



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

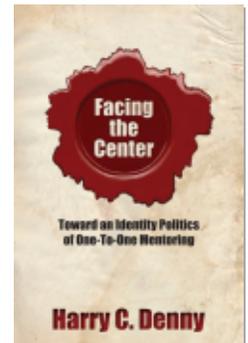
Published by Utah State University Press

Denny, Harry C.

Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring.

Utah State University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/1074](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1074).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1074>

## 2

### FACING RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE WRITING CENTER

*Scene 1:* An African American graduate student sits down with her student, an immigrant Russian undergraduate working on a paper for an upper-level writing requirement. The student has inflected a current events paper with what the tutor perceives as racist rhetoric. When she pushes the student to think about her argumentation, the student says she thought her tutor was going to be one of the white tutors and questions her tutor's qualifications. On later reflection the tutor says that her maturity and experience (she's a returning student who has spent a number of years as a corporate trainer) kept her from reacting to the student and chalked it up to a combination of immaturity and a lack of cultural knowledge. The tutor diffuses the situation by speaking to her qualifications and life history.

*Scene 2:* A writing center prides itself for having a great deal of racial, gender, cultural, economic, and academic diversity. The director jokes, "We're like a Benetton ad for writing centers." But on deeper reflection he begins to realize that "problem tutors" are ones who don't conform to the ideal face that the space has. What does it mean to have diversity commingle with a homogenized sense of performativity? What's the place for a tutor whose affect doesn't fit into an institutional culture dominated by "model minorities"?

Over the years, when I've shared this first scenario with writing center audiences, the typical reaction has been disbelief. Surely, people say, this tutor misunderstood the student. Surely, they respond, everything isn't as it seems, or as bad as it appears; more details would get to the heart of the problem, beyond the hasty conclusion that race was at issue. Racism couldn't be the problem, they protest. Instead, the issue, they earnestly intone, has to be related to interpersonal tension, cultural misunderstanding, hypersensitive individuals. Curiously, the doubters, over and over again, were white like me, yet in their initial reaction to explain away race, I always wondered whether they recognized their power—our agency, authority, gumption—in such

rhetorical moves. I wondered about their impact on people of color in our immediate company or those who are colleagues, staff and clients back on campus, those who hear and experience their identities as vantage points inevitably suspect while their white interlocutors' perspectives are beyond reproach. Our impulse around race was to doubt rather than believe what my former tutor had told me. We lacked the very capacity or imagination to view an experience through a different set of eyes, the ones my tutor experienced in very real ways. I wondered what it said more deeply about teachers' and tutors' ability to suspend judgment while responding to student writing: How many of us chided and corrected ("Sorry, you're getting this wrong!" before we affirmed and applauded ("I hear you saying this" or "I like that. Could you say more?")? Of course, it's easy for me to sit back, all sanctimonious, and act like I haven't played the very same game myself, to deny and doubt or to arbitrate a person of color's experience of everyday racism. But I have, more often than I'd like to admit. I'm just as guilty as the next person, wielding whatever privilege comes easily and naturally to me with little thought to its immediate and long-term consequences.

As a white person, I know the knee-jerk compulsion to pretend, to refuse race, even racism, are at play. "Surely," I've said, "You must be getting this wrong." "Don't you think you're being just a bit too sensitive?" I've challenged. Not too long ago, a graduate student called me out on my own discomfort dealing with race, having noticed my nonverbal "tells." He had observed me get flushed talking about racial tension when the conversations weren't on my own terms, under my control. My pale pink face would grow red at flash points of conflict and discomfort. This graduate student forced me to reflect on my own everyday practices. I realized that I'm not uncomfortable taking on conflict when it's couched in low-stakes discussions. I tend toward warm and fuzzy conversations about diversity that raise consciousness but rarely upset or threaten—especially myself. I plant seeds and raise questions, the answers and resolutions to which aren't really meant to be hashed out face to face or which really aren't offered for deep thinking in the moment. Such talk fails to create space for people to get real with one another and instead skims the surface, satisfying no one. But the alternatives, flashpoints for challenge and conflict, feel too chaotic and risky and leave me not knowing how to facilitate substantive dialogue without traumatizing those involved. How do we get real without creating too much discomfort? Moreover, how do we tap those feelings

as fodder for sustainable learning and teaching? Those moments of grinding tension or frustration often produce powerful breakthroughs from which change and growth can flourish.

My own journey to understand the identity politics of race didn't just begin with a student calling me out on my own insecurities and the ways I put them into practice. Rather, coming to an awareness of my whiteness and the privilege it confers as natural, through institutions and my own individual actions, has taught me that my own ways of knowing and doing race must be starting points for any activism I advocate. Growing up in Iowa couldn't have provided an environment more racially homogeneous, yet throughout my childhood in a working-class family, racism was a constant companion. My family's own paycheck-to-paycheck existence and periods on public assistance—registers of our material and economic instability—were always counterbalanced by discourses that we, at least, had it better (were better) than “them,” people of color. My grandfather's alcoholism never signified as an individual failing, but as a register of his slide from white propriety into depravity with black folks whose bars he'd get drunk in and stumble home from. For her part, my grandmother never spoke with any awareness of her lifetime spent as one of the first female meat-cutters at Oscar Mayer; instead, night after night, year after year, she'd take pride in performing as a matriarchal Archie Bunker, loudly and vulgarly complaining about the African Americans who shared a production line with her. My family never talked about or processed the disjunction between her words and her actions, like when she'd cook or care for an African American co-worker hurt on the job or another who had lost a partner. As my dad gained access to a union job and began working his way up through the local leadership, our family drifted from its clan-ish, multigenerational, extended network and toward a lower-middle-class, blue collar existence (with our own home, and nuclear family routines separate from the rest of our relatives). I saw dad go off and work and socialize with African American co-workers and fellow union members; slowly, the racist discourse diminished and disappeared as the family changed and our lives extended into different worlds, with support systems that introduced us to other experiences. Proximity to others had an impact, though I don't know that the pedagogy of it all was ever fully conscious. In the early to mid-1980s, the farm crisis and recession decimated the Quad Cities' manufacturing sector, intensifying the existing poverty and broadening the suffering. No longer could

economic struggles be forgotten as *just* a problem endemic to African Americans; with the deepening social problems, people began to question those historical explanations. As times improved and populations moved on, however, the promise of deeper and broad-based questioning dissipated for another day.

