

Flourishing as Anti-Racist Praxis: “An Uncompromised Commitment” to Black Writing Tutors

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Until a problem arises, we may be unaware that our well-intentioned tutor training practices expose some tutors to harm. This does not mean, however, that we are helpless until a trauma occurs that reveals the need for change. A proactive commitment to identifying and redressing policies that enable some trainees to thrive while others flounder can help us ensure that all tutors have equal opportunity to flourish. This is the commitment that I made after discovering an emerging pattern among Black women writing tutors attempting to enact a longstanding practice for tutors-in-training.

The practice, established prior to my appointment as director of a PWI writing and speaking center, requires prospective writing tutors enrolled in a training seminar to complete “tutor takeovers.” Peer and graduate writing tutor trainees show up for already scheduled writing tutorials and ask the student for permission to facilitate the session in the veteran tutor’s stead.

Thankfully, for most tutors-in-training, tutor takeovers have been positive experiences. As observed in their weekly reflections, by in large they feel more empowered as novice tutors, having applied their burgeoning knowledge and reaped in turn growing confidence in their abilities. Additionally, the veteran tutor who remains in the session can offer advice and encouragement to trainees often trying out for the first time the principles that they have learned. Despite these benefits, it is also the case that tutor takeovers presume the absence of bias and the presence of good will—this is a dangerous assumption.

Whereas students have readily welcomed white trainees into sessions and trusted them with their writing needs, Black women tutors do not always experience the same welcome and presumption of competence. From my office, I have overheard trainees in the hallway making their appeals to takeover tutorials. Regrettably, some Black women tutors are not granted admission as swiftly as their counterparts. After an initial failed attempt, they linger outside of tutoring rooms, waiting for another opportunity to repeat their appeal or, having been rejected and unable to wait for the next tutee to arrive, they try again another day.

In the end, all trainees succeed in completing the assignment, but I am troubled by this emerging pattern of aggression toward Black women writing tutors that the structure of tutor takeovers allows. In the most egregious instance, a white male tutee permitted a Black woman trainee to facilitate

the tutorial and then, with seeming malicious intent, proceeded to belittle her at every turn. He ridiculed her questions, dismissed her suggestions, and denied the virtue of her approaches. Utterly demoralized, the highly qualified Black doctoral student, who was strongly recommended and had substantial prior writing tutoring experience, contemplated quitting. As she relayed the ordeal, she astutely recognized that the student's hostility and denial of her abilities was in response to her race, gender, and status as a Black woman trainee. When reflecting upon the experience in her weekly seminar journal, she posed this poignant question: "What does it mean to guide individuals through any academic endeavor who recognize you as a visible body in a space while simultaneously deeming you as invisible by negating your competence, experience, and training?"

The trainee's takeover experience and subsequent question has spurred my own critical consideration of flourishing as anti-racist praxis. As much as I would like to believe that the violence she endured was aberrant, as a Black woman WPA I know better. Like Kynard who writes powerfully about her positionality as a Black WPA and the "psychological assaults of working with those committed to the demise of the black body" (38), I know firsthand that such encounters are all too common for Black women in the academy, having suffered microaggressions of my own over the years and consoled both students and colleagues experiencing the same. And while the degree to which offenders consciously inflict harm varies, the outcome for Black women is still one of violent "erasure." Bailey and Trudy reference this phenomenon in their discussion of *misogynoir*—disdain for Black womanhood that perpetrates violence against Black women (763–64; Trudy). Although Bailey first coined the term and Trudy theorized its function, others have appropriated *misogynoir* without due attribution (763–64). The refusal to credit Bailey and Trudy respectively for the "creation and proliferation" of the term and failure to cite their contributions is an "erasure" of their originating work (762, 765) and an example of the "anti-Black racist misogyny" that *misogynoir* names. The point I hope to make here is Black women tutors are vulnerable to both *misogynoir* and erasure in the writing center, just as they are in other "interpersonal, social, and institutional" contexts (763). As WPAs diversify their tutoring staff, it is also incumbent upon us to take up the decolonial project of negating Black women tutors' erasure and protecting their flourishing. I use the word decolonize to acknowledge the ways in which tutor takeovers rely upon a colonial embodiment of white privilege that disadvantages Black women.

