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Beyond the Known: Writing Centers and the Work of Anti-Racism

by Frankie Condon

During his 2005 International Writing Centers Association keynote address, “Blind: Talking About the New Racism,” Victor Villanueva issued an invitation and a challenge to writing center directors, scholars, and tutors. Villanueva urged us to examine and to address the ways in which race and racism shape writing center identity and practices; enable and constrain knowledge and knowledge production, teaching and learning; and are reproduced not only through the thought and action of individuals, but also and especially through systems and institutions.

Those of us who planned the 2005 IWCA Conference felt our dreams coming true on the day of Villanueva’s keynote. We wanted a keynote address that would take up the matter of race, racism, and writing centers in rigorous, challenging, and compelling ways. We wanted a person of color to speak to our overwhelmingly white discipline in ways that could not easily be turned aside or dismissed. We wanted a sea change in the conversation about writing center theory and practice such that the matters of race and racism would no longer seem strange or tangential to conversations about our writing centers, but central and pressing.

While it is true that over the years many writing center scholars have addressed social justice issues generally and racism in particular, none of us, so far as I can tell, has ever been able to produce the kind of electricity that flowed through the audience that attended Villanueva’s words. Following the conference a flurry of discussion about the keynote address ensued on WCenter. Exhausted and exhilarated, those of us who had planned the conference back-listed, thrilled that the dialogue

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we had hoped for was underway. Then there was silence. Several folks tried to
revive the conversation which sparked and then stilled again. The dialogue about
the ways writing centers might unwittingly manifest or reproduce racism and might
also be powerful sites for resistance against institutional racism had apparently
gone underground once more.

It is difficult to say whether or how individual writing center directors and tutors
have taken up Villanueva's invitation to think, write, reflect, and critically engage
against institutional racism. Some have, I know. The International Writing Centers
Association has recently taken an important step in passing an initiative on diversi-
ty (see http://writingcenters.org/IWCA_Diversity_Initiative.pdf). That initiative
recognizes the organization's need to reach out to communities of color, to histori-
cally Black colleges and universities, to tribal colleges and to learn from leaders of
color how better to resist racism in and through writing centers and better to
honor, support and sustain directors, tutors, and students of color. To the extent
that the IWCA initiative addresses race and racism, it is responsive to Villanueva's
invitation at the disciplinary and organizational levels. What the initiative does not
do (and was not intended to do) is to tell those of us who are white writing center
directors and tutors at predominantly white institutions what our role might be in
working against racism through our writing centers. This work remains for us to
explore and to take up locally.

In service of his argument, Villanueva took note of the ways the concept of race
and the practice of racism have shifted over time. As numbers of scholars have
noted, while race continues to function as a means of sorting, categorizing and
organizing groups of human beings, beliefs about the origins of racial difference
have moved from white supremacy rooted in convictions about an ontological
(God-given) superiority of those classified (or classifying themselves) as white to
convictions about supremacy driven by biological determinism and fed by the “sci-
ence” of race. More recently, as the scientific bases of race have been systematical-
ly debunked, the vestiges of old ideas about race have been buried in new tropes of
culture, ethnicity, and “civilization.” Concomitantly, racism has increasingly
morphed from legalized and explicit forms to implicit, subtle, if equally pernicious
forms of oppression and marginalization. Perhaps most notably this new racism is
marked by the notion that it is possible and desirable to be “blind” to race and that
if individuals, institutions, and systems refuse (pretend) not to see racial difference
that they are, therefore, incapable of enacting racism (Bonilla-Silva 25–49).

If the origins of race cannot be traced to biology and if, as critical race theorists
agree, the experience of people of color in the U.S. is not analogous to the experi-
ences of European ethnic groups migrating to and integrating (or not) into American social, political, and economic life, we must find alternative ways to make sense of race and racism. Whether race is "real" or not, our communities, and the institutions and systems that shape, enable, and constrain our lives interpellate each of us as raced subjects, and our world is ordered differently depending on how we are raced. That is, racism is real. Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe this reality as a complex interplay between structure and representation in a process of "racial formation." They define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55-56). Omi and Winant see racial formation as entailing two linked social forces: representation and structure. They argue that racial formation cannot be understood either exclusively in terms of cultural representation or of hegemony—"the way in which a society is organized and ruled" (56). Instead, Omi and Winant suggest, structure and representation are intimately connected in an evolving and mutually reinforcing sense through a process of "historically situated racial projects" (55). "Racial projects," write Omi and Winant, "connect what race means in particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized" (56).

