice work.

Many of the articles in this issue also discuss ways that the Marxian concept of determination functions in graduate students' work in writing centers, particularly around how that writing is read and judged. Now, none of the authors use Marxian language, like

determination. I'm using it as a convenient way to describe what I'm reading in the articles. Marxian determination, as discussed by Engels, says that people function within systems and processes of history that are determined, meaning there are both pressures in a certain direction and a setting of limits. In the ways Engels (and even Marx) use the term to describe economic and social systems, determination is more nuanced than simply saying that we are predetermined to make certain choices or see things in particular ways. Raymond Williams explains that "to determine or be determined to do something is an act of will and purpose" (87), so there is agency in Marxian determination. To give an example, consider going to the store to buy something to drink. You have choices, some kind of soda, an array of orange and fruit juices, bottled water, etc. You can buy from a local company or from a national or international one. You are not forced to buy any one drink or kind of drink. You have choice, but your choices are constrained by what is on the shelves at the store, and by information you happened to find important in making a decision about those drinks and companies. For instance, you are pressured to see some drinks as more preferable for a variety of reasons. You refuse to buy any product produced by large, multinational corporations or that contain high fructose corn syrup. Thus you can buy and drink anything you wish, yet you cannot buy and drink just anything (everything possible to drink is not on the shelves). There are pressures and limits. You have choice, but that choice is constrained. Your purchase of the drink you ultimately get is determined in these ways. Our reading and judging of student writing is equally determined by the courses, disciplines, and institutions in which we exercise our agency as readers.

The articles here narrate such determination in writing centers around graduate student work. For instance, Whitcomb experiences pressures and limits when reading a multilingual nursing student who has no plans to be an academic but finds herself writing academic papers. Green shows her own pressures and limits with speaking and writing in and between various languages, comparing it to "Graft Versus Host Disease," a problem caused by treatments for diseases like cancer. Keedy and Vidal's concept of "productive chaos" illustrates their own disabled work together that attempts to deflect pressures while staying within limits of writing a dissertation. Burrows's "Black tax" explains his and other Black graduate student writers' constraints and pressures that often are ones levied only on Black students. Martinez's CRT-inspired counterstory reveals both racist assumptions by those who read grad students of color and the "colonial

functioning of the academy," both of which show more limits in the ways we are pressured to judge academic writing. Meanwhile, Smith-Campbell and Little's "pedagogical love" adopted from Freire, offers a kind of corrective to such determination in reading practices, as do the rhetorical frames used in writing centers that dictate our work that Cirillo-McCarthy, Del Russo, and Leahy discuss. This theme is one in which the authors become conscious of the ways their work is determined, the ways their work has limits and pressures. To see the limits and pressures, to see the determination as such, is the first step toward revolution, toward antiracist practices, toward communities that resist the structures of white supremacy that create our educational institutions and world.

These two important themes might govern the rhetorical frames we tell about ourselves that then construct our work and lives in writing centers, as Cirillo-McCarthy, Del Russo, and Leahy remind us. Let me join the two themes together in order to create a Franken-narrative, if you will.

Writing centers are often places where students and tutors create success in both quietly, cooperative ways and contentious, tense ways, despite the institutional structures around them that determine students' learning and languaging and tutors reading and judging practices, all of which set limits on their languaging and pressure people to succeed in particular ways.

We might read "success" to be about reproducing particular kinds of dominant Englishes expected of grad students in various disciplines, or we might think of it as a set of ideal dispositions toward language and its valuing. Regardless, the frame that I am trying to articulate that encapsulates both themes might be seen as revolutionary work, social justice work, antiracist work, even peace work.

What all the articles in this special issue avoid, however, is an explicit account of how whiteness and whitely ways of being determine much of what happens in writing centers, but this is a crucial part of social justice work in our world today. Detailing whiteness and dismantling white privilege, which includes white language privilege, is a part of what I see trying to happen in these stories and counterstories. Several articles talk around whiteness and assume white language privilege, perhaps the most obvious accounts are those by Burrows, Martinez, and Epps-Robertson, but none reveal and define it, particularly in our reading practices in consultations with student writers (graduate or undergraduate). To me, this seems key to addressing all the issues of racism and oppression that most of the authors discuss. It's an accounting of the

white supremacist system that causes all these problems, whether they are located in gendered, disability, racialized, national, or linguistic differences. Why? Because white supremacy determines the entire system—is the system—and structures the limits and pressures of all writing center work, whether it is with or by graduates or undergraduates, faculty or staff.

I'm not criticizing the good work of these authors, nor am I suggesting that folks refocus their work in writing centers away from critiquing, say, assumptions around disability, or heteronormative practices, or gender issues, or class and economic issues that have bearing on language choices and the valuing of such languages and bodies. What I'm trying to say is that my reading of these authors' works shows me what needs happening next in my own writing center and likely many others. What these articles show are the symptoms of a white supremacist, heteronormative, ableist, middle class, masculine system that is the problem because this system tends to set up singular linguistic standards that writing centers are then expected to promote—and it's hard not to fall into this trap when we have a hard time seeing the system and how it determines our own reading and languaging practices. I, like Geller et al., suggest we might begin such intersectional social justice work in writing centers by focusing on racism and white privilege first because they cut across other dimensions of oppression (92). White language privilege is our common oppression. Yes, even white people are hurt by white language supremacy, although they are given more advantages, too.

