ABSTRACT

WHERE IS MA MIGO?: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON BLACK EMBODIMENT IN WRITING CENTERS

by Elijah Simmons

In this thesis I reflect on Black embodiment in writing centers, particularly centers at predominantly white institutions. Drawing on scholarship from writing center studies, concepts from critical race theory, including fictive kinship, and my own personal experience as a writer and as a consultant, I argue that as a field we must go beyond language difference and consider the embodied experience of writers of color. I offer critical reflections and strategies for how writing center administrators and staff can make centers more inclusive spaces.
WHERE IS MA MIGO? : CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON BLACK EMBODIMENT IN WRITING CENTERS

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
by
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Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2017

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This Thesis titled

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has been approved for publication by

The College of Arts and Science

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Dedication

I dedicate my thesis to “Ma Life” aka Donna Simmons, my mother. My mother has been my biggest supporter, attending every football game, every tennis match, every track meet and showing me the world. She brought me to the University of Rochester as child to witness how a college works and she pushed for me to apply to the McNair Scholars program.

Mom, as a child you brought me to work at the University of Rochester, where education was ingrained into me, being around McNair students and the various professors guided my way into my future career as an academic. I want to thank you for your vast support and guidance.

Love, Elijah
“Our humanity implies rights that are neither alienable, divisible, deferrable, or debatable even if we are mired in discourses that make them seem so. These are rights to, in the sense of a right to life, to education, to security, and to linguistic and cultural resources. Yet, the dehumanization and marginalization of the other is typically recycled in the form of “benign” arguments that violate rights.”

--Rasha Diab, Beth Godbee, Thomas Ferrel, and Neil Simpkins, *A Multi-dimensional Pedagogy for Racial Justice in Writing Centers*

Imagine

...It's 3:45 on a Tuesday...Just submitted your discussion post for the graduate seminar you’re taking. Put your earrings, chains, Jordan's and watch on. Enter your car listening to the Migos.

3:55, pull up to Bachelor Hall, hoping and praying it's a parking spot. As you enter the campus you notice very few people like you from skin color, dialect to attire and what they talk ‘bout. You start to feel awkward when you play your music at your school, however at home it's the norm. You start to see people stare at you; you change your music to their kinda music (subconsciously). Then you remember, “I should never be ashamed of my culture.” So you proudly play your music—but you’re still conscious of doing so any ways.

You walk into Bachelor Hall for your graduate seminar, and in this classroom no one is your color, no one has your kind of jewelry on, and no one has on Jordan's or your type of clothing. You start to feel insecure. You walk into class; the class banter is about NPR. You’re like “what is NPR?” Students look at you like why don’t you know this. You say WorldStar is my equivalent to NPR. Again you feel insecure.

After class you head to the writing center for your shift as a graduate consultant. Echoes of conversations start to play in your head as you enter the writing center, all the questions you’ve been asked and that you still get asked, “You attend Miami?” or "Do you play basketball?” (You’re tall and Black and physically fit—what else would you be doing on campus?) ... You leave the writing center, play your music and wonder should I change my identity...

I am 24-year-old Black male from Rochester, New York. I am also a graduate student and a member of the writing center community since my first year of college. As a freshman in college, I went to the writing center for the power. Power in the sense of becoming the person out of my friend group to pass level one of first-year composition. My friends and I were always very competitive, however it was something serious about our composition class. We would compare grades on every assignment. Without that competition I may have never discovered the importance of writing and writing centers in my life.

Because our instructor made writing center visits mandatory in our first-year composition course, I first learned about writing centers. But, I desired to out do my friends so I went to the
writing center more often. I didn't even tell my friends it was my secret way of becoming better than them. With the writing center I learned the technique to pass the first level of composition.

As senior in college I become a tutor at SUNY-Binghamton. I wanted to tutor because it looked like an easy course to boost my GPA before I applied to graduate school and because I was interested in reviewing papers and communicating through writing. In the process of taking the class and tutoring I realized I could see a future in this area.

So, as a master’s student at Miami University, I sought out the opportunity to serve as a consultant in the Howe Center for Writing Excellence. At Binghamton University as an undergrad I had a nexus of Black friends during my time at the writing center, so I never really felt out of place or different. But at Miami, which is a predominately white institution (PWI), I did not have that nexus due to entering a program where I was the only Black student. As many Black students in universities and writing centers have to do, I had to labor to find other Black students. After becoming the president of Graduate Student of Color Association and developing my nexus, I seen the same trend of lack of Black students in the writing center. I ultimately felt different because of my attire, my communities, my narratives, and my very body. Being one of the only Black bodies in a writing center wasn't easy.

In this article I reflect on Black embodiment in the writing center, drawing from (1) some of the current literature about Black students usage in writing centers, (2) Critical Race Theory, particularly the concepts of counterstorying and hegemony, and the importance of fictive kinship amongst Black educators and all educators to make more purposeful writing centers and, (3) my own experience as a writer and consultant. I will discuss what I did in my attempts to bring Black students to writing centers, with recommendations for other universities.

