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A Balancing Act: Black Women Experiencing and Negotiating Racial Tension in the Center

Abstract

Writing centers increasingly have been concerned with issues of race and racism in the center. However, most of the conversation around race has centered on student writers, with references to tutors of color given only in passing or in the context of larger discussions on race. This study uses interview data and a grounded theory methodology to examine the experiences of racism and anti-Blackness in writing centers for female Black undergraduate and graduate peer tutors, categorizing the experiences in three ways: attacks on character and identity, denials of credibility, and silencing. Connections are drawn with the experiences the tutors have outside the center, and the argument is made that the racial tension of their centers puts the women in a position of constant negotiation, performing a balancing act in which they must filter their responses to their racist encounters out of self-preservation. The results indicate that writing centers are not yet where the field and practitioners would like them to be and that much of the emotional labor of maintaining a tolerable work environment is falling to tutors of color. Writing center directors must do more to take back this responsibility and change the culture of their centers.

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Writing center studies over the past couple of decades, and even more so in recent years, have been increasingly concerned with issues of race and racism, especially as tied to embodiment and language. Writing center scholars have at the same time examined our institutional contexts and our role as perpetuators or subverters of the hegemonic, White supremacist, middle-to-upper-class discourse privileged in higher education. Most of the conversation around race and writing centers has centered on student writers. As Alexandria Lockett (2019) wrote, our disciplines of writing studies and writing center studies "almost always exclusively position marginalized students as students, not instructors, as clients, not tutors or directors" (Race and the Economic Conditions of Tutoring Writers section, para. 2). References to tutors of color or other tutors with marginalized identities are given in passing or in the context of larger discussions on race. With recent scholarship that offers insight into the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) tutors, scholarship primarily written by people of color (Faison & Treviño, 2017; Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère, & Sicari, 2018; Haltiwanger Morrison & Nanton, 2019; Lockett, 2019), this trend is shifting. But still needed is a deeper exploration of these students' understandings of their work as tutors, and, in particular, the racialized nature of that work in sites of unacknowledged and unaddressed Whiteness.

Black students often perceive and even experience higher rates of racial discrimination on predominantly and historically White campuses (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Gurin, Matlock, Wade-Golden, & Gurin, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cevero, & Bowles, 2008). Meanwhile, Black female students must contend with racialized and gendered oppression in and out of their institutions (Domingue, 2015; Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018; Lockett, 2019). Therefore, writing center administrators directing peer-staffed centers on college campuses need to give special attention to the historical contexts of the centers' institutions and how they affect Black staff members as students and thus as tutors.

A conversation not fully attended to in current writing center scholarship is that peer tutors are students living and studying on their campuses. Campus and community experiences affect tutors as people. Tutors carry their identities with them across campus spaces: when tutoring in the center, when teaching a course in a classroom, when walking across campus. A Black student-tutor does not put on or shed their Blackness when they enter into or leave the center. Negative experiences may not be so easily "dropped at the door" by Black tutors in the name of "professionalism," especially if—given the increasing calls for this work—antiracism is now part of the professional work of tutors. Further, racism itself is not "dropped at the door" of the writing center by anyone, as the stories of the participants demonstrate. While my study primarily examined the experiences of racism and anti-Blackness in writing

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centers for Black female undergraduate and graduate peer tutors, the data were pulled from a larger study that drew connections between the lives and experiences for Black tutors both in and out of the writing center at predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Elizabeth H. Boquet (1999), Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Boquet (2007), and Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) explained in their works one of the central conflicts in writing centers—the conception of writing centers as "safe houses" or "homes." This view of writing centers as safe, welcoming, and inclusive, while ideal, runs counter to the institutional and regulatory purposes at the origins of writing centers (Boquet, 1999). But while these authors all noted that writing centers have progressed over time and urged practitioners to continue the progression, Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet sounded a warning about writing centers falling prey to "institutional impulses" (p. 8) and acknowledged that the racism in their own writing centers reflected that of their various institutions and of larger society (p. 87). The authors went on to state, "Since writing centers are situated within institutions . . . that wittingly or unwittingly foster racism, they cannot completely escape resembling and reproducing much of what students of color experience outside of our spaces" (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2013, p. 92). Subsequent work (Denny, 2010; Faison & Treviño, 2017; Green, 2018; Haltiwanger Morrison & Nanton, 2019) has done more to suggest that writing centers are not "safe" and "welcoming" for all, particularly tutors of color. Allia Abdullah-Matta (2018) argued that "race is present in the classroom, the text, and the writing center whether the actors (teachers, students, readers, and writing tutors/consultants) choose to overtly acknowledge and/or engage in a racially conscious teaching or tutoring praxis" (p. 53).