So let's talk about this problem in concrete ways in order to solve it. How, you ask, might writing centers do this work? Perhaps, Cirillo-McCarthy, Del Russo, and Leahy offer a good start: carefully looking at our mission statements that provide the frames by which we understand what our work is and how we do it. If one is to approach writing center work from an antiracist agenda, we might ask: How might white language privilege and whiteness dispositions inform our writing centers' mission statements, or determine our tutor practices with students? I'd be hypocritical if I didn't admit that the writing center I direct can stand to work on its own mission statement and practices, which we've begun to do in staff meetings over the last few months. These things take time, and not everyone sees things in the same ways. Here's our most recent articulation of our mission statement: "The UWT writing center (a part of the TLC) endeavors to compassionately celebrate and support the languaging labors and products of our diverse undergraduate and graduate students within a welcoming and safe atmosphere." I might revise this statement even now,

changing the term "safe" to "brave," considering the good arguments made by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens on "brave spaces" as spaces where social justice work can be done. The emphasis is on allowing folks to expect a level of discomfort and difficulty, which may feel unsafe to many white people—but being uncomfortable ain't the same as being safe. Discomfort is the first step to growth and change. Being safe is the absence of harm.

Our mission statement is followed by a list of goals that we plan to explore in our practices and assess in order to improve the center's work. Our goals include:

- Cultivate a safe and inclusive space for learning and the exchange of ideas that explicitly addresses the relevant issues of social justice that matter to the lives of students (and faculty)
- Encourage faculty and others to talk about the Writing Center as a place for collaborative feedback for all writers, rather than a place of remediation
- Help students understand and respond to feedback in useful ways
- Help students increase their confidence as communicators
- Cultivate and maintain campus partnerships with other units and faculty
- Engage in outreach and in-class workshops/class visits in order to increase student participation in the TLC
- Engage in practices that celebrate a diverse range of student strengths as communicators
- Help students achieve academic and professional success in ways that are self-conscious and critical of themselves as language/symbol users

What is absent, or perhaps nascent, in the above mission statement and list of goals is any discussion of the white racial *habitus* that informs our practices and UWT teachers' dispositions toward student writing that always forms the context for consultations. This context is no different from all the stories told in this issue. The institutional and disciplinary contexts are always similar in this way. A white racial *habitus*, however it is defined in a particular place, might be thought of as a dominant set of durable and flexible dispositions to read and write in English, even though it is not static nor unified, but varies by discipline, class, location, and instructor, hence it is flexible. I take this idea from Pierre Bourdieu, who theorized *habitus* as ways that people are marked and read, while I've used it elsewhere to explain linguistic, bodily, and performative aspects of the racialized judging of

language (Inoue 42–51). Investigating the places and practices in which a white racial *habitus* is enacted is another way to say we are investigating white language privilege in writing centers. And because writing centers promote dominant white languages, dominant Englishes, by default since they exist in and because of white educational institutions, exist because of predominantly white academic disciplinary histories and theories, it seems imperative that all writing centers investigate the white racial *habitus* existing in their practices and places.

One way to examine practices and places for a white racial *habitus* is through a heuristic of sorts that has helped me in writing classrooms interrogate white language privilege in our judging and feedback of drafts. I'm only now beginning to use this heuristic in writing center work with tutors and others. Recently, my tutors and I used it to make observations on a mock consultation in our annual fall tutor orientation. It is only a first step and delicate work. I suggest preparing the discussions and tutors carefully by considering discussions like Arao and Clemens' article I've already mentioned, Helen Fox's *When Race Breaks Out*, and Ian Marshall's chapter, "Encountering Whiteness as Resistance," in Ryden and Marshall's *Reading, Writing, and the Rhetorics of Whiteness*.

My heuristic began as a way that my students and I defined the main elements or impulses of a dominant white discourse that operates in all of our judgments on writing, and it is informed by the literature on whiteness.¹ I offer it here as a way to think about the primary elements of a white racial *habitus* in writing centers. This includes ways we read student writing, interact with each other, draft our own documentation and mission statements, and rehearse our narratives that construct who we are, what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. There are four main elements to a white racial *habitus*:

- **Hyperindividualism:** self-determination and autonomy is most important or most valued; self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-control are important. Individual rights and privacy are often most important and construct the common good. The truth is always good to hear, no matter how painful, good, or bad it may be (each individual has the right to know the truth).
- **Individualized, Rational, Controlled Self:** person is conceived as an individual who is rational, self-conscious, self-controlled, and determined. Conscience guides the individual and sight is the primary way to identify the truth or understanding. Social and cultural

factors are external constraints to the individual. Meaningful issues and questions always lie within the self; individuals have problems and solutions are individually-based; both success and failure are individual in nature; failure is individual and often seen as weakness. Control of self is important, as is work and staying busy, or being industrious and productive; the uncontrollable in selves, society, or nature cannot be valued.