The first chapter alludes to my early experiences with activism and how they provided searing lessons about racial identity politics. I never knew a time when HIV and AIDS weren't always about race and racism and their thoroughly systemic dynamics. If the face of AIDS through its first decade wasn't routinely offered up and dismissed as gay, that personification was constructed as African or Caribbean. White America was assured that HIV was a consequence, inevitable at that, of identities and geographies (often conflated with one another). Middle-class, white America had nothing to worry about because its sexual propriety secured its immunity; only "the gays" and "the blacks," pathological, hypersexual, and disease-prone as they were symbolically constructed in mainstream discourses, were the ones at risk, who needed to be contained and regulated. In Reagan/Bush America, a global health pandemic became an ongoing morality play whose lessons were elastic and pliable to any population or figure that popped up to challenge or dislodge the face of AIDS. Injecting drug users, just as often white as of color, were cast as flawed and inherently health-compromised creatures, exiles from the middle class. Even ostensibly heterosexual (and white) seropositive people came to signify as never quite so, even "pseudo-homo," because they dared to have unprotected sex outside the sanctity of the nuclear family and its sexual politics. As the epidemic drifted into its third decade and health care developed protocols that extended life, white activists drifted away from direct interest, assuming the experiences of those with middle-class access to treatment was shared by poorer people (disproportionately people of color).

Beyond the work of HIV and AIDS education and activism, I learned that even civil rights activism was charged with racialized politics, ironically enough. For white gay activists, combating sexuality-based discrimination precluded any consideration of the racial history of civil rights in the U.S. My colleagues were shocked and amazed to discover a mainstream society ready, willing, and able to discriminate, to marginalize, and to demonize when confronted with the possibility that another axis of its privilege was coming under scrutiny. Veteran civil rights activists would ask, rhetorically, over and over again, "Where

were you folks when...?” They knew, too well, that white society was always quite ready to proclaim the country “post-race” and roll back, by popular vote, laws and judicial decisions designed to protect the minority from the majority and to mitigate the consequences of long (and continuing) practices of discrimination. But because queer activists couldn’t see the connections between forms of oppression, they couldn’t connect the genealogy of racism and xenophobia against people of color with what the LGBT community was facing. What’s more, they couldn’t see anti-gay legislation as a back door, a chink in the wall of liberal-era efforts to diminish and mitigate a cumulative history of discrimination. Queers didn’t connect the dots between Colorado’s Amendment 2 and the Defense of Marriage Act and ongoing attempts to roll back affirmative action, voting rights, desegregation policy, and wider social integration. Those were, my fellow activists would assure me, completely separate and unrelated. No small wonder that African and Latino Americans saw the gay community as wholly white, even when they knew people of color as part of our collective, and it wasn’t surprising that queers of color identified more intensely with populations defined by race. Coming out of those experiences in the early 1990s, my own whiteness was never more fully legible to me, in all its offensive and natural privilege, than when I worked as an activist and tried to make change happen.

When I landed in writing centers after that other life and its disillusionment and began another journey in the academy, I saw the same racial tensions and possibilities and once again naïvely thought fundamental change was possible. Writing centers, I thought, could be sites for activism; organic, sustainable, even broader change could be had there, though it had eluded me elsewhere. Years later, I’m still hopeful, but I now know that such labor results in shifts that are tremendously local, plodding, and at times, fleeting. The first scenario I presented at the beginning of this chapter is rich with possibilities for promoting anti-racism work in writing centers. Allia, the tutor who experienced the conflict, was compelled to prove her ethos in ways that white people just are never compelled to do in the same way. That performance reflected her sophistication and experience, a lifetime of doing that dance over and over and over again. Allia could respond because she had a register of responses, representing a rhetorical readiness that was socially constructed and exclusive to African Americans, and invoked where and when symbolic and material success weren’t assured. As

Allia once she told me, confronting every offense that comes down the pike is exhausting; she could have, justifiably, gotten angry, growled an equally off-putting response, or directly confronted the moment of racism. Instead, she chose to work around it. Allia responded to the student in neither a genial nor a confrontational manner, but another, subversive way, one which refused the marginalizing positioning implicit in the student's discourse and one which enacted the very professionalism and dignity the student had attempted to strip. Just as striking as what Allia reported as her response was the implication of just how much of our society's racism this immigrant had internalized in her relatively short time in the country, and how it commingled with the politics of race and difference in her homeland. This student was performing everyday American attitudes and practices toward race in an overt way that "natives" enact in more subtle, though no less offensive ways. What if the student were a person of color confronting identity politics from a tutor possessing racial privilege? In what ways does everyday practice delegitimize the student's experiences from a racial standpoint? How often has a student been told that experiences with race were off base, that they must be misunderstanding or misconstruing a situation? In what ways do we police real experiences with race and racism (or any form of oppression) in our writing centers?

Beyond the everyday struggle for people of color—whether they're tutors or clients in writing centers or classrooms across the curriculum—to learn, assert, or contest ethos, from the words they produce to the essays and other writing they create, there's an ongoing struggle over face they must confront. Which faces are permitted and tolerated and which ones face scrutiny, challenge or oppression? The opening scene gets at dynamics that operate in understated ways in writing centers and across college campuses. "Changing the face of" is a recurrent refrain from diversity panels at professional conferences or in articles that take up the ongoing under-representation of people of color in writing centers, composition, and the academy at large. I take pride in the staff of my writing centers mirroring our student bodies, but this reality is more a consequence of my institutional context than strategic work on my part. At more homogeneous colleges and universities, the effort must be more sustained to get similar results. But regardless of whether we have a diverse writing center or not—whether we have a critical mass of people of color that, by virtue of presence, challenge the hegemony of race as ordinarily practiced—we

still must create a space to dig into how racial identity politics play out in writing centers and beyond, and how they affect the myriad issues around learning to write. We must, I contend, uncover the hidden curriculum of race in education, the one that inscribes a racialized margin and center. We must think about how our practices represent a pedagogy of conduct that dominates and enacts privilege by teaching codes that naturalize the very people who benefit from it, perform it, signify it. People who teach in writing centers or composition courses must question how we interrogate ways of signifying, how these processes make possible both center and margin, and how that dichotomy can be re-imagined as a range of possible identities to which people can have strategic rhetorical positions.

