DISMANTLING NEUTRALITY: CULTIVATING ANTIRACIST WRITING CENTER ECOLOGIES

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There is a temptation when working in writing centers, composition classrooms, and other language-focused sites for us to say that we want students to be stronger communicators, stronger writers, stronger speakers. Yet, in the writing center at least, this notion of "stronger" is often understood as adherence to the rules of "Standard American English" (SAE). There are other names for this so-called standard: the Language of Wider Communication (LWC), the dominant discourse, academic discourse, and so on. We who work in writing centers often convince ourselves that because we are focused on language, then we are free from bias, and that language and literacy are neutral skills. We want to help students, after all. We tell them that, yes, you've been writing for years now, but we can teach you to write better. Or, and somehow this seems worse to me, you have a home language, but that language is inadequate for your new setting. In this article, I explore the potential complications of running writing centers at minority serving institutions (MSI), with special attention to Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and how thinking of writing centers as ecologies can provide keener insight into the real work of writing centers.

Context

The University of Houston-Victoria (UHV) is located in Victoria, Texas, a small city that sits roughly two hours from Houston. UHV was established in 1974, but primarily served upper-division, graduate, and nontraditional students. In 2010, UHV achieved downward expansion, which dramatically changed the type of student being served: traditional freshmen from urban backgrounds and with diverse racial and ethnic identities. In 2009, we were a predominantly white institution. In 2010, we became an HSI. More to the point, our Hispanic enrollment increases every year—over 50% of entering freshmen in the fall of 2017 identified as Hispanic, which means UHV will soon find itself in a new category: the predominantly Hispanic institution. At the moment, though, UHV is not unlike other HSIs in the country. Many of our programs are underfunded, the majority of our students are from low-income backgrounds (regardless of race or ethnicity), and our graduation rates are relatively low (García, "Complicating" 118).

However, the HSI designation only accounts for enrollment numbers and doesn't necessarily track how Hispanic students are actually served at the institution. In an attempt to more intentionally serve Hispanic (and all) students at UHV, I began critically questioning the work I did in the writing center, a liminal space between the academy proper and the student body, a space where the most vulnerable students often found themselves. While I like to think I approached this project objectively, I must also recognize my own positionality as a Mexican American who grew up in the area. In some sense, I want to help students who are like me.

What seems to be key for transforming a writing center is the shift away from the ways in which writing centers treat individuals and an emphasis on the ways in which a writing center exists within the larger ecosystem of the university. Nancy M. Grimm asserts, "[A]n ideology of individualism not only shapes writing center discourse but also *races* writing center practice, making it inhospitable to students who are not white" ("Retheorizing" 76). She proposes a social learning theory that challenges the unquestioned mottos of writing center work in order to make the writing center more welcoming to all students and to avoid the pitfalls of the cozy home. However, the writing center as home is not the only problematic metaphor draped over writing center praxis.

The Writing Center as Metaphor

Other scholars have dissected the ways in which writing centers suppress and oppress minoritized students. Grimm posits that writing center administrators should be "more fully aware of the ways that literacy practices reproduce the social order and regulate access and subjectivity" ("Regulatory" 5). Like border processing centers, writing centers decide who can and who cannot enter the university; that is, who does and does not belong. Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski extend Grimm's idea, comparing the writing center to a colonizing site, one where "basic writers are expected to speak an academic language foreign to them" (51). In particular, Bawarshi and Pelkowski problematize the apparent neutrality of

process-oriented models, questioning whether focusing on process is any less deleterious than focusing on products (45-46). However, as they analogize the writing center as a colonizing force, it becomes clear that acculturation, and not more effective writing, is the true (though implicit) goal of the writing center. That is, it regulates and "corrects" students.

As Stephen M. North observes, the writing center is seen "to illiteracy what a cross between a Lourdes and a hospice would be to serious illness: one goes there hoping for miracles, but ready to face the inevitable" (435). If writing centers are hospitals, then the people who go there must be sick. It then becomes the job of those writing centers to "cure" those who visit, in the hopes the patients never have to come again. There are bountiful metaphors that can be overlaid on writing centers, which reflects the richness of their work. Not all of these metaphors have negative connotations. However, there's a specific metaphor that highlights the racial and ethnic erasure in which the writing center, in its protection of the academic discourse, becomes complicit: writing center as migratory site.