If we want our centers to be more inclusive we have to make purposeful attempts to create change, even if we have to make some feel uncomfortable with the hopes of all feeling comfortable in the end. As a Black man, I recognize I only speak from my situated experience and that other people of color will have different individual experiences depending on many factors, but what we people of color all share is an exclusion from the white privilege that shapes most colleges and universities, especially the PWIs. Lastly, we people of color share an inclusion in rich communities and cultures that are often devalued from mainstream white culture and that thus can help inform writing center work to transform our centers in ways to be more inclusive spaces.

Writing Center Scholarship

Writing centers are open spaces—spaces where all are invited; however, even though all are invited, it’s often just select communities who generally use writing centers at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). If you are involved with a writing center at a PWI, reflect for a moment on when you walk into the center, what do you hear? What do you see, what do you experience, how do you feel?

Your answers will, of course, vary depending on your body and your positioning. But what you might think of first is language usage—the conversations so central to writing center work. There has been a lot of research on language usage in the writing center and on African American Vernacular (AAV) and how to help students of color learn mainstream academic discourses and how to help all members of the writing center community, but especially consultants, recognize and value diverse differences. Language is a good place to start, but I find myself thinking a lot about what Victor Villanueva stated in 2006 at the International Writing Centers Association
conference: “New racism embodies racism within a set of other categories—language, religion, culture, civilizations pluralized and writ large” (p. 2). Villanueva gives a frame to my argument that writing center scholarship must go beyond language to force a change with everyday practices in writing centers. Certainly Black students can feel excluded due to their home language not being valued or visibly used, as many anti racist scholars have established (e.g., Geller 2007; Greenfield & Rowan 2011; Perryman-Clark, 2012; Johnson 2016) And it’s certainly important to consider what does exclusion mean to others who aren’t excluded. White privilege is at work in writing centers, as scholars Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll and Boquet (2007) discussed, analyzing how some white people are able to politely ignore the daily workings of racism and to pass over such moments in the service of “civility” or unawareness (p. 41). This question is important because I have heard various conversations of race being ignored or viewed as too harsh and as I’ll discuss at the end of this article, I too have been told, in polite academic language, to basically tone it down.

Recognizing that many, if not most, writing center interactions don't implicitly value Black language and, importantly, Black students. Nancy Grimm (1996) argued that writing centers are based on assumptions about language, literacy, and learning that privilege white mainstream students (p.10). Grimm concluded with a few assumptions from writing center staff that include the belief that “students of color need their help and would find their services useful; that the university and thus the writing center are race-neutral and benign spaces; and that the literacy education offered by the university and the writing center contribute to leveling the playing field” (p.10). Considering language difference is certainly important. If a Black student comes to a center that does not recognize and validate as legitimate for particular contexts AAV that is problematic. Any writing center that pursues a narrow hegemony of “Standard English” and that sees AAV as non-educated or street lingo, they mostly won’t respect and value the culture that comes from the language. These unexamined assumptions about language too often shape and feed unconscious racism, thus impacting interactions across multiple contexts, including outreach to campus, consultations sessions, interactions with fellow tutors and administrators, etc.

As Geneva Smitherman (2000) wrote in her ever-current work Ebonics, contrary to popular opinion, is not the uneducated slang of young black rappers, but a sophisticated and rule-based language group with origins in the transatlantic slave trade. Ebonics comprises multiple ways of speaking that have, for centuries, been a means of survival, solidarity, and resistance for enslaved and the descendants of enslaved Africans spanning at least three continents. By clearly laying out the rules of its grammatical, lexical, phonological, and rhetorical structures, she showed that Ebonics is ‘emphatically not ‘broken’ English, nor ‘sloppy’ speech” nor a result of “linguistic deficiencies” or ignorance but instead comprises rule-governed and logical language systems (23). To bring more breath to the conversation of the idea of language I turn to scholar Vershawn Young (2011) who noted productive ways to view language: “if one sees it [language] as the focus for change: we teach language descriptively. This mean we should, for instance, teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it takes to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously. We should teach how to let dialects come mingle, sho nuff blend together”(33).

Even in a 30-60 minute writing center consultation, the consultant (whomever she, he, zie is), as representative of the larger center and, thus the university, is engaged in a form of teaching—teaching what is valued and what is not. I believe with Young’s ideas of how to teach language. We can and should push the conversation to empathic conversations opposed to
mono-culture approach. What I mean by empathic conversations is that all writers and tutors, regardless of their race and backgrounds, understands or learns to understand the rhetorical nuances that shape different discourses. There is no “wrong” language usage when it comes to dialect and vernaculars, just difficult contexts for usage depending on audience, purpose, etc. Going back to Smitherman’s point that Ebonics is a valid and detailed language. I push the conversation to the idea that many people subconsciously have about home languages of people of color: The belief that people of color are unable to communicate purposefully in widespread contexts and are therefore responsible for their reduced opportunities in white-dominated society. With this belief, it makes sense that a fair amount of writing center research has focused on African-American Language (Smitherman, 2000, 31).