Abdullah-Matta (2018) provided a rare glimpse into the significance of race for Black women in predominantly and historically White campuses. I also have defined multiple ways raced and gendered experiences in different campus spaces may shape the experiences of Black female student-tutors at PWIs (see Haltiwanger Morrison, 2018), while Lockett (2019) described her complicated relationship with the writing center and with graduate school more generally as a Black, queer, female graduate student. She chronicled feelings of being silenced and of pressure to "go it alone," as seeking help would confirm for others she was not up to par with the rest of her cohort. Lockett's graduate experiences reflect in many ways those of undergraduate Black women. Andrea D. Domingue (2015) and Nicola A. Corbin, William A. Smith, & J. Roberto Garcia (2018) found that Black women college students at PWIs faced persistent challenges, such as being silenced, ignored, or subjected to racial stereotypes, that posed significant barriers to Black women's academic success and emotional well-being in higher education. Additionally, Jolyn

Dahlvig (2010) found that Black women undergraduates at predominantly and historically White institutions not only often felt out of place but also experienced a lot of pressure to both connect with and provide mentoring to other Black students. As Domingue put it, Black women students at predominantly White institutions often perform the "Black Mama" role of nurturing leader (p. 462). The sense of being "out of place" and having to fight for recognition and access are reflections of broader historical and ongoing struggles for Black women in the United States (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011).

Methods

Selection of Participants

The data for this study were taken from interviews with nine self-identified Black graduate and undergraduate writing student-tutors, eight of whom identified as women. The analysis that follows includes data from seven of the eight Black women.[1] Black women were not specifically recruited for this project; the dearth of Black men in writing centers led to an over-representation of women, shaping the nature of the study. Rather than gender, the participants in the study were recruited and selected based on the following three criteria: 1. identification as Black and/or African American; 2. position as a current student/peer writing center tutor at a PWI; and 3. at least one semester of previous experience as a tutor. The tutors all identified as Black and some as both Black and African American, representing a variety of Blackness and Black identities. Two of the seven tutors were born in the United States to immigrant parents; three tutors had specific ethnic identities (West Indian, Nigerian, Guinean); and two tutors identified as Black/multiracial. In the analysis that follows, I refer to all participants using pseudonyms. Participants were given the option of providing their own pseudonym or having one assigned.

All participants were current students and tutors at the beginning of the study. The tutors attended six different PWIs in the South, Midwest, and Northeast. Four participants were undergraduate tutors, and three were graduate tutors. I chose to focus on PWIs because of their histories of and ongoing practices of exclusion and negative racial climates frequently associated with elitism and with larger student populations (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For example, exclusionary practices at all levels of education have led to a decline

1 Data from the eighth participant were not included in this article as the participant was unable to offer many details about her writing center work. Data from all participants were included in the larger study from which this article derives.

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in Black student enrollment at PWIs in recent years (Nichols, 2020).[2] This context about PWIs made them useful sites for this study, which also examined Black tutors' experiences outside of the writing center and these tutors' perceptions of their institutions' racial climates. Finally, all participants met the final criterion of having tutored at least one semester: They had between two and six semesters of tutoring experience at the beginning of the study. Limiting the study to tutors with some prior time tutoring allowed participants to draw on both current and previous experience, have a better understanding of tutoring, and perhaps be more comfortable discussing issues of race that both existed within and determined centers' cultures.

Data Collection

This IRB-approved study (Protocol #1612018584) used a grounded theory methodology, a method that requires the data collection and analysis processes be iterative, flexible, and intertwined, with analysis taking place as data are still being collected (Creswell, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2015;). I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with the participants. One participant, Kristina, requested and completed a third interview to share additional updates on her experiences at her writing center; that interview was considered part of the second round. Due to the semi-structured nature of the round-one interviews, which took place during the months of May and June of 2017, and the variability in the participants' experiences, these interviews ranged in length from 45 to 80 minutes. Following initial data collection, I developed themes from the first-round data to generate the questionnaire for the second round of interviews, which took place in September of 2017. This process allowed for both individuality of stories as well as exploration of common experiences. For example, although I did not ask any questions about gender during the initial interviews, all women participants made natural links between their raced and gendered identities and how these shaped their experiences. Thus, gender became a guiding focus of the second round of interviews and, consequently, in the study overall.

2 Andrew Howard Nichols's (2020) report for The Education Trust showed that almost 60% of the nation's 101 most selective public institutions, all of which are predominantly and/or historically White, saw decreases in Black student enrollment between 2000 and 2017; and in the year 2017, only 9% of the institutions enrolled Black students at a rate reflective of the state's population (p. 3). Nichols's report also noted that enrollment percentages of Black and Latino students at these 101 public institutions were on par with enrollment percentages of Black and Latino students at the nation's leading private institutions (p. 6). According to Kevin S. McClain & April Perry (2017), at the time of their study, PWIs enrolled the majority of Black students; however, they noted that negative racial experiences for Black students often led to high rates of attrition.

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Findings and Analysis: Filtering in the Center

The seven participants in my study attended six different institutions, four public and two private, and yet these women had remarkably similar experiences on their campuses *and in their centers*. The initial study from which these data were derived included a three-part analysis focusing on 1. the participants' perceptions of the racial climate of their campuses; 2. the participants' experiences of and navigation of the racial climate of their writing centers; and 3. the participants' perspectives and advice on how writing centers might engage in meaningful racial justice activism. For the purposes of the current article, I focus on the second part of the analysis, the participants' experiences in the writing center; however, during their interviews, participants made several connections between experiences in the center and experiences elsewhere on campus. When participants were asked about their experiences of racism, level of comfort as a Black person in their center, and comfort talking about race with coworkers and directors, the women responded by describing a balancing act: a constant negotiation of the writing center's racial climate that required them to *filter*. By filter, I mean to engage in an ongoing tactical negotiation of racial tension by limiting, adjusting, or denying oneself a response to a racist incident as a way to work around the discomfort, hostility, and fragility of white coworkers while protecting oneself from further emotional labor and distress.