If we extend the metaphor further, we can see the Academy, the University, as a different country with its own language, traditions, and culture. The writing center then becomes, essentially, a border processing center. In 2018, I fully intend to invoke all of the political ramifications and disturbing imagery that accompanies discussions of the border, especially here in Texas. The news is filled with horror stories of (brown) children ripped from their parents' arms, (brown) children in cages, (brown) children abused, (brown) children killed. In what ways do these types of stories impact the way universities, writing centers, and classrooms interact with (brown) students? The old way of thinking of writing centers, as neutral sites full of non-evaluative, non-directive questions and prodding, is no longer appropriate for the modern writing center. In order to answer the question of how writing centers serve minoritized students, particularly at minority serving institutions, writing center administrators must begin thinking of changes that can occur at the system level, at the level of the ecology.

Writing Centers and Writing Assessment Ecologies

Asao B. Inoue writes about ecologies in the composition classroom in *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing for a Socially Just Future.* He raises issues with the way in which student writing is judged and connects individual judgment to larger, systemic problems. He asserts,

> We can find racist effects in just about every writing program in the country. We live in a racist society, one that recreates well-known, well-understood, racial hierarchies in populations based on things like judgments of student writing that use a local Standardized Edited American English (SEAE) with populations of people who do not use that discourse on a daily basis— judging apples by the standards of oranges. (6)

He argues that students, particularly students of color, are forced to approximate a white racial habitus and are judged by this approximation. This assessment is seen as a neutral practice, and it is this apparent neutrality that has enabled the practice to go unquestioned. Yet, if we conceive of the writing center as having an ecology, as a larger system, we can begin to see the ways in which our practices can harm students. Inoue claims antiracist writing assessment ecologies "provide for the complexity and holistic nature of assessment systems, the interconnectedness of all people and things, which includes environments, without denying or eliding linguistic, cultural, or racial diversity, and the politics inherent in all uneven social formations" (77). This notion of interconnectedness is especially key when thinking of writing center ecologies at minority serving institutions.

In "The Idea of a Writing Center," North advocates for a process-oriented model, deliberately moving away from the act of editing, the "fix-it shop" model. In the process-oriented model, the consultant is focused on changing the student's writing processes rather than the paper—that is, "the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (North 438). Yet, Inoue asserts that ecologies have a quality of "more than," of inter-existing that students must contend with (9), a notion that North doesn't address in "Idea." Indeed, reading through this foundational text of writing center studies, it becomes apparent that North had an idea of a student in his mind as well. In particular, he argues, "[W]riters come looking for us because, more often than not, they are genuinely, deeply engaged with their material, anxious to wrestle it into the best form they can: they are motivated to write" (443). This presumption is somewhat optimistic. While I have certainly worked with motivated students in the writing center, they are more of the exception than the rule. It is far likelier for the uncertain student to visit us, for the insecure student to cross our borders in search of a way to belong in

their classrooms. Because of the remedial nature of the writing center space, motivated students at UHV do not often feel compelled to visit us.

While Inoue discusses antiracist writing assessment ecologies in the classroom, his view of interconnected elements supports Bawarshi and Pelkowski's view of writing centers as colonial sites. In their view, "[t]he shift from a product- to a process-based pedagogy becomes an invitation to interfere with not just the body of the text but also the body of the writer" (45). In ecologies, writers are the writing. People are the products and processes that they create or use. To change the process, then, means to change the person, which has been questioned by other writing center practitioners (e.g., Greenfield, Grimm and Barron, García, Villanueva). Romeo García in "Unmaking Gringo Centers," asserts, "[W]hat was at a stake, among other things, was being an accomplice to my own degradation" (31), which mirrors Bawarshi's and Pelkowski's claim that "the 'exchange' is hegemonically constructed when dominance is called a service; in accepting the service (in this case, instruction in 'good writing'), the oppressed consent to their own domination" (51). Yet, we often call this participatory degradation—this domination—neutral and good for the student.

The help we offer has a certain end goal. As Grimm notes in "Retheorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race," when writing centers want to help students, this usually means we want to make them "more like us, thus (ahem) 'better' and 'equal'" (75). That is, even when a writing center is staffed by "respectful, helpful, and friendly white people," the goal of the writing center is to reduce the markers of race in a student, to essentially un-race them (75). In "The 'Standard English' Fairytale," Laura Greenfield argues that the bulk of writing center and composition work is posed around getting minoritized students to "rid . . . themselves of all linguistic features that may identify them with communities of color" (46). In this view, we see that teaching students how to adhere to SAE has less to do with giving them a wider variety of writing tools than it does with removing the tools we don't like.