As much as this book begs consideration of the face of writing centers—what they are—such reflection doesn't get to the heart of what I'm advocating. The Benetton ad writing center might exist as an ideal and a reality, but it might still be rife with unresolved identity politics around race. In other words, being multiracial (or inclusive in any number of other ways) doesn't get into how race (or any other identity intrinsic to who we are) gets played out or acted on in everyday practice. A multiracial writing center might foster a learning environment that naturalizes a monocultural approach to rhetoric and expression, while a writing center less racially diverse might actively create spaces for conversation where learners and tutors alike challenge, explore, or scaffold to and from multiple linguistic, argumentation, and genre traditions. Although writing centers and composition classrooms can often get students and teachers past an obsessive attention to products and redirect our focus toward process, the very same negotiation needs to happen around our racial identity politics. Having diversity isn't enough or a necessary end; instead, we need to process whether and how it happens and to what consequence. As a means of providing a common language and framework by which to understand race, I'll first bridge theory on race to critical race conversations in writing center and composition studies. With that shared background, I argue that people of color often face pressure to accommodate to naturalized white codes of rhetorical expression, to perform them as stable, ahistorical standards. Juxtaposed to that hegemonic curriculum, my discussion then advocates oppositional or subversion codes, not as equivalent means of expression without consequences, but as codes that enable students and consultants to view communication as involving strategic choices over which they ought to have agency.

## THEORIZING RACE AND THE WRITING CENTER

Linda Alcoff argues race and gender are forms of identity that are visible on our bodies, making them fundamental to how we experience the world: “Visibility is both the means of segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance” (2006, 7).<sup>7</sup> While I challenge Alcoff’s belief that other forms of identity don’t have the same visibility and foundationalism as race and gender, I will concede that their histories and material experiences are profoundly different. Before we can understand how assimilation, opposition, and resistance impact the face of race in writing centers and other learning contexts, it’s critical to explore what’s meant by race and to turn that insight to composition and writing center studies.

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) map the history of racial theory and argue for a framework that they name “racial formation.” They point out that modern responses to race have ranged from the biological and ethnic to class and national understandings.<sup>8</sup> In each theory, race is made ancillary to other forms of identity; that is, those explanations offer other traits as foundational to society. Omi and Winant argue that race, like any other form of identity, needs to be viewed as a primary means by which society is organized. Put another way, our discourses and practices can’t be understood without the role of race factored into any analysis; that any understanding without it is partial and incomplete, that race is irreducible to other historical features of identity and domination as well as they to it.<sup>9</sup>

Omi and Winant (1986) posit the ethnicity model as the dominant paradigm by which race is understood in the U.S. It understands race as one social category among many possible across ethnic groups. The ethnicity model places emphasis on the notion of collectivity and has its roots in the study of voluntary or forced (slavery) immigration in European and American contexts. The paradigm held that assimilation led to a dynamic merging of ethnic identities with new American ones. However, research challenged the validity of this model as evidence

- 
7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to Alcoff and reminding me of her importance to discussions of identity politics.
  8. Omi and Winant don’t dwell on the biological paradigm very long because it predated social scientific work on race. Moreover, the belief system conflated genuine physiological differences with racist notions of social and cultural superiority and inferiority.
  9. This framing intentionally echoes Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) literary criticism vis-à-vis sexuality.

mounted that assimilation often didn't happen or happened in less than complete ways. By the 1950s, waves of earlier immigrants seemed to have been incorporated by wider society, while African Americans, whose arrival predated most immigrants, still struggled to eke out any minimal sense of integration. At the same time, those very immigrants, though identifying as American, still maintained rich community and cultural identities rooted in ethnic origins. In stark contrast, the very same community ties and cultural practices among people of color were viewed with suspicion and, frequently enough, attempts at suppression or, from time to time, imitation and appropriation. If the ethnic model's assumption of assimilation was correct, black people should have long since been integrated smoothly; the reality was, of course, at the height of Jim Crow segregation, dramatically different. Countering this assimilationist-ethnicity paradigm—that race and ethnicity might someday give way to an amorphous national identity—a cultural pluralist-ethnicity position emerged in relation to the mid-century civil rights movement. It accepted the persistence of multiple racial and ethnic identities and sought public policy to mollify the effects of difference and to, in effect, bracket the historical precedents to discrimination and anti-pluralism.

Beyond these mainstream views of race, more critical theories also have emerged, though they haven't challenged the dominance of the ethnic model, particularly in the domain of governmental policy, and more narrowly in relation to education and pedagogy. One model argues that race is a product of class struggle, that it's an invention to divide workers from one another, building in inherent and structural benefits and losses for whites and blacks alike. In some sectors, white earning power is elevated by exclusion of and discrimination against people of color, ostensibly reducing the labor pool arbitrarily and enabling a concentration and greater earning power for white workers. Beyond this Marxist understanding of race, Omi and Winant (1986) also detail a model that focuses on the nexus of nationality and colonialism, where race is the product of nations working to dominate or oppress one another. Domestically, "internal colonialism" works on the premise that groups of people are segregated from one another, forms of domination and resistance emerge, and institutional structures develop in reaction to them. Urban ghettos came into existence as the most legible instances of colonialism, ranging from attempts to confine African Americans within them through redlining and other

predatory housing practices, to well-meaning liberal outreach programs to save people from poverty by means of banking curricula meant to invest populations with “necessary” skills and educational capital for self-improvement.