The incidents the women had to navigate were varied but manifested most frequently in ways that fall under one of the following three separate but overlapping categories: attacks on character and identity, denials of credibility, and silencing. An example of how these categories overlap is that, because racism is complex and multifaceted, it is possible to undermine someone's credibility by attacking their character or identity. In the following sections, I present an analysis of these three types of racialized and gendered hostility in writing centers and of the ways participants filtered in response. I point to common elements across narratives and highlight key stories that represent the participants' experiences.

Category 1: Attacks on Character and Identity

Several participants faced experiences during which they felt their characters and identities were under attack from student writers, fellow tutors, and even the writing center directors. One tutor, Kristina, shared an experience from her first semester when, as part of her training, she was observing an experienced tutor. The writer, Kristina reported, was working on a paper about "African Americans who always think of themselves as being victimized." The tutor working with the writer helped the student with his paper but did not address the racism in his language or assumptions. Kristina, observing

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the session, stated that she felt the paper and the way the other tutor failed to address racism "minimized [her] experiences as a Black woman."

Felicia, a graduate tutor, also encountered negative Black stereotypes tied specifically to her identity as a Black woman and, in particular, to her use of Black Vernacular English. In and out of the writing center, White students and peers assumed she was less intelligent than they were. Felicia explained that, in her graduate seminars, her classmates would ignore her advice and input on group work. In the writing center, she explained she faced similar pushback and disregard for her expertise, stating,

> In the writing center, I would have students, I would give them advice, and I would notice that they wouldn't write it down, or they would look at me strange. And so, the tutoring session would last maybe 20 minutes [of a 50-minute session] because they really didn't wanna be there with a Black tutor.

Robin, a Black multiracial woman, described being exoticized by people in and out of the center who asked about her racial identity. She found this "awkward," especially from student-writers in the writing center. Both Felicia and Robin were confronted with reactions to different embodiments of Blackness. For Felicia, her Blackness was tied to language and the racist attitudes towards Black Vernacular English (Young, 2011; Baker-Bell, 2020). For Robin, her Blackness was tied to Whiteness, ambiguity, and the "mixed-race beauty myth" (Younge, 2012), or, as she put it, to the "something" that made her different and made people ask, "What are you?"

Carrie, another multiracial tutor, shared her experiences facing similar questions about her race outside of the center. While Robin usually chose to explain her racial background to others in order to get past the moment and move on with the session, Carrie took a different approach and limited her racial identification to Black rather than explaining her actual racial identity (Black/White/Native) to people, many of whom she said would respond with, "That's not what 'mixed-race' means," if she tried to explain her background in detail. Both Robin and Carrie were confronted with personal interrogations into their racial makeups that led them to filter their responses, and, in Carrie's case, her actual racial identification. Felicia, Robin, and Carrie all had to contend with notions of appropriate or acceptable Blackness.

In another example, Fatou, a first-generation American, spoke of an incident in which she, too, had to explain and defend her identity. During a staff meeting about professionalism, she explained that a White, female graduate tutor brought up name tags and "unusual names." Fatou said,

> I think [our directors] asked how can we better—how can we upkeep professionalism in the center. But, umm, she [a White grad student] mentioned everyone wearing their name tags, which we have, and they're really nice, so I was like, yeah, of course, you should wear your

> name tag. But her reasoning behind it was because "*some* of us have unusual names," and we should wear our name tags so people can see our names. One, just because you see my name tag doesn't mean you can read it, but when she said, "unusual names," she shot her eyes over at me, and the Indian girl beside me, and the Arabian girl beside me, too. So, in that section, she looked at that section and immediately said unusual names, which, one, I'm used to being told because my name isn't from this country, so I know that it's not typical of White Americans, that makes sense to me. But to call it unusual is not okay.

The White tutor's comment is significant in the context of a conversation about professionalism, as Black women historically have struggled to gain access to representation in professional settings (Bell, 1990; Bacchus, 2008). Scholars have noted efforts to "professionalize" writing centers and have also noted that the politics embedded in those efforts are often encoded in Whiteness (Faison, 2018; Lockett, 2019). Although Fatou said she dressed up on days she worked in the writing center and tried to maintain a professional demeanor in her workplace, her professionalism as a tutor was still called into question. In an example of what Victor Villanueva (2006) termed the "new racism," a linguistic shift from discussions of race to language or culture—or, in this case, to professionalism and names—Fatou's colleague avoided the unseemliness and taboo of saying anything overt about Fatou's race or ethnicity, framing the comment as a helpful suggestion for the betterment of the entire center.