However, this presumption of un-racing, or erasing, students is usually based upon an assumed institutional context. That is, a writing center at a PWI might very well have to contend with the potential harm of "improving" student writing when all this means is getting the student to write more like the writing consultant who, at a PWI, is also assumed to come from a certain background (white, middle-class, etc.). Writing centers at PWIs must contend with not just the apparent neutrality of language practices but of the belief in, as Rosina Lippi-Green says, "an ideology of standardization" (218). Laura Greenfield, Nancy Grimm, and Romeo García lay out strategies and techniques for how to mitigate this ideology at PWIs, but MSIs may have to take different approaches. How does having a majority-white staff at an HSI impact students' perceptions of the writing center? Does this reinforce Bawarshi's and Pelkowski's views of writing centers as colonizing sites? Alternatively, if a writing center has a majority of non-white consultants at the writing center, does this enhance the perception of the writing center? Or does this, as García ("Unmaking") puts it, allow students to more easily engage in their own degradation? Do the diverse racial and ethnic positionalities of consultants change the work of the writing center and make it less colonial? Or, since we're still trying to get students to un-race themselves, does having a large minoritized staff further mask that purpose?

My point is that simply placing a writing center in a more diverse space does not remove the regulatory impulses that come from English departments, university administrators, and even within the writing center itself. Having an all person of color (POC) staff does not absolve a writing center from critically engaging with race and race relations. However, this does serve as an opportunity to discuss race and racism in ways that might be more difficult at the majority-white writing center. This isn't to say that African Americans or Latinos experience race and racism in exactly the same ways, but it seems less likely for writing centers with majority-minoritized staff members to suffer the same kind of reactions as Grimm and Barron experience when trying to give race a more central place in writing center training (63). Indeed, discussing race and writing centers with consultants of color, when the manager or director is also a person of color, can generate powerful and meaningful conversations as shown in the conclusion. This isn't to say that one must be a person of color in order to have these conversations. Certainly scholars like Grimm and Greenfield show us that conversations on race and racism are important regardless of the racial makeup of a writing center. However, they also demonstrate that writing center managers and directors should thoughtfully consider their audiences when planning these conversations.

Toward Antiracist Writing Center Ecologies

This section explores the various layers of an ecology. Inoue identifies seven in total. For the purposes of this article, only three of the elements will be touched on: places, power, and people. It is difficult to examine ecological elements individually because of their inter-existing nature, but the three discussed here can be helpful in re-conceptualizing the writing center as an ecology. Before diving into the elements, though, it may be helpful to analyze the writing center as a site of assessment.

Writing centers tend to practice a kind of non-directive questioning, Socratic in nature, that is designed to help students think through their ideas.The ideal consultation may look like a conversation, a back-and-forth exchange between two people. For North, "the essence of the writing center method, then, is this talking" (443). Yet, at some point, the writing consultant must read a document, whether silently or out loud. This might be seen as an innocuous, if necessary, step. Reading is reading. Yet, for Inoue, reading equates to assessment, judgment, evaluation: "Assessment as an act is at its core an act of reading" (15). As we read or listen to a paper being read, we look and listen for errors. From the beginning of a consultation, then, the writing center searches for ways to label and organize people: this one is strong, this other is remedial. Yet, even as we judge, we claim to be non-evaluative. Literacy skills are often conceived of as neutral practices, what Grimm calls the autonomous model of literacy. Grimm asserts, "[W]hile [the autonomous model] insists on the value-free nature of literate forms, it uses these forms to rank and sort students based on features of their texts" ("Regulatory" 19). Conceptualizing the writing center as an ecology can help writing center practitioners move beyond this assessment function.

Of all the elements that make up ecologies, Inoue identifies place as the most significant. He says, "If there is one ecological element that may be the best synecdoche for the entire ecology, it is place. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies, at their core, (re)create places for sustainable learning and living. This is their primary function, to create places, and I think we would do well to cultivate such assessment ecologies that self-consciously do this" (14). Inoue's focus is on the composition classroom, but antiracist ecologies have a place within writing center praxis, too. While they don't put it in this way, Bawarshi and Pelkowski want students to critically engage with the ecology of the writing center, of the university, to "look critically at the changes we are asking basic writers to accept" (50). For Bawarshi and Pelkowski, this critical eye was a way to move beyond the natural hegemonic forces that weave themselves into the fabric of the writing center. Inoue, with his ecological perspective, seeks to dismantle those hegemonic forces completely.