Omi and Winant (1986) fault these class- and colonialism-focused theories of race for misunderstanding race as a concept rooted in some nebulous empirical reality, rather than as a term rooted in a pliable meaning tied to particular histories. These authors believe that, for all the interrogation of how race operates, its root causes or origins, it has always been understood as a category that “broader” ones subsume, rendering the complexity and fundamentals of race unexamined (13). Instead, they advocate understanding race in a different way, as a “formed” entity.

Race is indeed a pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept. Racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Racial meanings have varied tremendously over time and between different societies. (Omi and Winant 1986, 60)

Race, in Omi and Winant’s terms, is inherently a social construction, one not ever settled, but one constantly in a fluid state. They view race as a contested term, a formation that:

Refer[s] to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formation is the treatment of race as a *central axis* of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception. (1986, 61-62).

Race, in this thinking, is irreducible to other axes, like sex, class, or nationality, each of which have sets, matrices even, of discursive relations that constitute social, cultural and political relations. It is a tremendously important category to contest and to understand as fundamental because it makes possible the lens through which we view bodies. Linda Alcoff pushes this thinking by saying that our racial identities constitute “bodily experience, subjectivity, judgment and epistemic relationships” (2006, 183). None exists outside of or beyond the purview of that gaze and way of producing knowledge of, by, for and through race.

This very tension—race as a contested term, as a central site for inquiry—that Omi and Winant point to in their 1986 work is mirrored in and confounded by how writing center, composition and English studies have struggled to address it along with other identity politics. In her 1999 work, “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre-and Post-Open Admissions,” Beth Boquet traces the history of writing centers, noting that many emerged in the 1970s as a response to a flood of previously un-represented populations of students on college campuses. This historical moment is rich in significance, the very occasion when civil rights, the New Left, student protest, anti-Vietnam war, and women’s and gay liberation activism reached an apex of radicalism and challenge to institutional and social hegemony and control, as Johnson’s Great Society programs failed to deliver substantial, sustainable change. Throughout society, anti-poverty programs combated generational hardship, from urban cores to Appalachia and southern rural communities, and the vestiges of Jim Crow segregation gave way to expanded “white flight” to suburbs throughout the nation. In the academy, people of color and working-class folk found greater access to higher education, but institutions struggled to understand their learning needs and styles, to develop processes to help these students accrue the educational capital required to be successful, or to challenge whether existing conventions fit the new realities on campus. In composition and writing center studies, the role of race, historically, has been embedded in debates over vernaculars and whether and how to teach to “codes of power,” “code-switching,” or “code-meshing.” Carmen Kynard (2007) studies this history and its key figures, particularly in relation to the Students’ Right to Their Own Language movement within the Conference on College Composition and Communication. She argues that Lisa Delpit (1995), who many in the field have championed for advocating direct instruction on the written and rhetorical codes used by those in the majority, problematically advances a pedagogy rooted in integrating black students into a middle-class cultural elite without reference to their “home” cultures and subsequent impact on literacies to which they have access. Instead, Kynard advocates critical awareness of students’ literacy experiences and demands at home and school. Rather than exclusively focusing on such lower-order concerns as syntactical and lexical correctness, Kynard advances a pedagogy rooted in genuine understanding of students’ learning experiences, better knowing how their “culture, history,

or linguistic repertoire” impact on learning standard English vernaculars (374). Sound teaching and learning, she believes, places race as a central axis for discovery that struggles over language and race and makes possible different sets of knowledge and vice versa.

The importance of Kynard’s 2007 work comes in the pedagogy it reflects and the value it offers for leveraging the multiple literacies that we all possess for learning in diffuse contexts. Just as important, it values—rather than marginalizes—the identities and communities that students bring with them, each of which themselves have linguistic, rhetorical, and symbolic protocol that learners can tap and bridge to other domains. This social negotiation enables us all to understand and explore how identity, but race in particular, signifies and makes possible a wide range of possibilities, as Alcoff anticipated, that are encoded on/through our bodies, our ways of knowing and doing, and the relationships we build with worlds near and far. Too often in our classrooms and writing centers, such awareness—that home and school aren’t in opposition, but are mutually supporting reservoirs—is bracketed as irrelevant or a distraction. That message is ultimately self-destructive to learners and ourselves. Rather than foster the notion that a person’s relationship between home and school be severed, we should instead create occasions for helping people understand when, where, and how home is appropriate for reaching different audiences in various contexts. While we must all integrate with the larger world and imagine social actors whose own experiences parallel and diverge from our own, we never compartmentalize our multiple experiences, selves and identities to any good end. In the coming sections, I turn to that negotiation and question an uncomplicated assumption of mainstream (white) ways of signifying our identities, and I advocate that we empower students to make strategic decisions about whether they accommodate, oppose, or subvert conventions around racialized discourse patterns.

#### **ERASING AND MUTING RACE**

When we talk about race in the context of writing centers, staff can become reticent to engage the conversation. Such ambivalence is rooted in the difficulty of approaching the subject, especially when participants, myself included, come from entrenched positions of privilege and power, or unlikely as it may seem, are from marginalized positions, and have little awareness of their exteriority. Conversations about the structural and institutional nature of race are viewed through a prism

of what's gained from "making it an issue" when there's no clear benefit. I've heard white colleagues anxious about talk of race—of owning our culpability and benefits from institutional racism—who see it as an exercise of public self-flagellation, a performance without any tangible pragmatic outcome. What, they wonder, is the utility of owning a personal relationship with race and racism? What's the end of inventorying and testifying to privilege over other people? Others doubt the efficacy of writing centers as sites for launching social justice work in general or as spaces for critical dialogue on race: Why, they ask, must such charged discussions begin in sites often lacking in the political capital to effect change in something so systemic?