To begin the work of anti-racism in and through our writing centers will entail a sustained consideration of whether, how, and to what degree writing centers have historically been used as or complicit with racial projects within our institutions and higher education writ large. Given the theoretical framework of critical race scholars like Omi and Winant among others, there are large questions that we might as a community consider:

- In what ways are we resisting being used by institutions to provide "evidence" of care for historically marginalized groups and concomitantly to provide justification for the flushing of individual students from marginalized groups out of the academy ("look we gave them a writing center and they still can't cut it")? (See Grimm 106.)

- In what ways are we resisting the collapse of race and ethnicity such that we do not implicitly or explicitly endorse assimilationist models of literacy and literacy instruction?

- Are we creating opportunities within our writing centers and our institutions for sustained thoughtful, rigorous, and responsible consideration of institutional racism and productive, anti-racist transformation?
These questions provide us with a large field of entry into the work of anti-racism. In practice, meaningful address of the issues raised in them will require concrete engagement with the substance of our individual and collective belief systems, epistemologies, and pedagogies.

*New Beginnings: Anti-Racism in the Writing Center*

Learning about and engaging with anti-racism requires that whites hold apparently contradictory, but simultaneously true and complex realities in mind. Race is a social construction, and racism is a historically specific ideology with its related systemic logics and institutional practices. Racism is not an individual matter, and yet individuals certainly do benefit from and are complicit with racism. Whites who begin to study anti-racism find ourselves in a difficult position. We are called to emerging consciousness of the ways in which we have internalized white superiority, called to turn inward with critical reflection and an unbending intent to consider when, how, where, and why we have learned or mastered whiteness and taken its attending privileges thoughtlessly as earned. We are called inward to consider the toll the wages of racism exacted from us. We must tell ourselves and acknowledge the truths of our stories of how we came to be, to think, and to act as we do. At the same time, whites who come through desire or of necessity to anti-racism must de-center, must recognize and account in some public way for the partiality of our perceptions, our experiences, our knowledge—those stories we tell about ourselves and others. Anti-racism work necessitates both inward or private reflection aimed at personal transformation and an outward, public turn that is at once both humble and determined and is aimed at productive engagement in collective and institutional transformation.

Commonsense and past practice have led to a shared conceptualization of anti-racist process as beginning with the self and extending outward to an analysis of institutions, then systems. Too often, however, this trajectory has been interrupted when whites, overcome by a fascination with the personal, are unable to extend ourselves beyond what has been done to us, through us, and in our name with regard to racism. Interestingly, racism tends to unfold in fits and starts defying attempts to write a recipe that would enable us to unmake it. Alternatively, beginning with the structure and functions of the writing center may give us means by which to move inward—to examine the collisions of the personal with efforts to undo institutional racism—and outward—to work collaboratively across our institutions to broaden and deepen anti-racist commitments and to effect institutional transformation.
In their essay on ethics, race, and higher education, Mark Chesler and James Crowfoot identify five areas in which anti-racism work needs to be done in higher education: mission, culture, power, resources, and structure (223). Chesler and Crowfoot note that institutional change for diversity tends to take the form of superficial adjustments to programs and personnel, while the inner core of institutions remains substantially untouched. In fact, to (re)frame the work of anti-racism as "diversity" work may be one sign of what Villanueva and others have termed the new racism, particularly when the term diversity is used as a code word for race or is used to avoid ever having to name racism at all. To work at the core around matters of race and racism, specifically, Chesler and Crowfoot suggest, requires directly addressing not only the appearance of an institution, but its deep substance. Similarly, to create and sustain a writing center responsive to the needs and interests of students, faculty, and staff of color at predominantly white institutions also requires a meaningful re-envisioning of mission, culture, power, resources, and structure.

**About Mission**

Mission statements articulate the purposes served by an institution or institutional site and the principles by which those purposes are to be achieved. Such statements are brief and general. They are, however, more than window-dressing; mission statements name commitments to quality and service and as such serve as means by which an institution or institutional site can hold itself accountable or be held accountable to the constituencies it seeks to serve. Chesler and Crowfoot note that the implicit historical mission of colleges and universities has been to conserve and transmit knowledge and culture in the Western tradition—a mission that has predominantly served the interests of white males (207). To craft and publish a mission statement that embraces anti-racism and recognizes the potential for excellence in service, scholarship, and teaching suggests that the writing center exists not as a conservative enterprise, but as an institutional site that values lively, creative, critical engagement not only with student-writers, but with both traditional and innovative multicultural textual production.