- **Rule-Governed, Contractual Relationships:** focus is on the individual in a contractual relationship with other individuals; focus is on "informed consent"; model relationships negotiate individual needs. Individual rights are more important and non-political, whereas socially-oriented values and questions are less important and often political (bad) by their nature. There is an importance attached to laws, rules, fairness as sameness, contractual regulations of relationships. Little emphasis is put on connectedness, relatedness, feeling, interconnection with others; individuals keep difficulties and problems to themselves.
- **Clarity, Order, and Control:** focus is on reason, order, and control; thinking (versus feeling), insight, the rational, order, objective (versus subjective), rigor, clarity, and consistency are all valued highly. Thinking/Rationality and knowledge are non-political, unraced, and can be objective. Anti-sensuality is valued while there is a limited value of sensual experiences, considerations of the body, sensations, and feelings. A belief in scientific method, discovery, and knowledge; deductive logics are preferred; usefulness and pragmatism are important measures of value and success. (from Inoue, forthcoming)

If any of the above dispositions to language seem preferable to you, seem right—and they should since you are reading this journal, likely participate in writing centers, and have some success with academic discourse—then you embody to some degree a white racial *habitus*. This doesn't mean you have white skin privilege, or even that you aren't oppressed in other ways in school or society. It simply means you've taken on these structures of languaging, particularly when reading and judging language. They are not inherently bad or wrong, but by the same token, they are not inherently good or right. These dispositions to language participate in white language supremacy when a reader, teacher, institution, tutor, or writing center uses them as a standard for judging quality in writing,

as ideal texts or ideal language practices. When this happens, students get ranked or hierarchized. This ranking is a racialized ranking because the ideal dispositions used as the standard are white. The ranking is one way white language supremacy is enacted.

Our challenge is that there are good things to be had from a disposition, for example, that focuses on reason and order (as in the last element above), but I'm less convinced that we must hold students to some standard that dictates a certain kind of reasoning, or ordering, or that reason and order are preferable dispositions to promote and reward in the academy. Instead, I think, writing centers might form practices in which tutors help writers find ways to problematize (in the Freirean sense) these aspects of their own reading and writing practices and products, not to simply change drafts in order to get a better grade, but to understand the choices made in their fullest social and individual implications, to see the white supremacist determination in their writing labors, to see writing as a determined laboring act in which there are limits set and pressures exerted.

In fact, perhaps a student might be determined in more than the Marxian sense. She might also be determined as in persevering to be the kind of writer she wants to be, to be one that grows the discourses of the academy, and not just one that is confined and limited by it. We can have more than one Gloria Anzaldúa—in fact, we already do. We just don't recognize them as such. For instance, what significance to the individual student or her colleagues in the course who may read her draft does a student's writing practices have if they primarily favor a rhetorical style that leans mostly on appeals to emotion and an arrangement that resists a linear structure, that is associative or random, that is unordered? And what significance would this student's writing have on the class and herself as a writer if she could label some of her dispositions to write as racialized, that she could articulate her own dispositions in opposition to a set of white racialized ones that have oppressed her in the past when used as a standard against her? What if she were encouraged to do this research, to find out how her own ways of languaging may be determined by larger racialized, gendered, and classed structures in society and in her own history. I think, this would give her more power and agency in the ways that many of the authors in this issue seem to demonstrate about their own growing awareness of themselves as embodied, racialized, gendered, and disabled writers who operate in white, middle class, ableist educational institutions.

But maybe most important, such writing center narratives and practices would be social justice work that helps individuals see their interconnectedness, see that they have a common struggle with many others, and perhaps find ways to revolutionize language practices and make change together in the academy. Languaging as a practice and as labor has never been a solitary act, so I wonder how writing centers might resist the notion that just because we have individual sessions with singular writers who ask for help on their own drafts, why the only outcomes for such sessions must be applied only to that singular writer? This suggests that the problems individual writers face begin and end with that writer. No. They don't. They never have. Could we be inadvertently blaming the victim when we don't point out the ways the individual writer is determined by larger, racialized discursive and educational structures and systems? Why cannot individual writing sessions lead us all toward larger language problems, larger social conditions, structures, and work in our classrooms, institutions, and disciplines that determine us all? It seems to me that if most students come to writing centers for help because of the exigency of judging, because their writing is going to be evaluated by another, then it seems our social justice work should help students navigate the social and racialized structures of judgement that determine them in such assessment ecologies in schools.

Notes

1. The literature used to create this heuristic comes from both whiteness studies and contemplative studies: Barbezat and Bush; Barnett; Brookhiser; Elbow; Fox; Hahn; McGill and Pearce; Myser; O'Reilly; Ratcliffe; Roche; Zajonc.

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