In decolonizing the tutor takeover, I embrace the womanist commitment to Black flourishing exemplified in Rev. Dr. Gina M. Stewart's sermon, "An Uncompromised Commitment." Stewart's exegesis of the Old

Testament narrative of Shiphrah and Puah (*Bible Gateway*, Ex. 1.15–21), midwives ordered to kill every male child born to Hebrew women, subverts their erasure in biblical proclamation and illuminates their central role in resisting oppression. Stewart explains, Scripture often reflects patriarchal societies of the time; therefore, when women appear in biblical texts they are typically “background” characters, “extras in the story” and very rarely “the stars,” but Shiphrah and Puah deserve recognition for their refusal to carry out the king’s infanticide edict. Their reverence for God saved a nation and paved the way for later figures, like Moses, whom God used to deliver the Israelites from bondage. In essence, Shiphrah and Puah valued the higher calling of midwifery—ushering new life into the world—above the demands of empire that denied the women’s personhood and exploited their labor. Stewart challenges her listeners to act like the midwives, to embrace the ethical responsibility to preserve life by intervening in systemic oppression. Midwifery becomes a metaphor for disrupting institutional policies and practices that delimit or altogether deprive marginalized people of the right to flourish, to grow and develop in a world that cultivates and celebrates, rather than erases, their existence.

I am calling on WPAs to make a commitment to Black women tutors’ flourishing by interrogating taken-for-granted policies and replacing them with practices that position Black women tutors to flourish. This is a serious matter deserving of our ongoing attention. To hire more racially diverse tutors without also critiquing our practices is to deny the ubiquity of racism and its deleterious effects. That denial can result in de facto tokenism, dismissal of Black women’s presence and voice (Kynard 33) even as we benefit from the diversity they add to our rosters. Of course, we cannot prevent every racist encounter, but we can at least begin with the structures we impose and can also encourage and support Black women tutors’ own “proactive mechanisms of resistance,” such as “celebration” of Black culture and language, cultivation of Black “joy” in the midst of an increasingly anti-Black world, and prioritization of “self-care” that preserves Black women’s spirit and well-being (Marshall Turman). Measures like these can help Black women tutors enjoy the greatest degree of “freedom, justice, and equality” (Floyd-Thomas 11) as valued members of our centers.

The first opportunity to decolonize tutor takeovers occurred when the COVID-19 pandemic forced our primarily face-to-face tutoring center fully online. The shift to remote tutoring was an apropos time to begin reimagining the old practice which was incompatible with online learning. In lieu of takeovers, trainees tutored one another and also took their own writing to our virtual center for tutoring. After each session with a veteran tutor, the tutors-in-training were asked to reflect upon the following:

- How the tutoring session enacts particular ideas or practices from our readings and class discussions
- The ratio of tutee to tutor talk
- How the tutor instructs the tutee, providing writing rules or explaining how or what to revise or add
- How the tutor asks guiding questions, reads aloud (or invites the tutee to read), or puts herself in the position of a typical reader
- Ways in which identity and discourse are reflected in tutor and/or tutee talk, in attitudes about language and/or genre expectations, or in other aspects of tutoring
- Opportunities taken or missed for engaging race or other differences meaningfully
- How the tutor offers praise, shows concern or sympathy, or confirms the tutee's ownership over their writing
- Nonverbal (body language) and verbal communication of the tutor and the tutee's reception

Since our training curriculum centers “race and other matters of difference and inclusion” (Jordan), these prompts invite all tutors to critically examine racialized tutoring politics. From the vantage point of a tutee preparing to become a tutor, they can observe and question how race(ism) functions in tutoring and interrogate what those observations mean for their own praxis. Similar to García who envisions tutors as “decolonial agents,” “theorists of race and racism” with the ability to “transform” the writing center (49), I understand tutors as participating in a “reciprocal exchange of ideas” that holds the “possibility” for intra- and interpersonal “change” (Jordan). To do this work, tutors need to develop a “critical awareness of writing tutoring as a site of resistance” (Jordan); the new practice of taking one's own writing to the Center for tutoring and reflecting critically upon the interaction is one important part of this process.

While it is too soon to determine the full impact of this change, especially given the many difficulties and disruptions that the pandemic and rapid move to online tutoring caused, I am optimistic that the new practice, alongside peer-to-peer tutoring, discussion of video recorded tutorials, and interactive tutoring scenarios during the training seminar, better positions Black women for flourishing like their counterparts. The new structure does not make them the unsuspecting prey of interlocutors who do not share our Center's value for all bodies but admittedly also does not entirely remove the challenge of encountering someone who devalues their embodiment. They could face a writer who questions their credibility and resists their support, as a Black woman undergraduate writing tutor in her first

quarter of tutoring shared with me. I scheduled an individual meeting with her to inquire about her joy during a particularly tumultuous time in the quarter. All things considered—pandemic, protests, political upheaval—she was thriving as a tutor. Despite encountering a writer whose distrust of her advice and dismissive behavior made her feel as her fellow Black woman graduate writing tutor did, “invisible,” she was not defeated by the experience. Her understanding of the writing center as a site where racism and white supremacy are contested emboldened her resolve to continue on.

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