

POTENTIAL FOR AND BARRIERS TO ACTIONABLE ANTIRACISM IN THE WRITING CENTER: VIEWS FROM THE IWCA SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP ON ANTIRACISM ACTIVISM

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Abstract

The IWCA Special Interest Group (SIG) on Antiracism Activism “is a group committed to undoing racism at multiple levels: in the immediate context of the writing conference and local writing center, and more widely through systematic cross-curricular and cross-institutional initiatives” (“WCActivism”). This piece features the SIG’s participation in the 2018 online IWCA Collaborative at CCCC: the SIG leaders assembled a diverse panel of scholars and practitioners from different races, ages, institutions, and varying levels and types of writing center experience, but with useful and firm beliefs in action. Using Rasha Diab et al.’s 2013 article “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable” as a starting point, the panelists drew on their various perspectives to examine the potential for and barriers to actionable antiracism activism within both the writing center and the IWCA. The authors reflect on antiracism action in, through, and by writing centers and those who work in them, situated within writing centers’ local, academic, and institutional contexts.

Introduction

Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Keli Tucker: The IWCA Special Interest Group on Antiracism Activism “is a group committed to undoing racism at multiple levels: in the immediate context of the writing conference and local writing center, and more widely through systematic cross-curricular and cross-institutional initiatives” (“WCActivism”). The Antiracism Activism SIG became a standing SIG in 2017, and it is currently under our co-leadership. Since taking over leadership for the SIG, our primary goal has been to develop resources and support to help its members move toward the action invoked in the SIG’s name. The 2018 online IWCA

Collaborative at CCCC—a conference moved online because the physical location of Kansas City, Missouri, was deemed too racist by the voting members of IWCA for us to actually go there (Dietz)—seemed an appropriate time to reflect on action, specifically antiracist action. We assembled a diverse panel of scholars and practitioners from different races, ages, institutions and varying levels and types of writing center experience, but with useful and firm beliefs in action. Using Rasha Diab et al.’s 2013 article “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable” as a starting point, the panelists drew on their various perspectives to help us examine both the potential for and barriers to actionable antiracism activism within both the writing center and the IWCA. In their piece, Diab et al. ask their readers to go beyond simply articulating our commitments to racial justice and to move towards concrete, actionable commitments. In their reflections below, presented in the turn-taking structure born out of the Collaborative session, the panelists elaborate on and further explore their responses to the panel’s original questions on antiracism action in, through, and by writing centers and those who work in them, situated within writing centers’ local, academic, and institutional contexts.

Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Keli Tucker: *One of the justifications Diab et al. give for moving past confessional narratives is that*

our personal experiences of and interventions in racism are bound up in systems and institutions, including academic institutions. So, how can those in writing centers work towards building an institutional narrative of racism and/or antiracism, in addition to personal narratives? What is the value of a broader view of racism as it relates to writing centers?

Wonderful Faison: *Institutional Racism: A True American Horror Story.* I always find it odd when people ask me to reflect on something I said previously about racism, since that reflection is always a laborious task. The labor of personal narrative and the labor of resisting those who are dismissive of it as a personal problem and not a systemic and institutional one leaves me dismayed, discombobulated, and downright pissed off. This is truth. This is my truth. White folk get to live in their perfect white imagined world and leave uncritiqued the damage, the bodies, the genocide—all so they can have their segregated neighborhoods. Yet, in the same breath, they suggest that black people who create spaces for themselves (BLM) are committing terrorism against the White State. Facts.

So yes, I attempt to render visible the brutality and racial violence that continues to this day in the academy—the academy I loved. The academy that betrayed me with its white lies of inclusion, tolerance, and social justice. This is truth. This is my truth. Facts.

Elijah Simmons: Do You Wear Your Identity Or Does It Wear You? I ask this question with the purpose of thought; I want you as a reader to ponder on your identity.

Invitation

I used to think ‘bout how my identity changed from building to building . . . room to room.

I used to think if my name was Daquan . . . how would I be viewed on paper?

I used to think if I wore my earrings, hat backwards, tattoos, sneakers and necklace mixed with ma constant “playin of da dozens”

would/should/could offend you.

I think ‘bout how my identity is bigger than me, cuz this . . . is ‘bout the people who look like me.