It should be obvious that Fatou's name is closely connected to her race and ethnicity, and this incident put Fatou in a position of negotiating the racial tension created by her colleague's words. Fatou explained that, a couple of days after the meeting in which the comment was made, she approached the graduate tutor in private to express concern over the comment and to let her know that she, Fatou, and some of the other tutors of color had been offended. According to Fatou, the White tutor became defensive and refused to apologize, instead reasserting that when she spoke, she only meant that people should wear their name tags. Reflecting on the tutor's explanation, Fatou went on,

> But if my name is "unusual," or atypical of this culture, what would wearing my name tag really accomplish? Because if you can't read "Fatou" on paper, you can't read "Fatou" when you're setting up your appointment, what makes you think you can read "Fatou" when it's on my chest, on my name tag? And she really couldn't answer the question, so I just made it clear that it was offensive to me and to other people. I just would hope that, even if she didn't mean anything offensive by it, your word choice is really deliberate, and particularly working in the writing center, you know what words can do and how they can change situations and how the connotation can be. And so, I didn't have time to keep dealing with her defensiveness, particularly . . . coming to her as a person who wasn't

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> necessarily a tutor, but someone who was disrespected because my, for most of my academic life, my name has been considered to be weird . . . .

Fatou's statement demonstrates that the graduate tutor's comment in the writing center was indicative of her experiences in other educational institutions, where her name, rooted in her heritage, made her susceptible to racist attitudes.

Fatou's example also allows for an interrogation of the linguistic ideologies of racism. As Jane H. Hill (2008) explained in *The Everyday Language of White Racism*, "A central function of language ideologies in the reproduction of White racism is that they make some kinds of talk and text visible as racist, and others invisible" (p. 39). Stereotypes, considered to be false, are often easily identifiable as racist. Comments coded in the ambiguous language of professionalism are less visibly so. But Hill pointed to another linguistic ideology, a performative ideology, which Fatou addressed in her confrontation with the White tutor. According to Hill, performative ideology is an "ideology that is shared by most Americans [and] holds that words have an active force, that they can soothe or wound" (p. 40). Performative ideology is about "how language makes people feel" and "makes it possible to understand some words as assaultive, rather than as true or false" (p. 40). Realizing that the White tutor could not, or would not, see the racism embedded in her language, and having been confronted with the tutor's defensiveness at the suggestion of having spoken offensive words, Fatou adjusted her approach, used a different type of filter, and appealed as a fellow writing tutor and person mindful of the power of language to do harm, intended or not.

Those who work in writing centers might be expected to have greater awareness of these linguistic ideologies. As Eric C. Camarillo (2019) wrote, "We who work in writing centers often convince ourselves that because we work with language, then we are free from bias" (para. 1). But this is not the case, in large part because writing centers, particularly at PWIs, may be largely staffed by White people who have not taken necessary steps to educate themselves or to be engaged in the ongoing self-reflection necessary to notice the subtleties of racism that may be present in the writing center's environment. Working in a writing center at a predominantly and historically White institution requires an even greater level of awareness and effort because the institution itself was built on exclusion and at its origin did not anticipate a need to examine racist language in the way required today. Writing centers themselves are caught up in this exclusionary and controlling history, for writing centers flourished as Black and brown students gained increased access to PWIs and served to promote assimilation into the dominant (White) culture (Carino,1996; Boquet,1999). To intentionally counteract the Whiteness encoded in our structures, policies, and spaces, those working in writing centers must constantly interrogate the language circulating in and around our centers and work against the subtle racism that permeates our centers and our campus environments.

The incident Fatou recounted started out as what Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet (2007) termed "everyday racism," but the White tutor's continuous justification of her comment amplified the situation and created an environment of disrespect and discrimination towards Fatou's race and culture. Other participants shared similar experiences of feeling that their very personal identities were under attack. The most notable example of this came from Kristina, who shared her experience of being repeatedly called "aggressive" by both her fellow tutors and her directors. She stated that she was eventually pulled into a meeting with her directors, a meeting in which she was accused of making inappropriate and aggressive statements, and, in her words, "everything was completely out of context." Kristina described "sitting there bawling [her] eyes out" while her directors cited reports from fellow tutors about her "aggressiveness," without offering her an opportunity to explain. She was certain that her treatment was tied to her raced and gendered identity, saying "it was completely so clear that it was because . . . here were all these non-Black people on this side, and then I was telling my point, and then it was like, 'oh, this Black girl's kind of aggressive.'"

This trope of the "Angry Black Woman" can be traced back to at least the 1830s when White men donned blackface to portray loudmouthed, aggressive "negro wenches" (Kelley, 2014, para. 4); it continued through the 1930s with the "Sapphire" character from the popular *Amos 'n' Andy* television show (Collins, 2000); and it persists up to the present. It has been used both to belittle Black women, dismissing reasonable reactions as unjustified anger, and to depict Black women as hostile, particularly towards White people. We have seen this recently with Vice President Kamala Harris, whom, when she was running for her office, Donald Trump labeled as "angry" and "nasty" during her questioning of Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh (Clifton, 2020). This same stereotype is found in the report Kristina narrated about her writing center: Brought to tears, she felt that her identity as a Black woman was the root of this experience. She stated that she "had never felt so invalidated than in that moment" and that her character was "thrown out the window."

