

Narratives from a Writing Center: Actively Engaging in the Process of Anti-Racism

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When our writing center moved online during the pandemic, we faced many new challenges. One challenge was creating a digital environment that supported Writing Center staff and administrators in our implementation of anti-racist practices. Our center's approach to developing this praxis has not been to prescribe specific actions for our administrators and tutors. Instead, we have worked with each other to examine our positions both collectively and individually in relation to systemic racism and develop processes of reflection, vulnerability, and care that engage each of us in anti-racist work both personally and professionally. Below, we discuss our processes of reflection, vulnerability, and care and provide an example of what this can look like in practice. We conclude this essay describing where these conversations have unfolded as we have moved online during the pandemic.

We find that more traditional Western Anglo methodologies and models of administrative hierarchies hinder our work in enacting anti-racist practices. Comadrisimo¹ is a concept that Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano introduced as a means of mentoring Latinas in rhetoric and composition. It is also a way of disrupting institutional cultures that tend to exclude Women of Color. For the purposes of this article it provides us with an epistemological grounding that supports our personal and professional growth and enriches our process of developing and enacting anti-racist praxis (Tinoco, Eddy and Gage). As a concept, the word carries connotations unique to Latino culture, but the concept does not need to be limited or essentialized. For Latinas, the most common definition of the term comadre is women they know they can count on, lean on, and ask for advice or help when needed.

Even though comadrisimo arises from a culturally specific methodology, it is one that our director and assistant director engage with/in and encourage in the center to facilitate? networks of support, kinship, and mentorship. Comadrisimo honors the many forms our relationships with one another take. For example, as Sonya and Katherine built trust with each other as administrators, we became confidants in addition to coworkers, and we are able to enact our vulnerability with each other. This vulnerability also introduces elements of friendship to the relationships among administrators and staff such as Ione, Ranee, and Autumn. Enacted

alongside the reflection and vulnerability that thread through these relationships is our care for one another, a care that is rooted in our study of a feminist ethics of care and our emphasis on the reciprocity we build in caring relationships.

Prior to the pandemic, much of our work to enact anti-racist practices unfolded through informal discussions during our reading group meetings², between sessions, or in our breakroom over coffee. Through this face-to-face engagement, we modeled self-reflection, vulnerability, and care as a way to prepare ourselves for this messy work. Both administrators and tutors participated in this modeling. At the same time, we were building multifaceted relationships honored by *comadrismo* as we came to celebrate each other as whole people that occupied these spaces in unique ways. What emerged was a dynamic environment where we could confront and move through the very necessary moments in which we confront our own racisms. In these shared spaces, we emphasized our holistic growth as people and community members. We have grappled over the past year with how to continue this virtually, especially as we have hired new tutors while we are operating entirely online.

Rather than report out on what we do in our center, and risk ossifying this knowledge, we draw from *comadrismo* in the dialogue below to enact the process through which we develop anti-racist praxis. *Comadrismo* centers the experiences of those in dialogue and encourages the reader to examine their own positionality in relation to the dialogue. In disrupting the traditional Eurocentric epistemologies that root our knowledge about writing and writing centers, *comadrismo* provides us with a way of making knowledge that is dynamic, reflective, and collaborative. This aspect of *comadrismo* aligns with the challenging, messy, and ambiguous forms of labor involved in building a writing center that is committed to anti-racist and decolonial values and practices.

As you read the dialogue below, you will see hints of the nuanced relationships celebrated by *comadrismo* amongst the authors. These multifaceted relationships have been gradually built across a range of different positionalities through processes of self-reflection, vulnerability, and care. These processes help to hold us accountable to each other and to our anti-racist work. You see glimpses of this below as Katherine, our white director, opens the dialogue sharing her vulnerability not just to Sonya, our assistant director who identifies as Tejana, but to three tutors as well, and enacting a call for knowledge developed through their lived experience of working in the center during the pandemic that decenters her own knowledge. Our assistant director, Sonya then responds by modeling a care rooted in reciprocity as she affirms and then builds on Katherine's concerns. Additionally, the

tutors in this dialogue demonstrate the anti-racist practice of self-reflection that is then used to build knowledge and lead to action. This highlights the collaborative nature of our work and underscores the importance of caring relationships that are formed through the sharing of stories. In the conversation, our administrators model self-reflection, vulnerability, and care as we talk through what anti-racism means to us in the center. Two of our more experienced tutors, Randee and Ione, also model this self-reflection, vulnerability, and care as they share their journey with one of our newest tutors, Autumn.

Katherine: I am nervous about our upcoming new tutor reading group. So much of the rapport we develop with our new tutors as we introduce anti-racist practices — and the unlearning this requires — relies on face-to-face relationship building. I'm not sure how we'll be able to replicate this through virtual meetings.