I think how Dope, Beautiful, and Meaningful Black names are & should be celebrated

I think ‘bout how love is key in erasure of racism.

Jasmine Kar Tang: When I was preparing for this session, I was at home with my kids: my three-year-old and my one-year-old were crawling all over me, the little one drooling, the older kiddo dancing around, both of them tripping over each other. That’s when I started thinking, *This is the work.* One of the most radical acts that I could do as a woman of color in academia is to center my kids. And everything else tells me I shouldn’t think or do this. I have a feeling, for example, that I’m not supposed to talk about my family or my parenting decisions in this session. I’m not supposed to talk about using my breast pump in my office, doing the most intimate of acts—breastfeeding—in this clinical, disembodied space. But if you ask me about antiracism, I will talk about parenting, and I will talk about my kids because every day I think about what their educational environment is going to be one day, as kids of color at PWIs. This transforms into action on my part as a writing center director. I didn’t expect any of this, but what I realize is that every decision I make—especially ones that involve students and staff—I think, “That’s someone else’s child. That could be my kid.” That’s my broader view of racism: it seeps into our daily lives, it’s insidious, and if we don’t address it in our daily practice, it will continue sedimenting in our laws, our ways of knowing, and in our bodies.

Katie Levin: I want to specifically speak to the question, “How can you work toward building an institutional narrative of racism and/or antiracism?” In *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, organizer and black feminist writer adrienne maree brown identifies “interdependence and decentralization” as a key feature of powerful, ethical, justice-oriented group work (50). Citing several examples of root systems

in nature (84–86), brown goes on to describe how a combination of reciprocal responsibility and distributed power strengthens and sustains activist groups to enact systemic and cooperative change. For me, brown’s “root” metaphor calls to mind rhizomes—an underground connected system of roots and nodes that works to nourish and support a whole set of organisms both below and above ground. I’ve been thinking about the ways in which a writing center can be a rhizomic node in collaborative and reciprocal relationships with people in other campus units, through invitation, outreach, and being explicit about sustaining our cross-campus connections, whether they are events to do with antiracism or ways of amplifying the voices of people from marginalized groups. For instance, we at the University of Minnesota connected with the Critical Race and Ethnic Studies graduate writing group on campus (“Critical Race & Ethnic Studies”); we’ve co-sponsored one of their invited speakers for the past two years. We have also literally made space in the center for groups to meet and use the space. For example, we opened the space for the Twin Cities Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) to conduct a two-day collaborative retreat; during the retreat, at the participants’ invitation, we supported their development of a community writing workshop on countering Islamophobia, to be held with the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. In other words, I’m thinking about connections with other units as a way of underscoring shared institutional work for racial justice.

Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Keli Tucker: *How do you see working for racial justice as intersecting with working for other types of social justice?*

Wonderful Faison: *If I Gotta Say Intersectionality One Mo Time*—The real issue with undoing any systemic injustice is that everyone is looking for a silver bullet. The ONE thing that will end racism or homophobia or sexism, or, or, or. Not only is this thinking and approach reductive, it is downright delusional. In whose world (I recognize there may be some other worlds out there we ain’t found yet, soooo) is a complex system of injustice undone by the simplest of solutions?

People can’t even undo the complex internalized “isms” they have within themselves, but societal and institutional injustice can all be undone if we just learn to tolerate or do a workshop on racial and social justice. (Starbucks and the academy have a lot in common, no?) Are we too dense to understand that if workshops and tolerance ended racism everyone in this article would all be talking about something else? Instead, I sit here feeling like the academy is constantly on rewind and repeat, like we some type of broken Blu-ray, I swear.

Undoing systemic justice takes work—and various types of work. You just gotta ask yourself if you wanna do the work, and if not, go away. Don’t go away angry or nuthin, just GO AWAY.

Facts.

Jasmine Kar Tang: My institution, the University of Minnesota, has developed some policies concerning mandated reporting of sexual violence. In response, the Race, Indigeneity, Gender and Sexuality Initiative here is leading an effort to name the intersectional nature of sexual violence, challenging the university administration to enact a more trauma-informed, victim-centered lens. My writing center is fortunate that Dr. Rose Miron, a co-author of the document articulating this vision (Palacios et al.), is a former writing consultant; she led one of our staff meetings to unpack the question, “What would a trauma-informed, victim-centered consulting practice look like?” This is complicated because at our university, students who work at the writing center are considered staff and are therefore mandated reporters. So where does race come into this? Well, what happens, for example, if the mandated reporting situation involves a survivor who is an undocumented student of color?