The Max Learning Center at Macalester College includes a statement on anti-racism that might be used as a model for other writing centers (http://www.macalester.edu/max/). This mission statement is interesting for the ways in which it articulates anti-racism as a principled or ethical commitment to the intellectual work of the center. Importantly, the Max statement resonates in substance and language with the commitment of its college to social justice broadly.
conceived. This connection provides both justification and cover for the Learning Center as it strives to enact its principles. As Chesler and Crowfoot note, where historical commitments have tended toward the conservation and transmittal of traditional Western values and epistemologies absent a recognition of the bulwark of ideologies attending such a mission, anti-racist institutional or site-based transformation work can be attacked as promoting an "ideological agenda" rather than an intellectually defensible action. Writing center directors who choose to work to dismantle racism in their writing centers or across their institutions should be aware of and prepared for this critique. The careful crafting of a principled mission statement can and should be the beginning of such preparations.

About Culture

With regard to transformations of culture, Chesler and Crowfoot write that institutions committed to undoing racism will "recognize and celebrate multicultural norms and practices, and distinct cultural backgrounds and norms; advance scholarly epistemologies and curricula that embrace world views and knowledges of different cultures; respond to conflict in ways that do not seek to dominate, repress, or deny differences but rather to learn about problems and cherish differences" (223). To do this work in the writing center, directors and tutors will need to work collaboratively to understand the ways in which learning, knowing, and representing knowledge are culturally situated. We will need to recognize the degree to which definitions of excellence in writing within the American academy are circumscribed by the particularities of white Western values. Concomitantly, we will need to acknowledge the costs, benefits, and the paradoxes for students, faculty, and staff of color in choosing when, where, how, and why to submit to those values. With particular regard to our representations of the range of rhetorical choices available to writers and the relative value we attach to some choices over and against others, the writing center staff will need to recognize and account for the lived experience of people of color whose credibility and competence are questioned in and outside of the classroom by virtue of their race, whether or not they possess fluencies in academic Englishes.

Matters of culture and power intersect and magnify in moments of conflict. Anti-racism movements within and outside of academe can fold in on themselves when those conflicts erupt within communities of color. Just as whites do not hold common points of view on all matters, neither do people of color. And, yet, very often, when people of color disagree, white allies and colleagues can be stunned into immobility. One critical challenge for white writing center directors and tutors
attempting to articulate and put into practice anti-racism will be how we make sense of conflicts between what we believe we know about working effectively with student-writers one-with-one and the knowledge, experience, and perceptions of faculty, staff, and students of color. A further challenge we may well face will be the sense we make of conflicts or differences in perspective about our work from within communities of color. We will need, I think, to consider such differences and conflicts with courage and curiosity rather than with fear. Approached openly and honestly, problems such as these provide multi-racial groups with opportunities to come to greater understanding, to establish common ground, and to think and act with exceptional creativity.

About Power

In a powerful examination of the intellectual and writing life of journalist Robert Brasillach, a Nazi collaborator in France under the Vichy regime, Alice Kaplan describes Brasillach's call for a "reasonable anti-Semitism" (Kaplan 23-24). For Brasillach, moderate anti-Semitism was a reasonable response to what he saw as fundamental and irreducible biological, moral, and intellectual differences between Jews and gentiles. With regard to race in America, David Horowitz and Dinesh D'Souza make similar appeals. Damning liberal and left anti-racism activist movements and critical race scholarship, Horowitz and D'Souza variously accuse the political center and left of cultural and intellectual relativism. They argue that white, western life and letters are inherently superior to the cultural production of non-western, third world intellectuals, scholars, and artists, and posit that there may indeed be inherent (genetic) differences or points of inferiority between people of color and whites. Horowitz and D'Souza position themselves as embattled truth-tellers willing to speak what multitudes know but are unwilling to say aloud for fear of public sanction both within and without the academy. Within this logical framework, excellence and academic rigor are juxtaposed against diversity such that a concern for one contravenes an attentiveness to the other. To join the labor of anti-racism in the academy, writing center directors and tutors will need to undo the handcuffing of excellence in academic writing to assimilationism, and articulate in mission—and in the practices that follow mission—the extraordinary value of anti-racist multiculturalism to curricula, pedagogy, and institutional effectiveness.