Sonya: I understand your feeling. Modeling how we talk and interact is important. We understand that neither Writing Centers nor tutors can be neutral and that anti-racism is action, but I am wondering how we are going to model this work as a set of choices. Anti-racist practice requires acknowledgement of the current systems rooted in white supremacy and their gatekeeping function. It is in acknowledging the basis of our discipline and the regulatory function of the center that we are better able to evaluate our own positionality, biases, and cultural understanding as we critically examine the choices we make in either resisting or upholding these values. I am nervous about these conversations and how they are going to play out virtually.

Katherine: Me, too. We don't need to look far to see evidence of our mantra that language is never neutral. At the same time we are situated within a Hispanic Serving Institution located in a historically segregated area on the South Side of San Antonio, we are also in a city with an active Black Lives Matter movement that has continued to actively protest throughout the summer. While the broader implications of these conversations and the choices we are asking tutors to make have become increasingly apparent this year, this also makes our discussions more painful as we all have so much at stake in them — whether that's through the complicity of someone like me or the precarity experienced by others. This context is a constant reminder to me as a cis-gendered white woman that I am “the one in the way of progress, no matter what [I] have said or what [my] agendas are, how hard [I] worked, or how sincere” I am (Inoue, 356).

Sonya: Without our willingness to have these frank conversations, we would not be able to have them with the tutors. As a fifth generation Tejana whose family is from the land on which this university stands, working here with our student population means that I am home. Frank conversations can be difficult when they are personal. For me, this means the work we do in the center needs to value all of our students and affects me in a very personal way.

Ione: Dr. Bridgman, thank you for reminding me what Inoue says about our whiteness. Before working in the center, I equated white privilege with economic privilege. Since I grew up poor, I thought that I too had been marginalized. Working in the center has helped me realize that, even growing up poor, I have benefitted from being white. Now, I understand that as a tutor I should work to repair the damage of white privilege and systemic racism by becoming more aware of how I have been complicit with systemic racism and how to work against it. Part of this work is learning to recognize how my white privilege gives me an advantage and working to dismantle the systems of white supremacy I am complicit in. I am also learning to embrace discomfort and to decenter myself and whiteness in general in the hopes of clearing a path for all and not just white people.

Randee: I agree. It wasn't until I began working in the writing center that I was really introduced to this idea of being anti-racist. How we understand and address race in the writing center is vital to the success of the center, as well the success of the students who come and go. For example, white students have vastly more resources and opportunities available, placing them at an advantage before they even set foot on any college campus. It is important to create a space where differences are recognized, and even discussed. We as tutors must come to terms with our implicit biases, addressing not only where they may stem from but also how to push back against these ideas. As tutors, we recognize the institutions we are situated within have systems in place that are racist, classist, and favor white middle-class students.

Autumn: I started to see this in my own life after we started our new tutor reading group, and I asked my friend what he was doing to support the Black Lives Matter movement. He responded, "I do my part everyday by not being racist, I have black friends." In this moment, I realized the difference between being actively anti-racist and being not racist. After this experience, I began working in the writing center and learning ways in which I can be anti-racist. Upon reading Laura Greenfield's *Radical Writing Center Praxis* and discussing it with col-

leagues, I learned that anti-racism in the writing center can look many different ways. It might look like reaching out to a student with radical kindness regarding derogatory remarks in their paper. It might look like consulting another tutor or director on the matter. It might look like speaking up on an issue even when you are uncomfortable. It might look like being aware of your own biases and being mindful not to engage these biases in the center.

CONCLUSION

As you read this brief snippet of dialogue, we want to draw your attention to the ways in which we are enacting self-reflection, vulnerability, and care with each other. In turning to discuss the writing center session, Autumn demonstrates the importance of engaging with the personal work that must be sustained as we engage with anti-racist praxis in the writing center. Our emphasis on processes of making knowledge about writing center tutoring over best practices for writing center sessions also allows us to resist privileging scholarship that remains rooted in and reiterative of the white supremacy of writing center studies and its adjacent fields. Sofia A. Villenas, Francisca E. Godinez, Dolores Delgado Bernal, and C. Alejandra Elenes write that “[o]ften when we think of educational scholarship, whether it concerns youth, adults, or girls and women, a middle class Euro-American norm comes to mind” (3). This applies to writing center scholarship as well and has resulted in tutoring “best practices” that all too frequently center this imagined white body in the role of both tutor and student. Given this, we emphasize processes of making knowledge over prescribed tutoring practice in our conversations about anti-racist work in the writing center and acknowledge the violence so much of our scholarship enacts on bodies that do not fit the “Euro-American norm” described by Villenas, Godinez, Bernal, and Elenes.