Kristina's perceived aggressiveness played a powerful role in how she was treated in a workplace that claimed to be inclusive and welcoming, as writing centers often do. However, both her and Fatou's experiences demonstrate how racism in the writing center excludes and isolates those who are different—specifically, Black women. Their experiences also show how these experiences can be incredibly direct and personal for those who live them, while those who perpetrate the acts may deny them or fail to notice them and their exclusionary effect. This exclusion can be seen in all of the stories, even the moment when, as she recounted, Kristina had to sit silently and observe a session she felt "minimized her experience as a Black woman," bearing witness to her colleague's silence and complicity and feeling unsure of what to do in

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her vulnerable position as a Black woman who at the time had been on staff for just a few weeks. In the face of such racism, the participants in the study filtered as they chose if, how, and when to respond in a way that might address their concerns. However, there were additional barriers and ongoing tensions that complicated their decision-making, such as the burden of proving, sometimes repeatedly, that they belonged at the writing center and were capable of their jobs.

Category 2: Denials of Credibility

Participants reported having their credibility challenged and undermined in several ways. Many participants claimed that this happened more frequently at the beginning of their tutoring careers when, like most new tutors, they were less sure of their expertise and approach to the work and when lack of confidence may have contributed to some writers' skepticism about the tutors' skills. However, participants also gave accounts of sessions in which they were certain that their identities, racial or otherwise, shaped their perceived lack of credibility. For example, Fatou discussed her experience with having to prove to a student that she could help him with his paper, even though the student, a White male, had presumably scheduled an appointment with her based on her related major. Sharee, an undergraduate, wrote of feeling that, as the only Black tutor in a center with many older, mostly White tutors, her age made her feel more pressure to do a good job: "I think there's a greater appreciation for graduate students. And so, it feels like I have to do a really good job at the session to demonstrate that I'm an adequate consultant."

Felicia, a graduate student, also described feeling pressure to prove herself capable of doing her job, explaining,

> I could pick up on incidents where students, like the White students wouldn't trust my judgment, or actually believe what I was sayin'. I could also pick up, like, body language, so some of them wouldn't give me eye contact, or every suggestion I would give, they would kinda question it, or they wouldn't really trust what I was sayin'. I felt it in the majority in a lot of instances with the White students, especially in the first session . . .

When I asked Felicia if she thought the lack of trust was because of her appearance and dialect, she responded quickly: "I think so, because, for one, I'm Black, I'm female. I talk African-American Vernacular English. Even when I tutor. I don't change my language, and so, I do. I believe it did have sumthin to do with my identity." As Felicia explained and as others have noted (Young, 2011; Green, 2016; Baker-Bell, 2020), her language is part of her identity. She used this language consistently, even in academic settings, and racist attitudes towards her language resulted in experiences in which classmates and group members did not respect her intellect and input. And while Felicia said she faced more pushback from students in the writing center early on in her career,

she also said it remained a struggle throughout her two years as a graduate tutor.

Although Felicia claimed to have a positive relationship with her director, she said she never talked with her director about the challenges she was facing as a tutor, offering this response when asked:

> No, I didn't, because [laughs] she was White also, and everybody was White, and it was me and the other guy who was the only Black tutors, and so I just didn't worry 'bout it. Because, I was new on campus when it first really started to happen, and I really never had experienced face-to-face racism before, even though I'm from [the South], but I never really had experienced that before. And so, I was still tryin' to figure out why I am bein' treated this way, and by the time I figured out it was racism, I really didn't feel like my professors or teachers or director sayin' like, "maybe they was having a bad day," or "maybe they just, you know, didn't wanna finish the session," insteada actually callin' it racism. So I just didn't wanna have the conversation.

Felicia noted she grew up in an area with a large Black population and then attended an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) for her undergraduate degree. She explained that the Whiteness of her master's degree institution, particularly its location in a place with a majority White population, was something she had not experienced before, and thus she did not know what to expect or how to fully understand her experiences. She was still, however, familiar with the post-racial mindset pervasive in White spaces and was wary of how her director would respond. As noted, Felicia expressed positive feelings towards her director, saying she and the director got along well and that her director has been supportive of her. And yet Felicia was not confident that her word would be taken if she were to discuss with her director the racism she regularly experienced during sessions. And so, in an institution in which she experienced racism almost everywhere she went, Felicia elected to "pick her battles" and stay silent rather than be disbelieved or, like Kristina, be perceived as an "Angry Black Woman," a calculation Black women frequently make when deciding whether or not to speak up (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018, p. 633). Unfortunately, although her director had made likely sincere attempts to be supportive, to Felicia, her director was another White person who could not quite be trusted to believe her without question.

Felicia noted she also struggled to feel accepted in leadership positions in her center. In addition to tutoring, Felicia explained she held an administrative position in her writing center. In this position, she said she faced challenges as a Black woman speaking Black Vernacular English surrounded by White tutors who, like her White classmates and the writers in her sessions, did not always respect her input or even recognize who she was. Several scholars have discussed biases towards Black language, including Neisha-Anne S. Green

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(2016) and April Baker-Bell (2020), both of whom advocated for the validity and acceptance of Black Vernacular English and other "non-standard" dialects. Nancy Effinger Wilson (2011) explained that writing tutors, like many writing teachers, are frequently biased against Black English, with negative attitudes extending beyond the language to the writer or speaker, who is assumed to be unintelligent or uneducated. If Felicia sensed these negative attitudes from her coworkers, it may not be surprising that she did not turn to her director for support. When asked about why she felt she experienced such a negative response to her speech, even at a Southern institution with a Black student population larger than many large public PWIs and where students of all races spoke with various dialects, Felicia maintained it was due to her race:

> So, even though it's the South, it was really weird, those students had accents, but I guess the accent comin' outta my mouth, in a Black body, umm, just, [laughs] really didn't add up. And so, they just had stereotypes already pre-established, and so, I kinda had to deal with that.