For example, Sarah Blazer (2015) expressed how writing center staff education must be a primary focus to practice and value of linguistic diversity in writing centers, while engaging in powerful rhetorical arguments about linguistic, cultural, and epistemic justice (p.24). She then noted how our field needs to blossom more “powerful” scholarship to illustrate the engagement needed for learning how to embody anti-racism. Blazer continued the thought on how some writing centers have stressed the usage of language: “Students can use their home language there but not in their center; and other languages are ‘great,’ but standard academic English is unquestionably the one students need” (p.25). And, while one may express genuinely how they enjoy working with and learning from multilingual writers, when one continues to use language like "dealing with ESLs” (p.25), it reveals a fundamental deficit-oriented bias towards students who do not use privileged varieties of English or certain rhetorical moves valued in U.S. academic contexts. The deficit perspective seeds the third flawed premise: Using marginalized linguistic and discourse practices inhibit the development of the “others” (p.22).

Blazer proposed a great idea of teaching students the meta-awareness necessary to identify in others' writing and employ in their own a diverse array of linguistic and discursive approaches. If students are able to develop this technique they will successfully integrate their unique language practices into products they intend to present to audiences in academic and professional settings. As Young (2011) argued, when writers "color their writing with what they bring from home," when they "fuse" language choices generally characterized as standard English "with native speech habits," they help "enlarge our national vocabulary (p.25).

But in addition to language, we need to think about the embodied experience of students and consultants and administrators—of all who are part of the writing center. Bodies matter. My body—my skin color—my gender—these are reasons I get asked, “You attend school here?” or “Do you play basketball?” And when you look around your writing center, especially if you’re at a PWI, how many Black or Brown bodies do you see?

At Miami University, in the Howe Center for Writing Excellence, I found myself surprised by the lack of Black bodies in the writing center. But then again, I realize when I first noticed the absence I thought there’s no Black students in the writing center—that’s what’s normal! Hegemony is working which made me believe it was normal for the lack of Black students. The most significant way white dominance works in, over, and through all of us is by appearing to be nothing at all, by appearing to be politically and ideologically neutral, by appearing to be “natural”, even common sense. Geller et al. (2007) argued that writing centers could be fruitful places for both learning about how whiteness works in and through academic environments to maintain white hegemony and studying and practicing resistance to that hegemony. The field must realize consultation methodologies/pedagogies are not attached to the reality of identities and systems, we often authorize a pedagogy that deprioritizes issues of
human rights—including linguistic, cultural, and religious rights—rights that guarantee full realization of the humanity of each of us. Rather, by considering the people involved and the ways we are fully embodied and fully engaged in writing sessions, we can understand anti-racism as more than an intellectual activity (p.5).

Rasha Diab et al. (2011) proposed countering hegemony with the usage of three concepts: processual/reiterative, reflective/attentive, and embodied/engaged. All together, as Diab et al. discussed, the concepts can be used to dismantle overt racism and related language discrimination while commencing the work of addressing implicit, institutionalized, and (inter) nationalized racism, which are often more difficult to identify and intervene within a given writing session (p.5). The processual/reiterative concept focuses on how anti-racist work is a process and will take time to develop, and overall to see change is not an overnight progression. The concept of reflective/attentive argues that anti-racist work must be reflective in the sense of taking step back to ask what can you do or how can you help a given situation of systematic racism. The final concept, embodied/engaged, focuses on considering and connecting the physical in antiracist work. In my scholarship and in my work in writing centers, I find all of these concepts productive, but particularly the concept of embodied/engaged analysis, which I focus on here.

A way to put more emphasis on embodied experience and the whole person and culture is to apply lenses from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT provides lenses for understanding the complicated relationships of identity to culture and for how to apply theory to experience and, importantly, for how to create theory from experience. CRT is intriguing as it blurs the boundaries of theory and methodology (p.5). The theory of CRT documents and explores how the systems and structures of inequalities operate regarding race and racism. Furthermore, the methodological component of CRT centers the lived experiences and realities of oppressed individuals while simultaneously rejecting positivistic epistemologies and historical ways of knowing and truth (p.24). CRT creates an intimate relationship between theory and identity.

Using my narrative I will develop my argument with three concepts of CRT. (1) Race is the permanence of racism, (2) whiteness as property and (3) critique of liberalism. Race is the permanence of racism asserts that racism controls the political, social (including educational), and economic realms of American society, where, from CRT perspective, racism is regarded as an inherent part of civilization, privileging white people over people of color in higher education and where diversity action plans become ineffective when racism is ignored in this regard (Hiraldo, 2010). For example Affirmative Action has benefited white women more than people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). To really engage students of color, writing centers have be to focused on race due to various races/ethnicities that use or should be using the center, while implicitly devaluing other culture’s language by reinforcing the English language. As an undergraduate, I thought writing well or correct was a white thing and my friends also shared this concept of writing being white property.