Any expression of commitment to diversity absent a change in the distribution of power along racial lines—absent access for people of color to the decision-making apparatuses of an institution or institutional site—is in practice, devoid of meaning. Within predominantly white institutions, to fulfill a writing center mission that
articulates a commitment to anti-racism will require writing center directors to
give students, faculty, and staff of color meaningful access to the decision-making
processes of our centers. Informally, we might begin to address this goal by forging
collaborative alliances with other institutional sites and programs dedicated to
serving historically underrepresented students and students of color, in particular.
Formally, we might form writing center advisory boards and insure broad-based
representation of faculty, staff, and students of color on those boards. Internally, we
might work to ensure not only that we have a racially diverse staff, but also that
tutors have an important and authoritative voice in the elaboration of anti-racist
writing center ethos as it is practiced in the day-to-day operations of the writing
center. As writing center directors, we will need to be prepared to demonstrate our
commitment to resist institutional racism both among our tutors and to our institu-
tion’s faculty, staff, and administrators.

About Resources

When we think about resources, directors and tutors will need to consider care-
fully what is available to us. There are dangers inherent in over-estimating what we
have, but most often my experience has been that within predominantly white insti-
tutions, resources are underestimated when race and racism are at the table. Time,
money, and personnel can be accounted under the heading of resources. We might
also extend our accounting outward and consider the ways in which our libraries,
for example, might be a resource to us as we begin the work of structural change.
Are there faculty or staff with particular expertise in history, sociology, ethnic stud-
ies, African American Studies, to name a few possibilities, who might act as
resources for us? Are there faculty, staff, or administrators to whom we might turn
in our staff recruitment efforts? We might extend our accounting of resources even
further out and consider the ways in which regional and international writing cen-
ters associations, conferences, and members might be resources in furthering local
anti-racism work in our writing centers.

In any case in which we are called upon to re-think the distribution of those
resources that strike us as being particularly finite—operating budgets, for exam-
ple—directors and tutors need to think carefully not only about the ways in which
they may need to sacrifice spending in one or more areas to fund new initiatives. In
the case of the redistribution of dollars to fund anti-racism projects within the writ-
ing center, directors and tutors also need to consider carefully any resistance they
may feel to accomplishing that redistribution. The sense that attentiveness to race
matters is juxtaposed against excellence and effectiveness in learning and teach-
ing—that we must choose or sacrifice one or the other—is particularly apt to man-
ifest when money is at stake. Directors and tutors engaged in difficult conversations
around the distribution of resources, particularly budgetary matters, will be chal-
lenged to openly discuss their fears as well as hopes and to be rigorous in evaluat-
ing the degree to which budgetary decisions are being influenced by current
learning in anti-racism or by old, tired (racist) notions about the credibility, com-
petence, and potential of people of color.

About Structure

There are a number of ways in which we might go about changing the structure
of our writing centers to more fully enact principles of anti-racism. We will need to
insure that the diversity of our staff is, at a minimum, proportionately representa-
tive of the diversity of our campuses. Proportional representation of students of
color on our staff, however, will do little to challenge the prevailing whiteness of our
campuses. We can surely do better than our institutions at recruiting and support-
ing staff of color. There are a number of ways to begin the process of diversifying
staff. Perhaps the most self-evident is to seek potential tutors among the students
enrolled in our colleagues’ courses by asking for referrals. We might also seek out
potential collaborations with our institutions’ admissions offices to recruit students
of color by offering employment in our writing centers. Along these lines, a few
writing centers have developed high school outreach programs through which they
offer preparatory courses in peer tutoring in writing to high school seniors prior to
their matriculation. We might extend the now-popular practice of opening satellite
writing centers in libraries and residence halls to opening satellite centers staffed by
tutors of color in multicultural student services centers.