Each of these positions is indeed a plausible counter-weight to visions, admittedly utopian, of social change in academy. For the "why us" standpoint, the issue shouldn't be an either/or proposition, that race is either about individuals' culpability in institutional, systemic dynamics or about the structural physics of social relations that operate above and beyond individuals. The real issue is understanding that our everyday practices reify larger, more abstract forces in play, and that making change involves critical consciousness-making. We are, in other words, culpable in the social forces around us and have an obligation to speak into, reflect on, and disrupt them when appropriate. I advocate what Antonio Gramsci (1971) called "organic intellectualism," a sort of pedagogy rooted in enabling people to call into question the conditions that make possible their own oppression or domination (in the case of people operating from privileged standpoints). In composition studies, this thinking has been most widely taken up by followers of Paulo Friere (2000). Wherever the teaching of writing happens, the practice is embedded in dialogue where teachers/consultants encourage students to "problem-pose" ways of thinking and expression, that through critical engagement they will find a path to intellectual emancipation, at best, or greater voice and agency in communication, at minimum. In that latter sense, problem-posing presents a social justice pedagogy that's relatively hegemonic and oppositional in writing centers, even as many practitioners seek to resist understanding the activism implicit in their everyday routines. Writing centers, unique crossroads of students, faculty and institutional culture, are sites where organic difference can be made, even if tentative, ill-conceived, and halting. This intellectual labor is just as central to teaching in other contexts, where critical dialogue doesn't only lead to greater engagement and active learning, but

creates possibilities for taking up content in more meaningful, sustainable, and resonant ways for instructors and students alike.

Racial identity politics involves dynamics where marked bodies, those of people of color, come to signify with an excess of codes, a comprehensive set of meanings, the absence of which, simultaneously, confers membership in discourse communities of unmarked bodies, populations with historical privilege and domination in institutional cultures. In practice, students of color and their use of language offer symbolic capital that's rendered as non-transferable to many academic rhetorical contexts by the majority.<sup>10</sup> Such language signifies, when it's refused or denied access, linguistic and rhetorical practices long established and inscribed onto people of color, typically from urban or southern rural communities and named as Black or African American English Vernacular (BEV or AAEV). Often there's a class dimension to the vernacular since middle- and upper-class people of color often present codes consistent (or compatible) with dominant/white use of language and rhetoric in those contexts, while working-class people of color often don't have equitable access to institutional structures (schools, cultural experiences) that would provide opportunities to learn "codes of power" or ways of transferring such symbolic capital, as Kynard (2007) might support, between literacy traditions. Language use and rhetorical strategies clearly have cultural referents rooted in communities bounded by shared identity (see Gilyard 1991, Smitherman 1977, Kynard 2007), but it's also evident that linguistic politics have material implications, assuming, of course, that individuals seek to break from or move into discourse communities that privilege one code over another. Speaking standard English *can* result in access to positions—jobs, institutions, culture—where that code is hegemonic and a taken-for-granted condition of entrée, but I'm not convinced talking the talk evacuates more residual or structural racism that renders most of dominant society tremendously segregated.<sup>11</sup> I push this point because I'm

---

10. My use of symbolic capital here references Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1991) work. He argues symbolic capital is the elemental form of capital at the heart of other expressions—political, cultural, economic, social, etc.—around which fields and wider habitus are constituted and structured.

11. In my lifetime, African Americans' earning power has rarely surpassed sixty percent of what white people make annually (See <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/11/14/national/main2179601.shtml>, census.gov, or Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Only Latinos make less than Black Americans, while Asian Americans typically earn more than the white majority.

not convinced that teachers and learners often understand that choices and options exist between acquiring, adopting, adapting, and refusing the linguistic and rhetorical traditions of dominant culture. The pedagogical imperative is to foster awareness of the practices that render dominant or hegemonic discourse (their syntax, lexicon, rhetoric, etc.) as transparent and natural, appearing and existing without question, politics or implications; whereas other discourse practices representing any other identity formation are viewed as adjuncts, vernaculars or dialects that are somehow branches of the center. It goes without questioning that standard English and academic prose aren't themselves vernaculars, granted privileged ways of expression.

Not going forth into that dynamic—not to understand and critically engage hegemonic practices, whether conventions of interaction or language use—represents an attempt to erase identity at the center and the inscription of it elsewhere, on the linguistic and rhetorical practices of people of color. This move is tantamount to what James McBride (2006) remembered about his mother's explanation of her racial identity in *The Color of Water*: Growing up as a black man in Brooklyn's Red Hook section, McBride would, along with his siblings, ask his white mother about her race, the answer to which she carefully evaded. To her, she lacked race. The notion of white folks not signifying race seems, at first, like a dodging move in response to a difficult question, yet it captures a historical (half) truth, that people of color are historically raced and signified, while white people aren't in the same way. Of course, as a consequence of racing (and marginalizing) minorities (and remember, Omi and Winant (1986) argue this is a universal phenomenon), the majority is signified itself, if only in discursive opposition to them. White people come to have meaning in relation to people of color. Race, in this sense, cannot be understood in our cultural practices without exploring structuring oppositions: Whites cannot exist without the constellation of other racial identities, just as class, sexuality, gender, and nationality are also dependent upon the same unending set of juxtapositions. Defaulting to the hegemonic is posited as stepping out of identity politics, creating a vacuum where a neutral discussion of language can somehow be engaged without reference to historic, contextual, and rhetorical need.

Kenji Yoshino (2007) would refer to those defaulting moments as occasions when people of color are pressured to cover, to assimilate white norms of performing in the public domain. Yoshino, a Yale law

professor, explains the concept in legal terms, but it has wider resonance. He argues anti-discrimination law distinguishes between immutable and mutable traits of identity. Immutable elements, traits that cannot be changed like race, ethnicity, and sex, have legal protection because they operate as forms of difference from the majority that people don't decide to invoke or assume, whereas mutable traits, cultural expressions of identity that a person "chooses" to signify, can be regulated in such public contexts (130-131). Mutable elements can involve everything from hair style and dress to mannerisms and language use and create the basis for everyday—and legal—forms of discrimination. Yoshino invokes Eric Liu's writing on the model minority to explain the pressures people of color face:

Liu stresses his "yellow skin and yellow ancestors"—he has not passed or converted. Yet he believes. . . covering behaviors have transformed him. Observing that "some are born white, others achieve whiteness, still others have whiteness thrust upon them," he says he has become "white by acclamation." That metamorphosis is also internal. Liu says that insofar as he has moved "away from the periphery and toward the center of American life," he has "become white inside." (1999, 125)

Yoshino reproduces a list from Liu's memoir, *The Accidental Asian*, that details his "white" behaviors that include media, fashion, cultural, and community elements, most of which could also be interpreted as middle-class behaviors. While American society has grown to tolerate racial pluralism—what Yoshino would call *being* a racial or ethnic identity—there remains deep ambivalence about *doing* it. In other words, it's fine to be African, Latino, or Asian American so long as one isn't *too* African, Latino, or Asian. The degree to which a person of color plays into that protocol signals their complicity in covering their identity.