Wonderful Faison: *Always the victimizer, never the victimized*—I trouble with the idea of victim and I still do. I trouble with this idea because as a black lesbian disabled working-class woman, I constantly feel victimized. However, because I am a black lesbian woman, I am, without question, perceived as the threat, and to a maddening degree, I am perceived as a male threat. I cannot be woman because I am black. I cannot be a victim because I am black. Every story of my racial harassment by white women (who, at times,

are A1 terrorists) gets turned into an interrogation of what I could have said or done to cause racism to happen to me—like being black and existing in a predominately white space was not the genesis of their racism. I swear.

So when the institution that beholds me to report atrocities (and I do) to them, but refuses to see or give validity to the racist, sexist, and homophobic atrocities enacted on my body, I am given more than enough reason for pause and cause for concern.

Facts.

Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Keli Tucker: *Writing centers are located in very rural areas, very urban areas, and many places in between. However, every writing center is located within a community in which racism is codified in both its laws and its culture. How do you see the role of place in antiracism activism?!*

Katie Levin: I'm thinking about the histories of our writing centers. Down the street from my office is Appleby Hall, the former home of the General College, which included one of the earliest-established writing centers in the nation (Lerner). The General College (GC) was designed in 1932 to give access to higher education to first-generation students, including immigrants and people of color. Unfortunately, in the supposed interest of speeding graduation rates, the University decided to close the General College in 2006 (Worku 13). The GC, including its writing center, was known to attract and value more students of color—as both writing center clients and staff—than other units on campus. When the GC closed, things changed. The history of specific centers on campus is couched in a larger colonial history. I feel a bit weird bringing this up without sustained discussion, since merely naming the problem of land theft is not enough, but my whole university, a “Land Grant Institution,” is on stolen Native land. The Little Earth of United Tribes housing community is very close to campus. Native people have been displaced to make this university, and continue to be displaced on campus.

Elijah Simmons: Comfortable Counterstory Narrative (Martinez)

First, we gotta start usin' poppin' methods for conveying students of color on seeing the purpose of writing centers in a way that works for them, as opposed to having a metanarrative of what a writing center is supposed to do. Again, *this* is 'bout them. Reflecting on research I've completed with recruiting Black students to writing centers, a lot of universities have multicultural centers, and those centers don't usually have a *way* of looking. They can be in the auditorium, or it can be in the student center, they can be in the dorm hall. I say this to say place “Don't Matta”; rather it's about the community and interpersonal connections.

Secondly, we gotta connect on a personal level with students.

Pause: As you read this: ask someone where the students of color hangout at. Trust me, there is a place at your university.

Resume: Easy? Hard? Surprised? (Fill in your answer _____)

Third, by now you may be wondering what's a “poppin method”? That all depends on the center you're at and the students. By finding where the students hangout, you may be able to glean their study habits, interests, desires, and goals.

Fourth: I challenge you to find a method that resembles the community they have in their “hangout” spot. I say this because that hangout spot is the place of comfort for the students. I won't cite anyone for my last sentence; rather I ask you to observe how this hangout spot is a resource center, cafeteria, library, hairdresser, gossip hall, and everything else one could do on a campus.

Lastly, I push the idea of place not mattering for the fact these students have created places of familiarity through love for one another, in a location where they can find comfort in their own identity. It's our job to ensure students of color feel secure in their identity in our centers, which can happen by loving on the given identity they possess.

Jasmine Kar Tang: I'm the dramaturg of a group called Aniccha Arts, which stages performances in nontraditional places, and we've long said that our work “interrupts public space.” Not too long ago, the artistic director Pramila Vasudevan and I were ideating about a project, and she reflected, “What does it mean when we say we ‘interrupt public space’ and we're on Dakota land?” *The space and*

place were “interrupted” long ago. In short, our referent frame was problematic, colonial. (Ironic, since we both have roots in colonized places full of brown and yellow bodies.) We continue thinking about and struggling with how to acknowledge the land.