In order to support and sustain structural anti-racism within our writing centers
and to maintain a racially diverse staff, we will need to re-structure our curriculum
and ongoing staff education to address race and racism. Whether our interest is in
general tutor education or tutor education specific to anti-racist multiculturalism,
students studying the theory and practice of individualized writing instruction
ought to be reading primary texts. There is a small and growing body of scholar-
ship from within the writing center discipline addressing race and racism as well as
other forms of oppression that intersect and often overlap with racism. Students
interested in writing center work can be introduced to the work of Nancy Grimm
and Nancy Barron, Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski, Harry Denny, Beth
Godbee and Moira Ozias, and a co-authored chapter on anti-racism in The Everyday
Writing Center: A Community of Practice by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller,
Elizabeth Boquet, Meg Carroll and me. Reaching into the broader field of composition, we might introduce our students to the work of Victor Villanueva, Min-Zhan Lu, Elaine Richardson, Valerie M. Balester, Krista Ratcliffe, Keith Gilyard, Elspeth Stuckey, Helen Fox, and Mary Louise Pratt. In the fields of education and critical pedagogy, we might turn to the work of Lisa Delpit, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, and Jonathan Kozol. In critical race theory and the social sciences, we might introduce students to the work of Joe Feagin, Paul Kivel, Peggy McIntosh, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Adrien Katherine Wing, Manning Marable, Frank H. Wu, and David Roediger.

In addition to a reconsideration of what we teach, writing center directors and tutors committed to anti-racism may choose to examine how we teach—the pedagogies we practice and the ways in which those approaches to teaching might undermine our intentions or support and sustain anti-racism efforts. Without refiguring our pedagogy, I think, writing center directors and tutors run the risk of reifying the marginal status of anti-racist scholarship (and, in particular, the labor of scholars of color). Henry Giroux writes, “critical educators need to move their analyses and pedagogical practices away from an exotic or allegedly objective encounter with marginalized groups and raise more questions with respect to how their own subjectivities and practices are present in the construction of the margins” (15).

Anti-racist pedagogy, Giroux asserts, “offers students the opportunity for raising questions about how the categories of race, class, and gender are shaped within the margins and center of power” and for “a new way of reading history as a way of reclaiming power and identity” (16). Within the context of the writing center, such opportunities might take the form of an examination of the ways in which writing centers have been conscripted in the service of identifying, maintaining, and reproducing cultural, social, and political whiteness as a normative matrix of identity. Drawing further on Giroux, we might ask ourselves—and invite our students to investigate—what epistemological and pedagogical work has been done in and through writing centers to effectively erase the knowledge and knowledge-making practices of communities of color. As Giroux suggests, anti-racist pedagogy must take up the matters of “power, politics, and ideology” (17). Giroux is worth quoting at length in this regard:

A pedagogy of difference is not based merely on providing students with conflicting paradigms of the dispassionate skills of rhetorical persuasion. In fact, it is imperative that a pedagogy of difference move beyond forms of semiotic and deconstructive criticism that dismiss
central concerns of power, politics, and ideology. A critical pedagogical approach might begin by both engaging “how the school functions as an institution to produce the available discourses and knowledge” and analyzing the “way students enter into textuality—the way discourse addresses and, in Althusser’s term, ‘interpellates’ students as subjects.”

(Clark qtd. in Giroux 17)

Extending Giroux’s argument to an analysis of writing center practice, directors and tutors might take up the matter of whether and how writing centers have been schooled and school in turn to guard the gates of academic discourses and of knowledge production.

For an introduction to this idea in the context of prior writing center scholarship directors and tutors might look to Stephen North’s “Revisiting the ‘Idea of a Writing Center.”’ North, engaged in a critical re-examination of his own influential essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” writes,

[T]here is a strong tendency for [the writing center] to become the place whose existence serves simultaneously to locate a wrongness (in this case illiteracy, variously conceived) in a set of persons (and in that sense to constitute language differences as a wrong-ness); to absolve the institution from consideration of such persons, in that they have now been named (“basic,” “remedial,” “developmental”) and ‘taken care of’; and, not incidentally, to thereby insulate the institution from any danger to its own configuration the differences such persons are now said to embody might otherwise pose. (87)

While North is writing without any particular attentiveness to racial identity about writers labeled as “basic,” “remedial,” or “developmental,” it is worth wondering, I think, whether or how the racial identity of student-writers intersects with these sorts of labeling practices as well as whether or how writing centers may be serving gate-keeping functions for our institutions that are precisely racial in character.3

Getting Personal

As writing center directors and tutors within predominantly white institutions begin the work of understanding and addressing institutional racism within our writing centers, we will likely encounter barriers to transformation. Some of those barriers will be erected from without; for example, the potential resistance to and misunderstanding of the nature and potential impact of our work from English Departments, administrators, faculty, staff, and some students. Multi-racial collab-
orative work and coalitions of allies across institutional boundaries can do much to mitigate the effects of external resistance to structural changes within the writing center. Resistance from within the writing center, however, will be at least as obstructive to meaningful change as potential external pressures. Whites engaged in the work of anti-racism are challenged in an ongoing way to examine and re-examine how it is that we have learned whiteness and deeply internalized notions of white supremacy even and perhaps especially against our will. To take on racism is, in a critical sense, to take on ourselves; to struggle not only to remake our world, but also to remake our consciousnesses.