Covering is both a means and an ends that has a commonplace and problematic existence in most writing centers and composition classrooms, including my own. Students of color come to the writing center, often with a surface expectation that tutors "fix" their papers, with an underlying desire to cleanse their prose of markers of vernacular English and to adopt language use that sounds white or consistent with the more amorphous "Standard Written English" championed throughout the academy (I'll speak to the unique elements of this pressure to "code-switch" for multi-lingual writers in a later chapter). Whatever relationship they may have with standard English away from

school, savvy students learn the premium placed on its usage and the real consequences for refusing it, while less attuned peers are eventually told to write less like they speak and even later to speak less like they do at home. While “progressive” professors might grant permission to speak from authentic experiences, few tolerate or make space, real or rhetorical, for authentic language use, even make room for dialogue about the protocols attendant to discourse communities across the academy. Student voice might be championed as a means for engagement, relevance, and pathos, but being “real” or “true” works only inasmuch as it doesn’t threaten the supremacy of dominant modes of expression. Tutors themselves are in vexing positions, as students of color themselves or not, because they are often quite proximate to the demands their clients face: Tutors personally know the demands of instructors since their jobs as such are predicated on pedagogical experience, if not quasi-expertise, with collaborative learning, itself a register of an ability to bridge teaching and learning. Writing centers, then, have a tacit assimilationist contract with the populations they serve: Covering, a performative logic of assimilation, involves sets of codes and ways of signifying to the expected terms of majority; and tutoring involves mentoring one toward acquisition of those rules of conduct—linguistic, rhetorical, or even behavioral. The question, the moral dilemma for tutors and students alike, is the degree to which they problem-pose that social contract, making space to realize its very arbitrariness and, regardless, power.

The temptation to default to the majority, to cover oneself in the trappings of white hegemony, provides an explanation for why students might privilege white tutors over those of color. Although thoroughly racist, students might logically reason that the most efficient way to acquire “codes of power” is to seek those who might seem to purvey them the best, tutors whose bodies at least signify their proximity to the majority. Ironically, in the very scenario that leads this chapter, Allia possessed much more privileged educational capital than any other available tutor in that writing center. She was in graduate school as a returning adult student having long ago completed an undergraduate degree at an elite east coast liberal arts college, working for years as a corporate trainer, and raising children. Of anyone available to this student, Allia was quite possibly the best suited to offer the rules and codes of dominant expression in American higher education. Of course, the student had no way of knowing that background before

meeting Allia, and I'm not sure that owning such capital would ensure a tutor is effective. On another level, the student might have been registering another cultural assumption about race in teaching and learning. She might have thought, based on prior experience, that white tutors might be more likely to correct or fix her writing as opposed to an African American or any other tutor of color who might be known to make students work for their learning, to make clients active rather than passive participants in a session. In baiting Allia, the student was working toward a win-win scenario: If Allia caved to racism, she might be tempted to fix the student's paper rather than contest her, and if Allia passed the student on to someone else, she was more likely to get someone who would also do it, just "fix" her paper.

As troubling as I find that scenario for the tutor and the student and doubly so if the roles were reversed (and the tutor was tracking or profiling the student), I'm more worried by a response that might deny the role of race there. Because it is so invisible and hence structural and institutional, the quotidian experience of race and racism is less akin to what Allia experienced and more like the experiences that Geller, et al (2007) write about in *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, or that Villanueva (2003) describes in his *Cross-Talk* essay. Geller and her co-authors share the narrative of an African American woman who worked in one of their writing centers. She frequently got stopped upon entering the space and asked with whom she had an appointment. The student quit the writing center after she brought her son one day and a tutor commented that he'd make a great basketball player one day (87-88). The embedded assumptions about people of color not being figures who could be tutors, or narrow perceptions of life possibilities for black men, aren't original or terribly unique. At my writing center in Queens, young tutors of color have the same experiences at our registration desk, either with a new consultant acting as a receptionist or being relatively new among our community of consultants. But I've also heard younger-looking faculty get stopped and questioned by the same inexperienced people at our reception checkpoint. Whether the roots of the interaction are racism or unfamiliarity with who's who, the point remains the same: The tension between one's intent and reception is difficult to negotiate. These two situations remind me of a flashpoint in one of my graduate courses when a white graduate student, who by day directs a learning center and teaches basic writing courses, expressed frustration at the prose error

her students, mainly people of color, were displaying. Her frustration was couched in a language of elitism and superiority that worked to Other her students who were already so (“these people can’t even write a complete sentence”). However her frustration, as authentic, real, and genuine as it was intended, a call for help, was still racially tinged in a way that no white person can express without also invoking the cumulative history of institutional racism that her students’ experiences with education likely index. Another student, one of a handful of students of color in our doctoral program, called this student out for the racialized discourse and the poverty of her pedagogy, suggesting that she had no business working with basic writers in this context. I’ve heard both of these rhetorical positions over and over in writing centers and at conferences over the years. It’s a sort of discursive distancing where people are faulted for lacking certain educational capital, yet they are denied roots or strategies to overcome that gulf. This conflict testifies to the need for more, not less, dialogue among people in this class. That same Othering discourse is commonplace in writing centers, where first-generation students, especially when such students are of color, come in proximity to students, staff and faculty who don’t understand, or don’t have the tools to cope with the linguistic and material differences between themselves and clients. Such conversations shouldn’t be censored; rather, processes and techniques need to be leveraged to make for safe and productive difficult dialogues.