By going to the writing center to pass composition, I realized I was learning valuable skills—getting access to property so to speak. This tenet originated from the embedded racism in American society, where the notion of whiteness operated on different levels, such as the right of possession, the right to disposition, and the right of exclusion (DeCuir & Dixson; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). When I was learning these methods, I often pondered why wasn't I taught these ways as a child? Was it a secret? Had whites conspired to keep this knowledge from me the way it used to be illegal to teach slaves to read? I like to stress
how mind-blowing it is, that the only way to pass into a level of education one has to learn how to be white, how to code-switch with ease and how borrow/assimilate those methods for success.

The last tenet of Critical Race Theory helpful for the writing center community to consider is the critique of liberalism and its myths, such as the notion of colorblindness and the neutrality of the law and equal opportunity for all. According to this tenet, colorblindness is a mechanism allowing people to ignore racist policies that perpetuate social inequity, which can be found in the lack of inclusivity in the academic curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Writing centers may be though of as perhaps may even strive to be places of neutrality, when in reality it’s all about race—at least that’s how I see it as a Black man in the writing center community and I think whether someone is white or Brown or Black that’s how others should see it too. In this article I focus on a critical reflection based on my experience, but I would like to note that even though my article focuses on Black students in writing centers, there are various cultures that come into writing centers mainly international but users of the center aren’t just white.

Too often, I believe those who aren’t excluded look to theory to understand the plight of the excluded. Theory can be helpful for some issues in the academic work but we must listen to the stories of the excluded to truly see why they are excluded. When I read studies on how to make Black students successful, for example, that are talking about Black people but not with Black people, I think of the human zoos that were used in Europe and even in America to display the “exotic” bodies of Black people. I am not comparing education scholarship to human zoos but rather I am expressing how scholarship is not so productive if it doesn’t also include an embodied viewpoint—either from personal experience or from listening closely to the stories of marginalized people.

Jason Esters (2011) wrote how his viewpoint in the writing center was altered due to his identity of being a Black male. He noted how students didn't believe he worked in the center, how his director even walked by him outside the university without recognizing or acknowledging him, and how students didn't view him as a writing instructor when he walked in the classroom. His students thought the ideal writing instructor was a “white writing genius, tall thin man; well dressed (suit, business casual); nice dress shoes; golden blonde hair; blue eyes; and well-spoken” (p.31). I agree with him that being a Black male is an interesting experience. I have had numerous incidents where people walk by me or ask me if I know that this is the writing center when I have been there as a consultant.

But as Esters (2011) noted we must welcome being Black writing ambassadors and we have the choice to fit into the white normative culture or we can try to dissipate the negative fears and stereotypes of Black men. I choose to be a regular 24-year-old Black male from Rochester, New York, I wear earrings, chains, sneakers, cut off t-shirts, hat backwards and fully represent Hip-Hop culture. I note this because it has become important to me to dress as if I am at home and not change my identity for the writing center or for any where else in the academy. I had heard numerous times from my friends and family about them having to changing their hair, clothes, identity, name and especially language to fit into whiteness at their job or university. The importance started because I was questioned about my attire: questions like “will people take you seriously if you don't dress white?” or “why wont you change to be a real academic?” With these questions I understand I must dress how I have for others to see one can dress in their cultural norms to keep their own identity, and still be valued. In terms of language, I am still learning how to talk white, the dominant language of the academy, but I am also, as I do in this article, working to keep elements of my discourse patterns too. I had to learn to code-switch
within in the classroom, writing center and in this article.. Ultimately, this is why I push toward CRT to push the current scholarship for anti racist educators.

**Critical Race Theory and Fictive Kinship**

To help us create more inclusive writing centers, I propose that we consider adapting and applying for writing center contexts with the concepts of critical race theory and fictive kinship.

*Fictive Kinship & Ma Migo*

One methodological strategy central to CRT is the use of counterstorytelling, which strives to work against the continuation of oppressing those who are usually silent and invisible as subjects of the research. Derrick Bell (1995) explained counterstorytelling as a mode of telling the stories and narratives of those whose realities are often not told and silenced (p.6).

Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002) asserted that counterstorytelling challenges the dominant ideology and the traditional claims educational institutions construct about colorblindness, objectivity, meritocracy, and racial and social justice (p.21). More specifically, critical race scholars purport a critical race methodology to confront white privilege, counter notions of neutral or objective research, and reveals deficit research that silences epistemologies of people of color (p.19). CRT scholars utilize counterstorytelling as a way to challenge ‘master narratives’ and to dismantle the presumptions of the dominant discourse (p.22). Solórzano and Yosso discussed three types of counterstories: personal narratives, other people’s narratives, and composite narratives that (a) build community between those who are marginalized (b) resists and challenge the epistemology of those at the center (c) helps individuals and groups to develop our understanding of reality and possibility.