And, yet, even given the obstacles, whites do join with people of color to struggle against racism. In her book, *Whites Confront Racism: Antiracists and their Paths to Action*, sociologist Eileen O’Brien examines how it is that whites become involved in anti-racist activism. O’Brien notes that many whites are introduced and drawn into anti-racism work through activist networks which they see as “logical extension[s] of their other activism efforts” (20). O’Brien adds, however, that prior activism is not the only means by which whites come to anti-racism. Empathy, she suggests, is a powerful motivator for whites engaged in anti-racist activism, and O’Brien elaborates a range of what she terms “approximating experiences” that seem typical among white anti-racists.

O’Brien sorts approximating experiences into three broad categories: *Borrowed approximations* engage the empathy that emerges from witnessing racism, being moved by testimonies to the destructive power of racism, and/or from experiencing the ostracism of other whites that can result when white individuals begin to form close and loving relationships with people of color (25-27). *Overlapping approximations*, O’Brien writes, occur when whites begin to make analogies between forms of oppression to which they are subject and the suffering and struggles of people of color under and against racism (27-29). Finally, O’Brien identifies *global approximations* as a third form of white empathy. Many white anti-racists are profoundly influenced by their sense that racism violates deeply held principles of democracy, justice, and fairness. They see and are motivated by contradictions between their own and collectively espoused convictions and the material realities and effects of racism (29). O’Brien notes that few white anti-racist activists are motivated exclusively through global approximations, but most report this form of empathy as one that is woven into their affective and intellectual engagement with anti-racist organizing and action.

There is much to recommend writing centers as sites rich with potential for anti-racism. Our writing centers have already an historical affiliation with the democra-
tization of higher education, with the open admissions policies of the 1970's, with service to those students who have historically been excluded from or marginalized within American higher education. Further, both our scholarship and our public considerations of best practices in writing centers have tended to be humanistic in orientation and to embrace an ethos of compassion and empathy. Care must be taken, however, in building on our history and collective ethos toward an anti-racist institutional identity to embrace an ethics of responsibility rather than an ethics of good intentions (Reynolds and Smith 32-33; see also Grimm 107-108). Citing Max Weber, ethicists Charles Reynolds and David Smith note that "good intentions can lead to irresponsible decisions when the consequences of professional actions are not carefully assessed. Powerful professionals...need to engage in a form of ethical reasoning that weighs and considers the likely consequences of their...decisions" (32).

There is as much to trap whites in empathy as there is potential for deepened understanding and anti-racist engagement through empathy. One such danger is that empathy can lead whites who are not continuously examining and critically reflecting on the ways in which they may have internalized white supremacy to some very damaging assumptions—that we (white people) understand better than we do and that we can legitimately speak for people of color based on our ability to imagine what it must be like to be a person of color in a racist society. Absent a critical and theoretical knowledge-base, even with "good intentions" and profound empathy, whites may think/speak/act in ways that reiterate prevailing assumptions about the character of race and racism in the U.S.

There is no inoculation against racism that anti-racism provides; even the seriousness of our intent will not insulate us from the ways in which racism erupts from our unconscious and is coded in our daily ways of being and doing. As Harry Frankfurt writes, "As conscious beings, we exist only in response to other things, and we cannot know ourselves at all without knowing them....Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial—notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit" (133). Moving beyond an ethics of good intentions to an ethics of responsibility will require us to bracket questions of sincerity in order to engage with questions of impact and effect. To make the move from the claiming of principles to the enactment of those principles in daily labor can rock the foundations of one's sense of selfhood.

One very good reason to begin anti-racism work in the writing center with structural rather than personal transformation is that the organizational learning and
leadership required of us in implementing anti-racist structural change builds lines of public responsibility and accountability. Such a starting point moves us explicitly beyond the stuckness of good intentions. Another good reason for starting with structural transformation, however, is that this work can make visible and, hence, available for intervention, deeply embedded and racially invested individual ways of seeing, being, and doing. White writing center directors and tutors may begin naming, analyzing, and attending to our moments of discomfort, unease, fear, and resistance in ways that are not available to us when conditions enable us to fall back on sincerity. As Judith Butler writes, “[W]hen the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist” (8).