There’s even greater complexity in how race gets played out in writing centers. On the one hand, the need for multiculturalism, of which including people of color is a huge part, creates an inclusive space. But, on the other hand, conversation plays an important role regardless of what the face of the center is—there needs to be dialogue that’s genuinely transactional, not about banking for any perspective or essentialist way of being, but dialogue that’s a genuine exploration of difference and similarity, about same and other. The work doesn’t stop with inclusion; it extends to developing mechanisms for mutual learning. To me, that’s at the heart of a story Villanueva (2003) writes about in “On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism” in which he describes an explosive department meeting held to discuss dynamics that lead graduate students toward feeling as if they’re pressured to don white masks in order to succeed in the program. The students, Villanueva shares, feel that race is treated as ancillary to curriculum as opposed to integral to it (836-837). One student argues about the difference between speaking

and being heard, of being understood, internalized, and integrated. Hearing, and all that goes along with it, requires a level of performed reciprocity; interlocutors have to respond in ways that signify and name understanding or ongoing questioning. Greeting those moments with silence or not providing space for conversation to even happen connotes an environment just as closed and unwelcoming as any explicitly racialized or segregated space, thus making silencing a policing mechanism, a filibustering by static—or by white noise. I wonder, though, what about the writing center, where silence dominates, where no difficult dialogues, as one of my colleagues names them, happen. What does it mean to *be* silent as opposed to greeting moments *with* silence?

That sense speaks to the dynamics at play in the second scenario with which this chapter led. What does it mean to staff a center in inclusive ways, to do it with a select population of “model minorities,” tutors who, without question, have adopted codes and discursive practices of the majority, and for all intents and purposes seem to identify with the cultural majority? What does it mean to be an interloper in that environment? To confess, those have been my writing centers, and each has had more than its share of “problem” tutors and “problem” students who both refused, regardless of whether they’ve been self-aware of that refusal, to wrap themselves up in the protocol and other unwritten codes of assimilation of the spaces. The material consequences can be harsh: ostracization at best, being marginalized and subject to greater scrutiny (as my partner says, “The nail that sticks out, gets hammered down.”); or missed opportunities for voluntary collaboration and mentoring. On the flipside, for those who act as “team-players,” the rewards range from inclusion to possibilities for academic enrichment and perks (collaboration on research projects, networking and special mentoring, etc.). I wonder now whether those students were truly problem students or tutors, individuals who just couldn’t adhere to those writing centers’ codes of conduct, implied or not; or whether the writing centers were enacting a pedagogy of covering, a *de facto* learning and teaching environment that privileged assimilation and that made resistance futile, if not untenable. My greatest fear, in writing centers where the cultural inertia is toward a sort of multicultural assimilation, is that the outliers are taught a dubious lesson: Everyone is welcome so long as challenge and doubting are silent. In effect, silencing becomes a *de rigueur* mode of operation.

**FOREGROUNDING AND SUBVERTING RACE**

In the everyday practice of writing centers and composition classrooms, race is invoked as an issue of linguistic and rhetorical assimilation or as evidence of a need for multicultural initiatives. Accommodation mutes the charge that racial identity politics can bring to learning and teaching and makes race a trait that needs to be neutralized, rather than a set of practices for which recognizing difference is prized and generative. When conversation turns to race in the writing center, so much of the talk gets framed in terms of an unending series of binaries that I just don't see as productive. People are pressured to uncritically adopt academic English in tension with racially and ethnically coded speech and writing patterns (among others) that are perfectly appropriate and relevant in a variety of rhetorical contexts and genres. In essence, the face that is proffered in writing centers is one that too often uncritically accepts dominant performativity. As Jacqueline Jones Royster (1996) puts it, authentic voice isn't just a matter for vernaculars or languages that have dominance away from school; all language is authentic, whether uttered in the academy or beyond. Yet such utopias are illusive in the everyday grind of learning and mentoring in writing centers and beyond. Although putting a public face forward that conforms to racialized standards of discourse usage is the default pedagogical goal and outcome, covering isn't the only option to which people from the margins have access. I propose they may also elect to assume oppositional and subversive positions in relation to the center. An oppositional standpoint, to borrow from the rhetoric of social movements scholarship, might involve a rejection of institutional and social structure, advocacy of fundamental, systemic change, and use of non-standard codes (Cathcart 1983). Stuart Hall (1993) defines opposition in similar terms: Recognizing the reception and circulation of codes and meaning in direct contrast to dominant ideological formation. Further, Malcolm X (1965, Cited in Grant 1996) and Molefi Asante (1987) each have advocated oppositional forms of consciousness, critiquing Western thinking as inherently Eurocentric to the exclusion of Asian and African philosophical and rhetorical traditions. To be oppositional, then, in the context of a writing center would likely be an untenable enterprise for people of color who are students or tutors. The collaborative nature of the dynamic of meeting students where they are, of understanding that tutors aren't necessarily spokespeople

for larger institutional bodies and structures, creates a contact zone not entirely neutral, but also not entirely safe or risky for everyone and everything involved.

More typically, the moment for opposition comes in relational dynamics and while helping students negotiate their linguistic rights. Returning again to both scenarios that I led off the chapter with, I'm reminded of Allia's conflict with her student. An oppositional response would have involved directly protesting the student's action and demanding, understandably, an institutional response to her racism. Student life codes of conduct, particularly those that require a sort of decorum or common criteria for behavior, likely would have given her cover. More likely, and just as plausible, would have been Allia "going off" on the student, speaking out vociferously, even driving the student out of the space. More discretely, she could have sought out an administrator, a colleague, or someone else who could take over the session, in effect withdrawing from the situation and the symbolic, verbal abuse it was entailing. In the second scenario, the burden of action falls again on the object of tension, the person being raced in an oppositional way. Here, being thrust into a separatist position comes as consequence of *not* doing something, of not conforming or assimilating.