Felicia suggested that while "non-standard" Englishes were common in her center, her accent was unacceptable because it was tied to her Blackness.

The rhetorical negotiation of identity politics in the writing center was ongoing for several participants in this study, and they found it difficult, if not impossible, to separate their identities from one another. Sharee, for example, felt that, in addition to being Black and female, her youth relative to the age of her coworkers led to her being undermined, in some cases, by other writing tutors. She explained,

> The other day, one of my White coworkers—who is a PhD student, and I don't think this was a racial microaggression, I think she was just being annoying, but, and it was probably, like, a superiority thing because, again she's a PhD student and I'm an undergrad, so she knows what she's doing when it comes to writing, but it's her first year working here. . . . So she was shadowing one of my consultations . . . and she was like, "Oh, sorry, can I interject something?" cuz, like, she had caught something that I hadn't, and like, really wanted to say something. And I was like, "Not really, but if it's really pressing, then you can." And she was like, "Okay, if that's the case, then I won't say anything." And it was with the student looking at her, like seeing everything that's happening, like, she's already disrupting me, in the middle of my consultation. And she's like, "No, no, it's fine." And I'm like, "Cool." And so I keep working with the student, and then she interrupts me; she actually interrupts me, and she's like, "I'm sorry, but I really have to say this." And she interjects into my session and was talking directly to the student—was talking *past* me at this point— and, even talking to you about right now, it was *really* annoying, and I'm *really* angry that she did that, but she was like, "I'm familiar with this piece of work that you're writing about, and I think you

> should talk about this, and you're missing these elements. . . ."
>
> And so the student starts asking her questions, and someone who's supposed to literally be shadowing me. They start asking her questions about what should they add and stuff. And I looked at her, and I'm like, "Are you crazy? What's wrong with you?" And, I get that you're a PhD student, and I get that you're very well-versed, and I get that you know how to write well, and better than me, but that wasn't the point. You stopped me from doing my job properly. The student probably thinks I'm not good at what I do, that someone who's learning how to do this job interrupted me and gave them advice, and not even in an appropriate way. . . . And again, I think it's related more to my age, more than my race, but she is an older White woman.

In Sharee's account, she questioned to what extent the incident was due to her race, but she also pointed out twice that the other tutor was White ("one of my White coworkers," "she is an older White woman"). Sharee struggled with this separation because she knew intuitively that for Black women, there is no separation; there is no "just Black," or "just woman," or "just young," or "just" anything. Intersectional Black feminist scholars have reinforced for decades that oppressions cannot be unbound. We cannot say that the White tutor would not have done the same thing to a White and/or male tutor, but we also cannot deny the significance of her actions for a young Black female tutor in front of a white student. The observing tutor usurped authority from the Black woman she was supposed to be learning from and guided the session in a way that overstepped her role as a tutor in training. In this instance, Sharee chose to respond directly, telling the White tutor after the session that interrupting was inappropriate and should not be done again. Sharee filtered in that she did not challenge the other tutor in front of the student-writer, deeming this inappropriate, or ask the PhD student to consider to what extent race, or even age, played into her decision to undermine a more experienced tutor. But Sharee did assert her right to be heard and reminded the trainee of her knowledge and skill as a trained and experienced tutor. In addition to these reflections on the age discrimination she felt in the writing center, Sharee expressed frustration in part because, in her classroom, she said she felt she was expected to be a "representative" for her race, but then when she entered the writing center, she felt she was "just a person." Moving across spaces on the same campus, her stories show she faced her White peers' conflicting and contradictory expectations that required constant negotiation and consideration and that, it is worth noting, echoed findings from Lisa R. Jackson's (1998) study on Black women college students' experiences 20 years earlier.

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DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1960

Category 3: Silencing

Although Sharee chose confrontation in this instance, there were times when she and many of the others did not speak, feeling that they could not, or should not, for the sake of maintaining their sense of well-being. I asked participants about their comfort levels talking with other tutors or their directors about race and racism. A few participants stated that they did feel comfortable or would if the need arose; however, all but one made some sort of qualifying statement about when or how they would approach race. Others stated outright that they did not feel comfortable having conversations about race in general or racism on campus. Carrie explained that she felt comfortable and had had casual conversations about race with a few other tutors of color, but when speaking with White tutors, she said she felt she would have to be "filtered in the conversations." Here, Carrie's use of the word "filter" prompted me to ask for more information:

> I would talk about [race] but I would be very, very careful about what I say. And not careful in the sense that when I'm talking with the minority students I'm saying ridiculous things, but sometimes honesty about racism and racial experiences—even if they are said in the most appropriate way—can kind of trigger some people and make some people offended. So, being careful when I talk about racism or something that's racist that's happening.