Part of the counterstorying for Black people occurs in the connections and communities of *fictive kinship*. Fictive kinship is a vital element in the Black community and, as Daniella Cooks (2004) showed, it’s especially vital for the creation of community among Blacks in the university. Cooks (2004) argued that fictive kinship can be defined as social ties that are based on neither blood ties nor by marriage ties but rather on ties created by shared experiences (contemporary and historical), and shared subject positioning. Fictive kinship in the Black community means that “family” is expansive—friends are family, colleagues are family—and family members always have each others’ backs and looking out for one another in shared sense of unity. Fictive-kinship networks allow, for example, Black educators to advocate on behalf of other Blacks.

As Henry Louis Gates (2014) asserted Blacks use signifying language to pass on cultural rituals from generation to the next and that language usage is also part of fictive kinship. I chose to title this article, “Where is Ma Migo,” to explicitly build from the idea of fictive kinship. Ma Migo comes from the rap group “Migos” from Atlanta, Georgia. Migos is a word used in Atlanta in the Black community to describe kinship. By using Black vernacular in my title I look to grab the attention of different types of readers. This usage of Black vernacular can be a rhetorical move that writing centers can do to appeal to Black bodies.

To build fictive kinship communities in our writing centers, to build the spaces where we can foster and develop counterstorying, it helps to hear the stories of others. So let me take a moment to tell you about some of my experiences the last three years at Binghamton University and Miami University where, as I detailed briefly in the opening, I moved from writer in the center to consultant and from uncritical participant in the center to more critical Black student.
My Writing Center Experiences

As a Writer

My first experience of going to writing centers was at Saint Peter’s University (64% Black or Hispanic). At this time I was still a Criminal Justice major, writing and English weren’t something I could see myself doing—at least not until that first-year writing class and I wanted to be better than my friends. Better in the sense of passing first year composition. As a requirement in our FYW course we had to attend the writing center at the university.

At first my friends and I didn't see the purpose of writing centers, they were the place where the white people went. Saint Peter University wasn't a PWI so there were lots of people of color across the university but, prior to going to the center, my friends and I felt that the writing center was a place that was non-inviting, a place where white people went because we felt we simply didn't belong, due to the lack of Black people in the space. We generally, went to places where we seen people who looked like us. However, we had to enter the space because of the requirement of our white instructor. I recall my friends, saying “I’m not going, I don't wanna talk white…I’ll pass this class without the help of the center.”

But I had an appointment right after class so my friends seen me walk over. When I walked in the writing center I was timid, I was nervous, I thought to myself, would I lose my “Black card” for using this service? As I sat down, I thought to myself, I have to use proper English or they will think I’m not smart or worse illiterate. My tutor was a white woman who was part of the honor college. She seemed to know all things about the English language. After I left the session, I realized this is the way I can gain power. As most groups of young adult male friends are, my friends and I were competitive over everything. Our latest competition was to see who would pass composition 1 and move on to composition 2.

I realized the one way I can win at this competition was to be “white” and use the writing center. I went to the writing center every week to learn how to write the correct way, I had to beat my friends. And when I was the only one to pass into composition 2, I knew writing was important. I switched my major from Criminal Justice to English. I also encouraged my friends to use the writing center and tried to teach them the formula for passing composition because composition 2 wouldn't be fun unless my friends were with me.

As a Consultant

I transfer to Binghamton University my junior year as an English major. Writing was my passion; for some reason I really liked writing papers. Which was really uncommon in my community of friends, where generally writing was reserved to women. Writing was seen as a being white or feminine. My first experience of doing research with Black and Brown students was with my first mentor Aja Martinez. She taught FYW to the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students during the summer. EOP is a program in New York State to provide opportunity and access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students who possess great potential to succeed in college.

During this summer course, I was able to see behind the scenes of a FYW course; with doing this research a project blossomed, trying to understand student’s engagement with assigned readings. After interviews with students and class observation I came to the conclusion: students mimic what they saw. For example, if their parents read a lot or if their friends read a lot or even if they saw people who identified the same as them. I took this finding with me, as I became a writing tutor in my senior year.
For the last year of college I became a writing tutor for the simple reason I like to look over papers and talk to people; it was cool to me and I realized I could get credit for talking to people about writing. As I began tutoring and taking our mandatory course on how to tutor, I realized that in discussions of diversity and difference it seems we (both the field and Binghamton’s center) focus a lot on international students. The moment I realized international students looked at writing tutors as ambassadors of the English language was when a student from Hong Kong ask me “what is a catch phrase? and can you give me some for my professor?” At first I was puzzled, and then I answered, “I don't know, its very locational, catch phrases differ depending on various factors.” He looked back at me with slight aggression to say, “Aren’t you an American, how don't you know what a catch phrase is?” I was struck by what the student said. I thought to myself “To this student I’m not Black rather I’m an American who should know all about the English language.”

Another moment in that year when I was assumed to be ambassador of the English language was when a writer from China brought in a paper that was in support of Communism. After the consultation the writer ask me “Do you think I will get a good grade” and all I said was “ This paper may rub your teacher the wrong way, depending on his background. America has fought many battles against Communism, but you have the freedom of speech, so just do it”. Her face turned red and she yelled “ NO… NO… I'll change it, I want to be American.” And after this I was in shock, like “Damn, hegemony is strong.”