Starting with structural transformation enables white anti-racists to move dialectically between analysis and engagement with (against) the matrix of relations in and through which our ideas of selfhood emerge. In addition to the social, political, and economic costs of racism to white people and predominantly white institutions as well as to people of color, there are also potentially devastating personal costs. Those personal costs are certainly distributed unequally along racial lines. It is also true, however, that whites stand to gain much from the achievement of racial justice and many of us can testify, if given the opportunity, both to the ways in which racism has damaged or destroyed our relationships with loved ones, distorted our dreams, and diminished our ability to imagine worlds we have not yet seen, but hope for. To address what is personal about racism requires a willingness to listen deeply, compassion—even and especially when what one hears hurts—and a powerful determination not to stop at “me” or at “I.” The witness of people of color and whites to the existence and impact of racism must be linked to a critical engagement with the socio-historical conditions for racism, the institutional practices of racism, and responsible and accountable action against racism.

For whites, at least, the thought and labor of anti-racism necessitates a willingness to acknowledge what we do not know—to risk uncertainty and failure and to do so publicly. To step into anti-racism is “to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relations to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (Butler 136). To embark on this journey from our writing centers can be the start of an extraordinary personal and professional journey not only
for those of us who are directors, but also for the tutors and student-writers who inspire, follow, and lead us to extend ourselves beyond what has been said and done—beyond the known.

NOTES

1 This essay could not have been written without the help of a great number of folks. Michele Eodice, Jennifer Mitchell, Catherine Fox, Beth Godbee, Moira Ozias, and Mike Condon all read drafts and offered great feedback. The Writing Center Journal reviewers and editors were tremendously helpful to me. Finally, I would not feel what I feel, think what I think, know what I know without the support and guidance of a wonderful community of anti-racist activists locally and nationally who have challenged, mentored, heckled, and loved me more and better than I have ever deserved.

2 See for example, the work of Nancy Grimm especially, but also the work of Ann Green, Harry Denny, Jennifer Mitchell, Michael Dickel, Michele Eodice, Beth Boquet, Anne Ellen Geller, Meg Carroll, Laura Greenfield, Karen Rowan, Brian Fallon, Beth Godbee, Moira Ozias.

3 I have included in the appendices of this essay a series of queries designed for writing center directors and tutors. The queries relevant to local analyses of mission, culture, power, resources, and structure can be found in Appendix A.

4 For a second set of queries pertaining specifically to individual reflection with regard to anti-racism work in and through writing centers, see Appendix B.

WORKS CITED


APPENDICES

The following queries are designed to assist writing center directors and tutors at predominantly white institutions, who have not yet begun or who are just beginning to do the work of anti-racism. It is probably worth offering a brief note about the use of queries in anti-racism work.

My own use of queries stems from my involvement in Quaker faith communities which use themed questions (queries) that are designed both to offer spiritual challenge and to support collective discernment. The process of analysis, challenge, and discernment is quite different within a faith community, however, than within an intellectual community or within a spiritually diverse anti-racism movement.

Within faith communities there is typically some level of collective, principled agreement already in place when queries are offered. This is, in my experience, almost never the case within intellectual communities, particularly when the matters under reflection and consideration have to do with racism. It is true, I think, that most often when we gather in academic environments there is a collective desire for racial justice. Our disagreements most often stem from differences in our analyses of what racial justice would look like, how far we have to go to achieve racial justice, and who is responsible and to what degree for what has been, is, and might be. Given our collective desires (our good intentions, if you will) the conditions necessary for meaningful individual and collective reflection about queries are similar, though. There is, I think, no real safe space for thinking and talking about racism. This is particularly true for people of color, but is also true (or should be true) for whites as well. There does need to be a kind of shelter-space in order for queries around race and racism to be collectively considered and addressed. That is, we need spaces in which we can understand together that trust around issues of race and racism is earned and that rigorous and compassionate commitments to honesty, integrity, confidentiality, clarity, forgiveness, and responsiveness are critical to the earning of trust.

I offer the following queries, then, with the caveat that part of the work of using these or any queries as part of a process of collective discernment involves a commitment to creating and sustaining shelter-spaces in which individuals can reflect and write, think and talk together in principled ways about racism and anti-racism.
APPENDIX A

Queries for Writing Center Directors and Tutors at Predominantly White Institutions

Mission

- In what ways does the mission statement of our writing center attend to changing demographics in our institution that necessitate anti-racism?
- Does our mission statement articulate a positive relationship between the diversity of our staff and the writers we serve and excellence and effectiveness in tutoring?
- In what ways does our mission statement include or allow for multiple definitions of excellence in academic writing?
- Does our mission statement provide justification for anti-racism?