Carrie's comments demonstrate an awareness of the potential for defensiveness from her White colleagues, such as that displayed when Fatou approached the tutor about the "unusual name" comment. Carrie was engaged in a balancing act, having picked up the sense that some of her White coworkers did not want the topic of race to be brought up. Sharee expressed a similar feeling, offering the following response when asked if she felt comfortable talking with other tutors or consultants about race:

> No. And I don't mean that . . . just, yeah, I really don't. And this isn't, umm, a negative reflection on the people I work with. All of them are kind and not problematic people. But I, do you ever—like when you're ever— like, in a White space, and when you bring up an issue of race, it's like, "Wow, did you really have to bring that up now? Like, what's going on? Aren't we all just people?" I feel as though, if I were to bring up the topic of race, with the particular set of coworkers I had [this] year, with the White coworkers, I don't think I would have been able to have as much as an open and honest discussion about it. And not even out of fear, but just out of, like, being pleasant with them. Just like, "Oh, did you hear about the defacing [of the Black Lives Matter poster] or anything?" If I were to bring that up, like, I don't want them to get aggravated.

The language Sharee and Carrie used is significant. Even though Sharee said her White coworkers were "not problematic," she still wanted to avoid making

them "aggravated." This is how she navigated a "White space." Meanwhile, Carrie spoke about being "very, very careful" and not wanting to "trigger" her coworkers. Sharee seems to be more comfortable identifying this tension, referring to the Whiteness of her center and coworkers, while, for Carrie, the Whiteness of her coworkers was unspoken in her distinction between "minority students" and "some people." Still, both women were aware of how even the mention of race could create a stressful or uneasy environment for many of their colleagues. Sharee referred to her colleague's "White fragility" (see DiAngelo, 2018) to explain her reluctance to engage with her White co-workers, when,

> you know, if you're not getting the vibe that they're really wanting to talk. Like White fragility, where like if you bring up race, they're like, "But I'm not racist." And it's like, no one said that, but I wanna talk about it. And I think that's the issue.

Nica, a graduate tutor, described a picking up on similar reluctance to talk about race from her co-workers, noting a "shutdown" whenever race, and especially Blackness or Black people, came up. In her words, "There's a kind of a push back not to discuss it." Nica also seemed to be dealing with White fragility with her coworkers, evidenced through the pushback that she noticed whenever the topic of race came up. Nica said her director encouraged her to develop programming around race after noting her interest and investment in the issue. However, sensing pushback and a lack of respect for the topic amongst her fellow tutors, Nica was reluctant. Carrie and Sharee also said they were interested in and willing to have conversations about race, but like Nica, they also indicated they had a sense of self-preservation in the face of resistance from their peers, whom the participants worried were not interested in such conversations and might become upset or hostile. Talking about race with hostile or even just unprepared White people is often emotional work for people of color, work that, as graduate tutor Robin noted, "we do in our day-to-day lives." The prevalence of this work led Robin to say she made a point of reminding herself and other BIPOC tutors committed to antiracism to "have the energy to take care of yourself." That the women in this study faced similar difficult and racist experiences in their everyday lives, experiences in which the participants were called angry, were overlooked, or felt uncomfortable speaking, is significant, as these experiences are closely linked for Black women (Domingue, 2015). Choosing not to engage with their White coworkers in the writing center was a way for the participants to take care of themselves, protecting emotional well-being and reducing opportunities to be seen as an "Angry Black Woman" for creating circumstances of stress for unprepared White people (Jones & Norwood, 2017). The fact that the participants were willing and even wanted to speak with their fellow staff about race but could not do so because of potential backlash means that the tutors in my study were

https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj/vol39/iss1/5
DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1960

being silenced on issues that were important to them, and that directly affected their lives and academic environments.

A sharp illustration of the power and importance of the writing center environment comes from Nica, who explained that, in addition to not engaging in any unnecessary conversation with her colleagues, she also avoided spending any more time in the writing center than she had to. This was in part because she was busy, but it was also because the environment in the center was so unwelcoming towards her, as she explained:

> As far as the director goes, she's fine, but as far as the students go, I still notice little moments of like, and I don't know if it's me as a person or me as a Black person, I know I always come back to that, but I notice that people don't acknowledge me like they would somebody else when they walk in the door, or when I speak, they don't speak back. . . . Like, they don't really wanna engage with me, they don't wanna interact with me. . . . I don't really, I don't purposely avoid the writing center, but I don't spend any time there because I'm so busy with everything else. . . . So, is it that they don't see me really that often and that relationship isn't really built, or I don't know really what it is. But I can say that it is a unwelcoming feeling.

It is clear from her story that Nica has spent time both thinking about why her fellow tutors did not acknowledge her presence and even testing out situations when they did or did not respond to her, noting that she was more likely to get a response from someone if they were alone. As Sharee did with the White graduate tutor, Nica hesitated to say the way she was treated was due only to her race, but also like Sharee, she circled back to race several times during her interview and the telling of this story. Nica drew connections between the way she was treated in the writing center and racial tension with some of her professors, experiences which she said led to her being so isolated from her program that she almost had to leave. Given Nica's struggles in her program, it would have been nice if the writing center had provided a refuge. Instead, she said the community in the center treated her with the same sense of being unwelcome and unheard that she said she felt in her program and in her institution generally.