If a place makes up the entire ecology, then the physical space of the writing center ought to be taken into account. This doesn't mean coordinators and directors need to look at alternate spaces to move into or begin new construction. What it does mean is taking note of the physical space the writing center currently occupies. What objects are in it? What's on the walls? What kind of chairs and tables are there? Round tables seem to be preferable, but I've found that any table shape will work as long as the consultant is careful to sit next to, rather than across from, the student. This positioning helps control the flow of power both within the consultation and even within the writing center.

For Inoue, power "operates through the disciplining of bodies and creating spaces that reproduce docile behavior as consent" (121). In this way, Inoue's discussion of power ties into Bawarshi and Pelkowski's idea of the colonial writing center. "Power *is* the environment," Inoue says (122), because it flows throughout a space and between people, controlling behavior. In a consultation, who has power and who doesn't? Who can write on the document and who can't? Who is talking? If we're attempting non-direction, then the writing consultant's goal is to ensure that power flows primarily from the student. In a process-oriented model, we might say that we're giving the student increased agency, encouraging her to take control of her writing, that she wants control of the writing. Yet, some students do not want control of their writing. They want the consultant to be the sage on a stage and to give them useful, easy-to-understand directions.

Who, then, has power in the consultation? Who should have power? These types of questions are not necessarily appropriate for an individual consultation, but they are certainly topics that can be discussed among writing center staff. Inoue says, "[I]nterrogating power in an assessment ecology is important because it sets up the rest of the students' problematizing practices" (123). Writing consultants, then, should be encouraged to think about how power is distributed between themselves and students, between themselves and writing center administration. At UHV, every comment is framed as a suggestion or recommendation, and it's up to the student to decide what advice to take and what to discard. However, it is equally important to help the student understand why they may take some pieces of advice and not others.

Many of the student writers at UHV, especially younger and less confident ones, want nothing more than to do what the writing consultant tells them. They're not lazy, just scared. So they come to the writing center for help.

While a place may contain the entire ecology, a place is defined to an extent by the people who occupy it. That is, while we may conceive of the writing center as a physical site, it's equally composed of the people who visit. Who visits the center? Is it mostly freshmen and sophomores? More women than men? More students of color than white students? Unlike other aspects of an ecology, the people within an ecology are ever-changing. The racial makeup and variety of background experiences changes year-to-year based on changes in the student body.

When UHV downward expanded in 2010, we saw a very rapid demographic shift from mostly non-traditional white students to younger, browner students. A change in people, then, necessitates a change in approaches and strategies. Inoue posits, "The local diversities that make up the students and teachers of a writing assessment ecology have their own purposes for the environment and may even design the assessment ecology itself" (138). In turn, the way an ecology defines people may also define the spaces which they are allowed to occupy. In this way, we see that the writing center is not just a site of remediation—it has this designation because the people who are referred to the space are themselves seen as remedial. Inoue asks, "Is it true that African Americans and Hmong are remedial because they are not prepared to write in college, or is it true that the designation of remedial, among other elements in the system, such as the bias toward a white racial *habitus* in the [standardized test], constructed such racial formations as remedial?" (139). Like Greenfield, Inoue asserts that the perception of remediation, of needing help, is formed more by an assessment of student bodies than actual student writing.

Conclusion

When I began to develop a training program centered around antiracist writing assessment ecologies, I had some concerns about introducing the topic to my staff. In the south, it's somewhat gauche to discuss sexuality, gender, race, and all the other things we can see but pretend that we can't. When I finally presented on antiracism, I made it more a discussion of ecologies and power, avoiding mentions of race. I thought, perhaps, that it would be a distraction or that I would be seen as self-serving. What's significant is that I felt this way even at an HSI, where I share a cultural and ethnic background with the majority of students (though, not the majority of the writing consultants). I am empowered by my supervisors and have free reign over the writing center. Yet, my doubt and insecurities remained. The more research I did, though, the more I realized that cultivating antiracist writing assessment ecologies in a border space such as the writing center would be essential to maximize student success, regardless of race or ethnicity. Everyone can benefit from it.

Since then, I've created a revised writing center canon that begins with North then moves to Bawarshi's and Pelkowski's "Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center," Grimm's "The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center," Greenfield's "The 'Standard English' Fairytale," and Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English?" The list is expanding,

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