

Racism in the Margins

Gabriel Morrison and Kathleen Tonry

It was one of those papers where the professor tries to correct all the grammar. And it's covered in pen of different colors from multiple times. And so she's in tears, and essentially . . . what he told her to do is "go to the WC to learn English." . . . I don't even think you can think of yourself as a writer after that.

—Yasmine S., writing center tutor

One thing that I saw was one-word responses. "Unclear." "Disorganized." "Don't understand." . . . If someone sees the whole thing in red saying "unclear," "sloppy," "disorganized," "change"—just the word "change" or "remove"—that doesn't help anyone. That's not discourse. That's an order.

—Odia K., writing center tutor

Every tutor and writing center administrator can tell these stories, many of these stories, about the “everyday language of oppression” (Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011) they have “overheard” in the margins of student papers. The Racism in the Margins project began as a way to put marginal stories at the center of antiracist languaging efforts.

The margins of student papers are crucial spaces, often documenting the most essential—and the most private—conversations between a writer and instructor. These conversations can demonstrate the best that university education offers—energetic, guiding exchanges that engage and wrestle with ideas and expression. But over the years, it became obvious to us that margins are sites of vulnerability for students, and the places where faculty reveal assumptions about the intellectual superiority of “standard” English, misguided notions about correctness, and oversimplifications of the language acquisition process. These assumptions are rooted in racist ideologies, and the damage done by these comments is unequal, borne most painfully by Black, Latinx, indigenious, Asian-American, and international students.

Our writing center's tutors pointed us to these marginal remarks, reporting them while still always carefully guarding writers' privacy. We heard the reports—and saw the distress and often anger of tutors—during private conferences, informal meetings, staff development sessions, and at the tutor staff break table. What happened on the margins for *some* student

writers never stayed marginalized in our center. Yet it was hard to name it, and harder to think of ways to redress it.

Indeed, the troubling comments reported by tutors never took on the dimensions of the racial assaults or derogations (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, as cited in Csizmadia et al., 2020) that make up the overt incidents most often publicized in campus culture. Instead, we realized, the racisms that get inscribed in the margins of student writing are more subtle (if no less damaging), more structural and institutional, more imbricated in the fabric of university discourse. The faculty comments often seemed innocuous out of context. “Go to the writing center” can be read as encouragement when directed toward many white students, but the same comment becomes loaded with racialized assumptions, a code for something else, when it appears next to underlined linguistic nonconformity.

Over the last few years, we have struggled to find the best way to intervene in these “invisible” (but not to us) forms of “everyday racism” (Geller et al., 2007). We realized we couldn’t address this racism in tutoring sessions or staff development contained to the writing center—after all, tutors were not writing damaging things in the margins of student papers. Nor was this a problem primarily manifesting in composition courses that could be remedied through teacher development in our university’s FYC program or by contributing to scholarship that would be read primarily by those in writing studies. The majority of writing instruction and assessment at our university (perhaps most universities) happens outside of composition classes in the academic disciplines, where teachers are unlikely to be exposed to scholarship focusing on issues of linguistic justice (Baker-Bell, 2020). An intervention, we realized, needed to touch all parts of our university.

ANTIRACISM IS ABOUT ACTION

I think it’s really important that [our antiracism work] isn’t performative. . . . [We] want to take steps outside of the writing center. . . . We need to make sure our work is also affecting academia and not just us.

—Writing center tutor focus group

We could not look away from this problem of racism in the margins, but we did not know what to do about it either. For a few years, we read scholarship in antiracist pedagogy and higher education reform, we sought input from our writing center’s tutors, and we reflected on what it would take to make meaningful change and what kinds of change should be prioritized.

Throughout this process, we took seriously the words of Diab et al. (2016), who write that “critique (in its many forms) should dovetail with opportunities to take action (also in its many forms)” (p. 20)—and also the words of tutors in our center, who emphasized that our responses to racism avoid being “performative.” We felt it would not be enough to start a conversation within our center or among like-minded colleagues. Such conversations have been going on, robustly, within our scholarly associations and journals for some time now. Antiracism is about action (Kendi, 2019), and we felt the current moment called us to try to make systemic changes, using all the tools available to us.

And the most powerful tool we had was right there in plain sight: the observations and anger and advocacy of writing center tutors themselves. It was our center’s tutors who had urged us to take on this problem, and who also knew that writers should not bear the burden of coming forward to show, explain, and stand behind their language choices—again. Tutors were already speaking for those writers, loudly and clearly, and simply wanted a way for their voices and observations to be amplified, to reach faculty, to create change. It turned out that familiar writing center practices that ask tutors to value writerly agency and voice also underscored the ways tutor voices and agency could turn into real advocacy.

In fall 2020, we applied for newly available internal funding allocated to supporting visions of systemic change across our university. We were awarded a substantial grant to inaugurate a multi-stage and multidisciplinary initiative we titled *Racism in the Margins*.

With the intention of revealing “racism in the margins,” we began to offer a microphone to the tutors who told us about the racisms they encountered in faculty feedback. Their accounts were brave and bold. You can view a synopsis of some of their stories in a video called “Conversations from the Margins” on our initiative’s website: <https://ritm.initiative.uconn.edu/narratives/>.

Those tutor voices coincide with the anonymous comments and overall findings described in the faculty-led Racial Microaggressions Survey conducted at our institution (Csizmadia et al., 2020): <https://rms.research.uconn.edu/>.

Both “Conversations from the Margins” and the Racial Microaggressions Survey powerfully attest to the revisions we need to make as teachers and administrators.

During the 2020–21 academic year, we hosted a virtual conference featuring Haivan Hoang, Asao B. Inoue, Mya Poe, and Vershawn Ashanti Young. The virtual format meant that it was exceptionally well-attended, and gained a national audience—but locally, too, we saw an excellent

turnout from faculty across the disciplines. The conference seems to have prepared a productive framework for faculty to come together and help us think about what kind of sustainable faculty-centered development initiative will gain the most traction across campus. We built on insights gained from the conference and from our archive of tutor voices as we convened faculty working groups to begin building faculty development programs, which we will pilot this coming fall. Tutors are helping us reassess the role writing centers—and especially their histories of advocating for writerly agency—might play as we move toward a more meaningful antiracist pedagogy across the disciplines.

Following in the footsteps of successful WAC-integrated initiatives like the Writing Across Communities model (Kells, 2018), we hope to grow the program into a faculty-led movement and an explicitly antiracist writing culture, widely adopted and practiced across our large, land-grant university.

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