Thus far, I have explained how tutors frequently remained silent out of a sense of self-care and emotional well-being. However, Nica, feeling ostracized from the center, limited her physical presence in the center. She was silent because she often was not physically present to speak. The feelings of unwelcomeness and lack of belonging expressed by Nica came through even more clearly in Kristina's story. Following the meeting with her directors in which she was told she was overly "aggressive," Kristina described herself as being in a state of constant vigilance over her words and actions because she feared she might lose her job. She said she felt she could not speak a word out

of line for fear it may have gotten back to her directors who would then have had an excuse to let her go. As a result, she said she often chose not to speak at all. Kristina recounted a conversation she witnessed but was not included in about hip hop and Black feminist perspectives. The conversation centered on how hip-hop was getting "soft" because Black male artists were expressing their feelings in their music. The White, male tutor went on about how he could make his argument using "Black feminist opinion," and a male Hispanic tutor co-signed on how great his ideas were. This conversation occurred after the meeting with her directors, and she described the conversation as another moment during which she felt her identity was minimized and invalidated and her voice silenced.

Kristina's discomfort in this situation stemmed in part from the conversation itself but even more so from its tone, her exclusion from it, and its context given the previous events:

> And I thought it was just interesting that the person who was nodding their head like this was a masterpiece was . . . one of the people who was part of making me feel so invalidated [he had reported her to the directors], but when someone else who is not Black and has no context of Black people and what it's like to be them and what their perspective is, suddenly that's art, and that's the best thing you've ever heard.

Kristina said that as she sat at the table listening to this conversation, her co-workers did not invite her to join in. She explained that they spoke over and around her, without consideration for what knowledge or insight she might offer as a Black woman. And, she said, because of her previous experiences with the people having the conversation and with her directors, she did not feel safe inserting herself into the conversation, as she had already been marked as "aggressive." Being fearful that any words she spoke might lead to her termination, she said she remained silent in hopes of keeping her job.

Kristina's attempts proved unsuccessful, however, as when I contacted her again three weeks following the second interview to confirm my use of her narrative in my research[3], she informed me that she was no longer employed at her writing center and requested to speak to me again. She explained that she had logged in to her center's online scheduling system to check her appointments and noticed that she was no longer on the schedule. Taking this as a sign of her removal from the center, she said she decided to email in her resignation before she could be officially fired by her directors. Kristina indicated she never asked for nor received an official explanation for her departure from the writing center. She said she recalled some vague mention of budget cuts at a

3 Kristina had expressed significant concern over sharing her story with me, due to her experiences in her center. I followed up again to make sure she was still comfortable proceeding with the study.

https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj/vol39/iss1/5
DOI: 10.7771/2832-9414.1960

staff meeting but explained that she, a tutor with a year of experience, could not have been let go due to budget cuts when the directors were still hiring new people. Regardless of what reason might have been given, the result was that Kristina's voice in the writing center was not just silenced but also removed completely from all conversations—about race, tutoring pedagogy, and the broader campus environment. Any knowledge or insight she had on any topic became inaccessible to other members of her writing center community. Further, Kristina became unemployed. She explained she was fortunate enough to have parents who could help pay for food and bills, but she expressed concern for others who might end up in her position with less financial support from family.

Conclusion

The stories shared by the participants suggest that racism was a common and pervasive part of their lives as writing center tutors. In their centers, these women had specific and frequent personal experiences with racism, many of which were similar to the racism they experienced elsewhere. At the same time, the participants had a general sense that the writing center was not a space in which they were fully included or welcome, not a space in which they could openly discuss issues that affected them as Black students or women. It was a space that prioritized Whiteness and White people, a "White space," as Sharee referred to her center. The analysis above demonstrates how Black female student-tutors filter in response to this Whiteness as well as in response to the specific racism in their centers. Fatou succinctly summarizes the constant negotiation, reflection, and questioning that comes with being a Black female writing center tutor:

> I think being a Black writing tutor, particularly a Black woman writing tutor, it just adds to the balancing act, right? So you never know if that was a comment made because you're a woman, or because you were Black, or because of your major, or because of anything really. So it does put you, it puts in you this mindset where you're trying to analyze everything, and trying to deduce what it was.

Fatou's comment echoes much of Kristina's experience in her center, as well as comments made by Nica, Sharee, and others. Writing centers want to and often claim to be different from other locations on campuses. But the constant negotiation of these writing centers' hostile work environments and the filtering that the Black women in this study had to do is a strong indication that writing centers are not yet where we want them to be. The tutor-tutor interactions and the tutor-director interactions, are just as, if not more, important than the tutor-tutee interactions. A tutee may come in once and then never again. A tense relationship with a co-worker or supervisor is one that requires

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additional emotional labor. But that labor should not be on the tutor. Directors, as leaders, need to think about the "space of race" (Abdullah-Matta, 2018, p. 52) in their centers, which is present regardless of whether the directors have acknowledged it or not. This space extends into and beyond the center, just as the work of writing centers extends beyond its physical walls.

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