In my senior year, I presented my research on international students’ use of ipads at CCCC in 2015. As I walked around the convention center, I noticed there weren’t many Black people, then I noticed there weren’t many Black people who were my age, and lastly there weren’t many Black men. After C’s I go back to my writing center and I find myself wondering a lot about why aren’t any Black people here either, just me. What made me so different to join the writing center and use the center? Our writing center was in front of the admissions office and we were inside a glass atrium. We had the sweetest white grandmother from Alabama at the front desk; she made everyone feel comfortable and special. Our writing center was very relaxed and welcoming; the setting was six tables all in a circle. Everyone on the staff, myself included, felt connected, yet very few Black students came to the writing center, even with being widely visible to the whole university and a sweet grandmother to greet everyone… no Black students.

**As an Ambassador of Writing**

I took my wondering about small numbers of Black people in writing centers with me to Miami University where I joined the Howe Center of Writing of Excellence. The writing center was located in the main library of campus (see Figure 1). Right away, I realized the same issue that Binghamton University and Saint Peters had: there were very Black students who visited the center.
them. For example a lot of PWIs have student centers where all the Black and Hispanic students
work on services that are inviting to other people who identity the same as them. Mimicry with the idea that cultures and
visuals, mimicry and

Figure 1: Howe Center for Writing Excellence, Miami University

I decided I would do something about this. After being at three universities and the issue

I realized that I need to get more involved in the conversations around writing centers and
who uses them. What motivated me was how I felt as a Black consultant which was so similar to
how I felt when I was the only one to pass first year composition at my first university, I felt
different, alone and overall wanted more people around me who looked like me.

So in my first year at Miami, I went to the manager of the writing center and I asked “
can we have an event for Black people?” She seemed a bit surprised by the question but said
sure, but we have to include all people. So we changed the event to invite all people but to focus
especially on Black and Brown people. Planning for event was interesting for no one in the
predominantly white center had much experience in creating an appeal specifically to Black and
Brown students. They looked to me and I had no answer. We had to decide a title of the event,
and this is when I started to use Black vernacular to attract Black and Brown students. As you
see below we took two approaches for attracting students. At first we used my name as a way to
show a Black person was hosting the event (shown in the left in Figure 2.) But then we realized I
was new to the university and my name may not read as a Black person to everyone so we
changed the RSVP line and we also added Black to the design (shown in right on Figure 2.)

Figure 2: First design for HCWE Event (left) and second, revised design (right)

After the planning of the event, there was the groundwork. I had to go around university
passing out flyers and talking to professors. One professor told me “ you have to go find the
students and in person talk to them, explain to them why they should use the writing center.”
This task was a lot harder than I thought, for first I only been at Miami University for 2 months.
But again the ideas that I realized at Binghamton and Saint Peter’s came back to life: ideas of
visuals, mimicry and normality. Visuals in the sense of students will most likely do what they see
other people who identity the same as them. Mimicry with the idea that cultures and
communities of people usually do the same as the first generation showed. And normality wraps
up both ideas of mimicry and visually, students desire to embark on services that are inviting to
them. For example a lot of PWIs have student centers where all the Black and Hispanic students
hang out. At Miami University the place to embrace community is the Office of Diversity and at Binghamton University the place for community was the Educational Opportunity Program center.

But even with my efforts recruiting—which admittedly were not the strongest because of factors mentioned above—the event that we planned was not fruitful; there were only eight students who showed up. But it was a start, I found out what I had to do. I had to find a way to create inviting space for Black and Brown students.

One of the memorable conversations from the event was a discussion with the president of International Student Association. We discussed how vital it is for students of color to use services around the campus especially in the writing center. We discussed the traumatic history that has held Black people from education, especially being literate. My words to him was “this is whiteness working, we (Black people) are taught to believe are home language is wrong or isn’t good enough, then we can become subconsciously distant toward our own home language and literacies and move to whiteness for success”. After our discussion we exchange contact information to have our two organizations collaborate to push literacy for graduate students of color.

To discuss this experience and get feedback from the broader writing center community, I was advised to apply to Eastern Central Writing Center Association (ECWCA) 2016. As I was applying I was thinking to myself what will create noise at this conference. I started to look at previous years’ programs and I realized that everyone title and description was pretty similar and used Standard English. With that I thought to name my presentation “Where is my Migo.” Below in Figure 3 is the first slide of my PowerPoint. I wanted to be as bold as possible; I wanted to make a statement. This picture is an image of the rap group the Migos in front of a drug house.

![Figure 3: Presentation Slide including Migos “Back to the Bando” Album Cover](image)

My session went very well. I planned my session to be a workshop. I listed out what I did to plan and execute “How bout An Inclusive Howe” which I have detailed in the paragraphs above.

Then I had everyone write out what they did in their own university to create diversity in their center.