Culture

- During our everyday work in the writing center, do we recognize and honor multiple cultures, culturally situated behaviors and practices?
- In what ways do we support and advance research and writing that embrace multicultural epistemologies and knowledge-making practices?
- Are we responsive to conflicts within our writing center, between student-writers and faculty, or between faculty in ways that do not suppress or deny difference? Do we use conflict as an opportunity to better understand difference and to better honor differences?

Power

- Do people of color within our writing center and across our institution have access to the decision-making processes of our writing center?
- In what ways do we hold ourselves accountable to communities of color within our institution?
- In what ways do we use our power and authority both formally and informally to combat racism both within our writing center and across our institution?
- In what ways do we demonstrate our commitment to change?

Resources

- Do we dedicate resources within our writing center (time, money, space, etc.) to support anti-racist innovation and organizational change?
- Have we made tutor research and writing around issues of race, racism, and academic writing a priority in our writing center?
- Do we actively recruit a diverse staff?
- Does the arrangement of space in our writing center provide a welcoming and supportive environment for students, faculty, and staff of color and for members of all underrepresented groups?
Structure

- Have we made deliberate efforts to create collaborations across our institution to support our diverse staff and to better serve student-writers of color?
- Do we encourage multi-racial collaborations both among the staff of our writing center and among the student-writers (and their faculty) who use the services of the writing center?
- Does the curriculum of our peer tutoring in writing courses and staff education address in meaningful ways diversity issues and matters of race and racism in particular?
- Have we considered and addressed anti-racism in our pedagogical approaches to peer tutoring in writing and in the teaching methods we employ in workshops, and peer tutoring courses, and staff education?
- Does our writing center have anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies especially with regard to racism?
- Do we provide sustained support for excellence in teaching and learning for students, faculty, and staff of color?

Adapted from Chesler and Crowfoot, Figure 12-4, in “Racism on Campus” (Chesler and Crowfoot 223).

APPENDIX B

The following queries are designed to facilitate the dialectical movement between structural and personal transformation. The queries or variations on them might be used to generate reflective writing, which might or might not be shared publicly, prior to staff or classroom discussion.

Queries 2 for Writing Center Directors and Tutors at Predominantly White Institutions

Mission

- What questions and concerns come up for you as we consider the mission statement of our writing center through the lens of anti-racism?
- What questions, concerns, or fears emerge for you when you think about the writing center as a site and a locus for anti-racism work on our campus?

Culture

- How and when did you learn that you have been assigned a race and that different racial assignations bear different social, political, and economic values in the U.S.?
- In what ways and in what contexts have you been taught to be/perform the race you have been assigned?
• In your home community, would there be costs associated with identifying, affiliating, and/or advocating for someone from a different racial classification than your own? What would those costs likely be?

• Do you fear that there will be costs to our writing center and/or to those of us who work here, if we affiliate or ally with or advocate for students, faculty, and staff of color?

Power

• When you imagine people of color within our writing center and within our institution having more of a say in what we do as a writing center staff and how we do it, what do you most look forward to? What do you most fear?

Resources

• When you imagine being a member of an increasingly diverse staff here in the writing center, what do you look forward to the most? What do you most fear?

• If you imagine distributing the resources of the writing center differently, in order to accomplish anti-racist goals we establish, what would you be willing to sacrifice? What would you be unwilling to sacrifice? Can you name potential gains for yourself, for all of us as a writing center staff, for student-writers that would make any necessary sacrifices desirable or worthwhile?

• When you imagine speaking publicly about anti-racism, what if anything do you most fear? What most excites or interests you about that possibility?

Structure

• To what degree are you able and willing to openly and honestly engage in difficult conversations about race either in class or during our staff meetings? What gets in the way of your open and honest engagement in such conversations? What makes your engagement possible?

• Often our racialized assumptions about one another are unconscious or barely conscious. Could you track or catalog for a day the fleeting thoughts you might have as you encounter people of races different than your own? If you did that, what do you think you would discover about how you have been trained to think of others? How might those ideas (or how do those ideas) affect what you do or don’t do in the writing center?