Also, as someone who grew up in east Tennessee, I find that racism often gets pinned on the U.S. South. In the meantime, here in Minnesota, locals talk about something called “Minnesota nice,” which I realize is somewhat like “southern hospitality” (except with a dose of passive-aggressiveness): our understanding of what is “nice” or “hospitable” changes when we consider how white folks have historically interacted with communities of color and indigenous communities (Fuentes et al., Shin, Szczesul). We have to be thoughtful when we talk about regional particularity, ethos, and history, for the racism that we see here versus the racism I grew up with in Tennessee is part of the same monster. My point is, when we as writing center folks hear another administrator reflect on racism at their workplace, we need to think twice about the “my school isn’t like that” response some of us go to.

Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Keli Tucker: *Diab et al. claim, “Writing program administrators and writing center directors occupy positions of power making them responsible for structural components of an educational space” (Diab et al. 32). However, the “power” held by writing center practitioners can be complex and limited, and, in practice, often does not feel like power at all. What suggestions or ideas do you have for overcoming the barrier of having a lack of power within one’s institution, or even one’s center, to conduct actionable antiracism work?*

Wonderful Faison: *Doin what I wanna so maybe you can be free too—Let’s not talk about how black folk are limited. Let’s talk about how black folk, specifically, how black women turn limitations into possibilities, creating pathways to freedom. Let’s talk about what freedom looks like in an always already racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, mysogynoirist academy. Let’s talk about what freedom looks like when you are bound by chains both seen and unseen.*

To see possibilities when bound by chains one must ask: how much give is in this chain? How old and rusty are these chains? Where is the weak link in the chain that bounds and confounds me? How can my mind (the only thing slightly unbound) find freedom in the limitations of these chains?

Generational and systemic racism is hundreds years old (I’m being generous, we know it’s like thousands years old, but let’s keep it to the U.S. for the sake of simplicity), which is old enough to see the rust begin to form on decaying minds that have weakened enough to allow a slim few, intent on undoing the whole chain, to become a part of such a fragile system of bondage. It is here (at this point) right now, there is access. That interloper intent on undoing these chains you must find, you must engage, you must align, you must coerce, you must persuade. Everyone is an access point to somewhere.

But what if you, oppressed body, find you can be or are an access point? What if you, colored body, who has faked it until you made it, have the keys someone has been looking for? What if you, black body, had the power to be resilient in the face of erasure and confirm your existence, your right to be here in this space and just exist?

We are access points. We find ways. We make ways. That is the essence of BlackGurlMagic: We make a way outta no way. Facts.

Elijah Simmons: For this question I looked at Lamar Johnson’s piece called “The Racial Hauntings of One Black Male Professor and the Disturbance of the Self(ves).” Johnson writes, “Our racial hauntings can serve as an onto-epistemic and humanistic violent tool to dismantle white supremacist patriarchy. In other words, if we do not confront our racial ghosts, then it is an act of repressed and symbolic violence against y(our)self that ultimately continues the narcissism of whiteness and white supremacy” (480). I believe to understand one’s racial hauntings, either white or Black, is a poppin’ method for creating interpersonally with students, to understand and connect with the students on a humanistic level. I believe the questions from Johnson’s piece are needed in writing center training; “How does your racial background affect how you exist, and how others that are racially ostracized feel?”, “How does your racial background make you operate in

the world?” and “How does your educational experience value your race?” (10). If we’re trying to become more antiracist, we as in people of color and/or white people—everyone has to try to understand how they can make *this* more liberating, such as uncovering your racial haunting then through loving on all the identities in the center.

Jasmine Kar Tang: When I danced in her company, Dr. Ananya Chatterjea taught me about “wiggling” as a way to navigate a closed system: the institution may present many barriers, but people of color and indigenous peoples must find ways to wiggle through or under it. As she recently shared, this means we need to “find our way in *with our fullness*”—that fullness being “all of our intersectional politics, values, all of our desires” (Chatterjea). Indeed, years of doing this work tell me that we have to insist on maintaining integrity and fullness through the process. And as Diab et al. suggest, “If we’re in the shadow of power, that means we are really, really close to power, and with some creativity, we may be able to make something of the situation” (35-36). Where are other pockets of support for racial justice work? Where are the communities, the other folks at the university, for example, whom we (as writing center directors) might collaborate with and get really creative with?