My next step in my journey was to see what other universities were doing across the nation. During the summer of 2016, I visited seven writing centers on the East Coast and in the Midwest. I didn’t conduct an official IRB-sanctioned survey, just out of curiosity if I was in the
area, I dropped in and talked to people. Without quoting anyone specifically, what I learned that many centers haven’t thought about this issue of Black students in the writing center. Many centers had not considered ways to be proactive so as to bring Black students in. For example, staff at one center stated that their center is across from the diversity center on campus but that they have never went over to invite the students to the center. Overall, I realized that this conversation needed to be brought to the head of writing center discussion. The biggest issue in my opinion in writing centers is the lack of understanding and support for students who aren’t white.

After this I became more intentional with my research. I changed the title of my project to “Where is MA Migo” and I changed the frame to focus more directly on Black students. In my earlier outreach at the HCWE at Miami, I felt that using Black and Brown wasn't really getting my point across and I wanted to reach even more directly to Black students. The next event I created for the HCWE at Miami was in partnership with Mentoring, Achievement, Diversity, and Excellence) MADE@Miami, which is a program devoted to helping minorities get acclimated to Miami University. In Figure 4, I have both flyers that were made for the event. The first flyer had the idea of a Black women’s hair, which is believed to represent unity and strength. The other was a more traditional flyer. I decided to print and send out the Afro centric flyer so as to visually embody an image of Black culture.

The MADE event was a success—at least judging by the participation. We had 30 students attend. We had various flyers for the student to put into their orientation folder. We also gave out gifts that had our name on them, to push our identity with the students. My intention with the event was to catch the students when they first started school, when they are making friends. I wanted the writing center to be the place where they became friends and also the first service they seen on campus. I met with each student personally to ask what they thought of the center, and the majority never heard of a writing center. I then took a picture with the last group, which is below in Figure 5, which our director posted on our web site (with student permission) and that I posted to social media to create that image of students of color in the center to broader
university and public audiences.

![Figure 5: Photo of Participants at MADE@Miami Event](Image)

Writing center outreach, especially to diverse communities, can and should be done by everyone, but I also think its productive for a Black student and consultant, to be the ambassador. As you see on the fliers Graduate Student’s of Color Association is presented. I was the president of GSCA at Miami University. I developed my identity on campus to be the ambassador of the writing center and of writing. I was English graduate student, composition instructor and writing center tutor/researcher while being the president of an organization with the purpose of creating spaces for people of color. As you see above I posted a picture of the event with MADE@Miami on my Instagram. I realized I had to create other ways of communicating that Black students were in the writing center, again always trying to create that new normality. I wanted students to see themselves in the center and thus be more comfortable and interested in coming to the center.

**Recommendations for Writing Center Directors and Staff**

My recommendations could apply to all users and students of the center, however I plan to focus on Black and Brown students. As scholars Geller et al. (2010), established white people are able to politely ignore the daily workings of racism and to pass over such moments in the service of “civility” or unawareness. Nancy Grimm (201) expressed how white writing center directors must be bold enough to break the silence, to be able to respond to stories of racism within writing centers without rage, scholarship must go beyond language to force a change with everyday practices in writing centers. Taking Geller and Grimm into account we must look to accept difference and find the best ways to be inclusive at our given university. With this argument I open the idea of embodied experience of Black students. Embodied/Engaged is beneficial to recognize the right as a full person to be attentive to their histories, and possible difference they may bring to the consultation.

First, most broadly, we should recognize and encourage “difference,” I will define difference as a student’s histories they bring into the center. We must adhere to the value of difference-based learning while embracing our academic freedom in hopes of developing a student’s full self within his or her own histories. Strategies to do this include: (1) Create community in the writing center by allowing a space for difference; (2) Create empathy within the community by encouraging reflection on different narratives; (3) Invite all students and communities to be part of voting or ruling on ways to improve the writing center; (4) Have events that build community on academic and non-academic related subjects.
We also need to embrace fictive kinship in our writing center work. One approach for doing this is to guide all actions and decisions in the writing center through the idea bell hooks (1994) developed radical love. Ralph Rodriguez (2004) argued that radical love fosters community and emerges through it. Radical love is a love that gives the benefit of the doubt, that affirms and questions, that holds its skepticism at bay to allow a raw thought to develop, that understands accountability not as a zero sum game, that doesn’t draw lines in the sand, that doesn’t believe in solidarity without criticism, that understands that rifts can heal and that we need not divide ourselves from one another during that healing. It also understands that there may be moments when toxicity reaches such a level that, out of self-care and self-love, one has to pull back and find new alliances. A radical love can foster and enrich community. Strategies to do this include: (1) Let writing center staff and users know that “your success is my success” with the intention to show we are all together. (2) Let students know their own literacies are valued, and we will support all ideas in the center.

It’s also essential that directors and writing center administrators understand their community and that they are deeply involved and part of that community. Strategies to do this include: (1) Observe the writing center from a far while engaging in service to consume the everyday practices of the center with the intentions of making change only after understanding the “whole” situation within the community. (2) Build genuine relationships with students, faculty and staff to build a collation to better the university.