What feels more tenable to me, a position that enables everyone in a writing center to participate in advancing them as spaces for social justice, is one rooted in a notion of subversion. Cal Logue (1981) argues that a subversive position might appear as assimilationist, involving what on the surface might be interpreted as a tacit acceptance of institutional protocols and rituals of the wider system, but it actually involves manipulating discourse and populations in ways that advance individual needs while undermining the status quo. Logue believes a subversive approach involves rhetorical disguise and readiness as well as the use of language in coded ways that inform insiders (or confederates) and manipulate those in positions of dominance. He initially used this framework to deconstruct slave rhetoric when they spoke (and sometimes wrote) from positions where they had no practical choice between outright assimilation and opposition. They lacked the power to pick from those two positions because being truly oppositional had the direct consequence of violence and death. Students or tutors of color obviously don't face the same threats, but the material consequences of refusing, particularly in the context of education, are still nonetheless real. Can people of color, in effect, realistically take on a separatist approach to

academic communities when they can't influence or bracket hegemonic rules and conventions of communication and practice that impact on material success, particularly in a society that places a premium on undergraduate education as a pre-requisite for most entry-level professional, white collar (or service industry), and increasing numbers of blue collar trades? Getting good grades, succeeding, and advancing professionally can often be predicated on playing along with the rules of the game, even at times when one wants to resist.

Rhetorical readiness and disguise are intrinsic to the learning and mentoring practices of writing centers, and it's a cumulative sort of capital that also develops with life experience. Tutors can be cultural informants, as Grimm (1999) advocates, bridging their own experiences with learning the academic ropes and rituals, to novice students who are often still learning their own sea-legs, not knowing where, when, how and who to listen to and observe. Consuming cultural capital, or learning the rules of its acquisition, isn't about a slavish adherence to tradition; it's about knowing enough to undercut and challenge from a position of security. Understanding conventions or genres doesn't necessarily mean accepting them as natural or given. Rhetorical disguise would involve using dominant codes of language in expected ways, to speak or write in ways that might otherwise appear to be covering or assimilating to white standards of conduct. But lurking beneath the veneer of this accepted, hegemonic use of language would be a special use of code that either contains codes for confederates or manipulates one's opposition to turn attention to some common enemy. This latter sense is what Henry Louis Gates (1986) theorizes as *signifyin'*, a technique common to African American cultural experience throughout history. All of this work is consistent with what effective writers do in any context, to consider an audience and to use understanding of it to guide development of an argument. Sound tutoring involves dialogue on and questioning about what students know about their audiences as well as the genres operative in courses. However, subversion comes into play when both tutors and students collaborate with one another about ways of leveraging personal experience in occasions where professors might not otherwise allow it; or when they work together in developing appropriate, respectful ways to question, even challenge, faculty to re-imagine or refine assignments, projects or readings. In sessions I have had with students, more often than not, they've never had occasion to talk about the various ways in their everyday lives that they switch

between codes for different discourse communities, from work and friends to family and elders. We've talked about how they came to know how to switch or change up the way they use language. Even when the linguistic differences were minor compared to the amorphous expectations of academic English, just having the conversation was empowering in the face of what might otherwise be seen as mystifying. My goal, in these sorts of sessions, is to have students and tutors alike recognize that we all have multiple voices and codes to invoke for our rhetorical purposes, that we have the agency and responsibility to strategically use them, and that sustainable change comes from having them in circulation, forcing institutions and the academy to evolve and adapt.

### **PARTING THOUGHTS**

The face of the writing center is crucial. Having a disjunction between those tutoring and being tutored can manifest in any number of ways. It can create a colonialist culture from which a local form of stratification can emerge, and it can create an experiential dissonance for those entering a discourse community. Then again, I've only ever taught or worked in writing centers in institutional contexts where first-generation students, working-class students, students of color, or some combination thereof, dominate the population being taught. I've been in contexts where experiential gulfs yawned between faculty and tutors and the student populations in their writing centers. In each case, the cultures were dysfunctional for a whole host of reasons, yet none of those problems were insurmountable had there been spaces for speaking and hearing one another and seeking out ways to collaborate on ways to make sustainable social justice work. How people move between margin and center, how to face the center or the margin, is about a fluid process and product, neither one nor the other. As the U.S. moves ever closer to racial and ethnic minorities being the numerical majority (a reality in most urban centers already), the question of margin and center and politics of moving between both becomes ever more complicated. As people of color negotiate center and margin—whether, even, to move between them—a simultaneous negotiation must happen for white people, for people like me, who also need to learn a new world in which their experiences, their languages, their ways of knowing aren't always the default positions. In reality, most people reading this book, in the near- to medium-term, will likely continue to be overwhelmingly white and privileged if they index the current demographic trends in

the field, and to these readers, I must implore labor rooted in inventing our privilege and to invest heavily in strategies that mark us when unmarked and to contest the insidious ways in which we silence and fail to hear, to see and to listen.

Kynard's (2007) work speaks into the long history and politics of composition studies struggling with its surface politics and deeper lived practices at the intersection of students' right to their own language and institutional pedagogies of domination. Learning to write in a college classroom involves a negotiation of disciplinary and universal academic genres and rhetorics, but acculturation doesn't happen in a vacuum apart from the wider social and cultural practices that have historically made them possible. Our conventions signify who we are, and battles over them are charged with the identity politics always already operative in our society. Teachers, tutors, and students too often face a Faustian bargain: Acquire the keys to the kingdom, enter, and flourish, but you must leave your baggage, your socio-cultural heritage at the gates. But the academy has forever changed in the last thirty years as access to education has democratized. The face at the center doesn't necessarily have to be white, yet a multicultural one that lacks a range of linguistic referents isn't fundamentally an improvement. Instead, we must advocate multiple literacies—of home, vocation, passion, and publics—as a matrix of communicative possibilities that *everyone* must have facility with and a fully conscious repertoire to articulate them to audiences. Our being and doing race feeds the complexity and rich potential of learning and teaching, and should not be positioned as a set of variables to be overcome and mitigated. As central as race is to who we are, rendering it transparent or seeking to dissipate its role eliminates rich potential for expression and critical thinking. To empower students means giving them agency and opportunity to interact with all worlds possible through a range of terms and devices.