Katie Levin: I agree with Jasmine about the importance of creative collaboration for justice, and I’m also thinking about Diab et al.’s reminder to critically reflect on our own power/positioning: where do each of us have power *over*, power *with*, power *for*? As a way for me, a white person, to attend to power *with* and power *for*, community activism has been really important. Showing up in justice-oriented spaces as appropriate; reading work by brown, Robin DiAngelo, Ijeoma Oluo, Rinku Sen, the writers at *Wear Your Voice*, and many others; iteratively reflecting on my own positionality; and learning in other spaces from community leaders and community activists, have helped me re-see ways of making or supporting change in the institution. Similarly, when I do activism on campus, I have different risks than students, but I also have different kinds of access to power. I’ve done a lot of learning from and with activist groups and collectives here on

campus that are student-led but are specifically open to everybody. Developing trusting and reciprocal relationships with members of these groups, and supporting them in their work—including from a position of institutional power—then engaging in faculty or staff activism that is supportive of student activism, is something that I and other writing center professionals can do, even if it’s not officially from within our centers. (In fact, our collaboration with the JACL originated when Jasmine and I were participating in an on-campus rally and march in support of Teamster staff; at the rally, we ran into Jasmine’s friend Yuich Onishi, a faculty member and member of the JACL.) Also really important for me is ongoing learning and self-work. I strive to continue seeing sites of power, and ways of taking or supporting action—not only beyond what I could have done five years ago, or last year, or before this panel discussion, but also beyond what I am capable of today.

Elijah Simmons: I’d like to add one last point on trying to create a network of liberating forces. I think interpersonal connections are so essential combined with being more humanistic, making students feel like humans and not just a quota, actually making a bond with them. Lastly, loving on these students, cuz *this* is ‘bout them.

In Conclusion

Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison and Keli Tucker:

In the IWCA Collaborative session on which this piece is based, our hope was to acknowledge the barriers to antiracism, but also to look for and act on (or continue to act on) the potential for meaningful antiracism. We framed this discussion around action and actionable commitment because we believe, like Diab et al., that narratives and conversation are helpful, but more so when combined with intention and action. As Faison noted above, if sitting around and talking to one another were enough, the panel from which this article originated would not have existed. There have been other challenges and calls to action: Harry C. Denny’s *Facing the Center*, Nancy Maloney Grimm’s *Good Intentions*, and Frankie Condon’s *I Hope I Join the Band* are just a few. It is our hope that the conversation here can continue and build upon the work already done in the field, and that

hearing the struggles and successes of the diverse contributors—three of whom are people of color, and all of whom draw on various aspects of their intersectional identities—will be useful. Additionally, while the reflections above have been a means of highlighting the importance of listening to the lived experiences of people of color in our field, we hope that they also demonstrate that the responsibility for antiracism activism lies in each of us. Though some of us may not feel powerful as individuals working within distinct centers, as Levin noted when citing Diab et al., we do have power, and we need also to conceive of it as being “power *with*” and “power *for*”—to ask one another, “What can I help you do?” and “What can we do together?” As Simmons explains in his response above, creating an inclusive community transcends any barriers of place. And as Faison and Tang discuss, we must also ask ourselves whether we have really done all we can do, or whether the anticipation of the barriers we might face in conducting antiracism activism has itself become the barrier.

Since becoming co-leaders of the Antiracism Activism SIG, our goal has been to take our positionality and orientation from Neisha-Anne Green, who, in her 2018 article, “Moving beyond Alright,” called upon those in our field to be not just allies, but also accomplices (29). Moving forward, we intend to take steps to make the SIG and its work more visible within and more vital to the IWCA organization. While not all members of IWCA are members of the SIG, we hope this article will help all members work towards meaningful action and possible solutions for racism in their centers, institutions, and communities. We hope our colleagues’ responses will serve as a catalyst for this action, and will not only help us do what Diab et al. called the “self-work” necessary to the process of antiracism activism, but also prompt each of us to consider all of the potential avenues through which we can make antiracism an essential part of our writing center practices.

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