From these foundational moves, we can also think of specific strategies around everyday decision-making and writing center programming.

Create a new normality—one that includes Black and Brown people-- with visuals or mimicry. My friends and I as undergraduates were hesitant to use the writing center because we saw the center as a “white” space. Thus, it’s important to ensure that programming and programming advertising and is more welcoming and inclusive and takes the threat away so Black and Brown students may feel more comfortable to use the writing center.

Create rhetoric of the center that invites Black students. Go to places on campus where students of color hangout--what does the place look like? This depends on each school. But more so than the physical space, it’s the rhetoric of community that matters. It’s about the community that is built and shared in the space. Again, pushing the idea of strong community to make writers feel comfortable and normal.

Recruit Blacks and Brown users and workers with attentiveness to language and hegemonic biases. For example the last call for applications at the HCWE used the word “Nerd.. Nerd is usually depicted to describe a smart student. But nerd also carries, especially for students of color and among my friend set, conceptions of whiteness. You hear “nerd” and you think white person. The word nerd only appeals to a certain crowd opposed to the whole campus. A solution could be using purposeful tactics such as saying the job can appeal to Trio students or using AAV and overall appealing to students with other interests than the “average writing center worker.” Overall, taking the time to learn your community to take away monoculture application and rhetoric that is natural conveyed in a writing center. By bringing more Black and Brown bodies in to the center, especially as consultants and administrators, writers of color will feel more comfortable and welcome in coming too.

Create partnerships with Black organizations, students and faculty. Partnerships with faculty, student organizations and Diversity’s offices/programs can be extremely beneficial. Again, pushing the idea of normality, if the center is visible in spaces that the student hangs out, then the student will feel more comfortable to use the service. One center I visited on the East
Coast partners with their TRIO program. Therefore students see the writing center at their hangout spot, on their TRIO website and its part of their courses requirements. Creating a way to be viewed as a place to enhance literacies and not being white or remedial. Overall making writing a part of the community and to change the narrative with instructors who make students attend the center.

Educate yourself. As Grimm (1996) expressed, white writing center directors must be bold enough to break the silence, to be able to respond to stories of racism within writing centers without rage, to be able to make reasoned decisions around moments charged with race, and to think carefully and reflectively about what actions would lead white writing center directors to be allies to writers and colleagues of all races (p. 12). I somewhat agree with Grimm, on the notice that white directors or staff should engage in these conversations to create an open space for all races. However, not with the notion of ally-ship, I have never been a fan of ally-ship. I believe most allies have good intentions however how would you feel if someone with cultural history of oppressing your existence tells you how to complete research or function in the academic world as a Black body who lives with that historical violence of your culture daily? Rather I believe it’s productive for white people who desire to be allies to read scholarship on Black people and most importantly listen to the plight of Black bodies. Because “In spite of the good intentions of individual writing center workers, writing centers operate with structures of privilege such as historically racist institutions” (Grimm, p. 8). Engaging in such listening and learning may be difficult, but it’s purposeful for the mission of bringing in more people of color.

In my work, I have faced times when people haven’t wanted to listen or when people have asked me to change my story. For example, one year when I submitted a proposal and a program summary for ECWCA, the conference organizers suggested I consider revising my program summary to be less “political” and that I may want to revise to focus more on language and discourse communities so that people would want to attend my session. Here is my proposal:

ECWCA Program Summary
As a Black male, I have noticed the place I grew to love, implicitly doesn't value the culture of African-Americans or any non-Eurocentric culture. Why is this? Is American history to blame? Does this trace back to the creation of the American Education system? Have you ever just looked inside your universities’ writing center to absorb who’s inside the space? Who is assuming the power within the writing center? In my workshop I hope to open conversation to why other cultures aren’t valued in writing centers and how we as a field can create new techniques to put value in other cultures within writing centers. I thanked the organizers for their suggestions and then I did not change my summary. When I presented at ECWCA, I opened with noting how I wasn't initially accepted to present due to the content being political. The audience was in shock, to me it was an example of people seeing racism and silencing of a Black body in real life. Questions grow from the audience that all centered around “how can I help?”. Again, after this I realized my work needed to be discussed at the conference and at other writing centers. The concept of fictive kinship back with radical love for Black people, people of color and everyone is essential for discussion inclusion. I say this project is bigger than me; I feel that I can’t reach success without creating a lane for the people who look like me. Finding productive ways to include people of color in writing centers

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1 TRIO refers to a suite of Federal programs (originally in 1968, three and now eight) to increase access to higher education. It includes the McNair Scholars program, which has helped me attend graduate school.
is a step in eliminating racial division in universities. Overall, I started this project because I think being literate in the most important part of society. Not simply writing and reading but the ability to purposely communicate. With the various laws and regulation that has hindered Black people from learning gives me even more proof that being literate is so important for success in America. If we are able to help more student of color enhance their literacies then we are doing our job as educators. Just remember the main idea that various slaves and civil right leaders had for freedom was to educate the Black race.
References