In our current online environment, our social committee has grown to become the main way we facilitate spaces where we reflect on our positions both collectively and individually in relation to systemic racism, enact our vulnerability with each other, and practice the care that engages each of us in anti-racist work both personally and professionally. Our social committee members have become the main organizers of our biweekly events where self reflection, vulnerability, and care are practiced. The social committee is currently comprised of veteran tutors and the assistant director, whose role is to schedule Zoom meetings and ensure necessary items are ordered and mailed to participants. The committee organizes two professional development events per month: one that does not require any preplanning, and

one that requires preplanning and organization. Examples of events that do not require pre-planning are movie nights and book discussions. Examples of larger events are murder mystery dinner parties and ultimate vacation getaway presentations. Once a theme for the month is established, the veteran tutors take turns structuring discussion questions and planning for the ways in which our project intersects with our work as writing tutors and the anti-racist process. They devise discussion questions to help guide our conversations back towards anti-racist practice as well as our writing center work. For example we have discussed the ways in which we reveal our truths and perform ourselves as after we had a extremely fun night of playing characters as a murder mystery party.

These events continue to center the dialogues that unfolded so much more easily before the pandemic. They provide low stakes ways for us to reflect on the racist and colonial structures we work within, build trust through our vulnerability, and enact care for each other. Additionally, these events redefine professional development to include personal development as we learn that we must attend to the needs of every individual if we are to attend to the needs of the larger group and enact anti-racist processes in our center. Through such dialogues, we continue to grow together both personally and professionally as a community committed to anti-racist practices. This growth occurs through our self-reflection, vulnerability, and care, all processes that we talk about, study together, and enact differently through each of our unique positionalities in the center.

NOTES

1. Despite MLA convention, the authors have made the deliberate choice not to italicize words in languages other than English in order not to create a demarcation between words that “belong” in the text and “exotic” or “foreign” words. By choosing not to italicize, we are asserting that these Spanish words belong in and have a place in this academic text. Also, In keeping with the multilingual tradition of rhetorician Gloria Anzaldúa, we do not provide English translations of Spanish words, but simply include them as part of the work.

2. Comadrisimo is a concept Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano introduced as a tactic both for mentoring Latinas in rhetoric and composition and for disrupting institutional cultures that exclude Women of Color.

3. As our schedule allows, all of our writing center staff participate in reading groups through which we read and discuss a range of texts, including scholarship from a range of fields as well as other works of nonfiction such as biography and memoir.

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Sonya Barrera Eddy is a Tejana director of the Integrated Reading and Writing program at Texas A&M University- San Antonio. Dr. Eddy was previously the Assistant Director of the Writing Center. Her scholarship investigates the resistive rhetorical strategies Latinx communities in Texas enacted through literature, art, poetry, performance, and community education. Much of her current work centers around antiracist and decolonial practices, and her work has appeared in *Composition Forum*. She has been presented at conferences including the Cultural Rhetorics Biennial Conference and the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Katherine Bridgman is an associate professor of English at Texas A&M University-San Antonio where she directs the Writing Center. Her research focuses on embodiment across digital interfaces. Her scholarship has appeared in venues including *Kairos*, *South Atlantic Review*, *College English*, *Computers and Composition*, and various edited collections.

J. Ione Matthews is a recent graduate from Texas A&M University-San Antonio, where she earned a bachelor's degree in history and a secondary teaching certification. As a student, Ione worked as a writing tutor at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. Additionally, Ms. Matthews is a long-term substitute teacher for Northside Independent School District, where she teaches English Language Arts with seventh and eighth-grade students. She is looking forward to continuing working with learners of all ages through teaching and tutoring

Randee M. Schmitt is a native of San Antonio who began tutoring in the Writing Center while enrolled as an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University-

San Antonio. After graduating with her Bachelor of Science in Psychology, she continued her work in the center, remaining involved in tutoring, workshops, and the social committee. She is currently preparing for graduate school, working as a research assistant on projects focused on moral injury and PTSD, with the goal of becoming a clinical psychologist. Rande loves meeting and working with students in the center and seeing their confidence grow after each session.

Autumn Brooke Crane holds a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology from Texas A&M University - San Antonio. Autumn is a writing tutor and Mindset Coach who helps women overcome fear and limiting beliefs, harness the power of their minds, and own their innate power to create a life they love. Autumn works with individuals who want to create a better life for themselves as well as the collective. She enjoys the impactful work she gets to do in her work as tutor and coach. Autumn also enjoys hiking, biking, reading, writing, creating, and making memories with loved ones.

