

EMOTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ANTIRACISM IN THE WRITING CENTER

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Abstract

Why do conversations regarding students' right to their own language and antiracism in the writing center still invite insults and agitation? After all, these struggles for students' rights to self-determination and their own language in composition are far from new. The narratives present within this writing move beyond mere analysis of how and why established institutions attempt to control, and, rather, put Laura Micciche's theories of emotion and performance to the test. When teaching tutor training, readings regarding students' right to their own language and race potentially cause conflict and can, at least at first, elicit strong emotional responses. This article explores the value of such early emotional reactions to these readings. Can the tutors' emotional performances, both in action and voice, eventually help to bring attention to, or subvert the backlash and attacks antiracism rhetoric tends to invite? Within its pages, Micciche's *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching* suggests that we perform emotional appeals rather than simply make them. Through performance, she claims, we present emotion, not as something that resides in people to be shared or withheld, but as encounters between people. This article's narrative "reenactments," then, are set to reveal the fears and desires behind the resistance I've both witnessed and encountered all while promoting what I deem to be a necessity for emotional performance in antiracism and writing center work.

In the 1960s, political activist, poet, essayist, novelist, performer, and playwright Amiri Baraka fielded a question from a white woman at one of his performances regarding race relations and Black self-determination held at New York's Village Gate in Greenwich: she asked, in earnest, "[C]ouldn't any whites help?" Baraka replied, "You can help by dying. You are a cancer. You can help the world's people with your death" (Baraka, *The Autobiography* 285). Baraka's emotional reaction openly confronts the white system of power, oppression, and repression he attacks. To consider Baraka's words or performances as potential challenges to institutional racism today seems appropriately responsive, as this system of power is far from dead. Not so long ago, I, a white male, administered a writing center in a major state institution responsible for teaching an undergraduate population in which over fifty percent of the students are white—an institution like many in America, whereby no matter how heavy the denial, racism is most certainly present and pervasive. Now, I'm not sure there is a "right" way to write this, or how to proceed exactly. But you wanna know what I think? I think everyone I have encountered in academia *knows*—on some level—that the academy privileges a white, male hegemony. I discovered, though, that as

students and colleagues read and respond to the words and performances of activists like Baraka, they find it increasingly difficult to avoid confronting these notions of white privilege and supremacy, especially as they relate to standards of English communication. Sure, to confront race and racism in our classrooms and institutions remains dangerous. And, as white instructors, I think it's important to understand that to do so means we're going to misstep. To do so in the name of antiracism, though, is always a better option than doing nothing at all. As Asao Inoue writes in his Foreword to Frankie Condon and Vershawn Young's *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, "When it comes to race, racism, and antiracist work, it is important that everyone feels safe, but equally important that many also feel uncomfortable. It's only through discomfort, perhaps pain and suffering, that we grow, develop, and change for the better" (xviii). Similarly, in their edited collection, *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*, Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan argue for a renewed, committed engagement toward antiracist work in writing centers. Victor Villanueva, as another example, has long maintained that where some see racism, others see none ("Blind: Talking About the New Racism" 3-19). Building upon these words and works, this essay promotes what I deem to be a necessity for emotional performance in antiracism and writing center work.

Of course, since its publication in 1971 and revisions in 1993 and 2010, *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* has been used to analyze how and why established institutions respond to—and attempt to control—social protest: "Agitation is persistent, long-term advocacy for social change, where resistance to the change is also persistent and long term" (Bowers, et al. 3). My exploration, however, moves beyond mere analysis to present a narrative of tutor training that puts Laura Micciche's theories of emotion and performance to the test. When training tutors—as many of the essays in Greenfield's and Rowan's *Writing Centers and the New Racism* recommend—I have moved readings regarding students' right to their own language and race to the top of my schedule in order to promote civil discourse throughout the semester. While I stand by my decision, this shift could cause its own conflicts and can, at least at first, elicit strong

emotional responses and create a divide among the tutors. What I'm interested in exploring here is the value of such early emotional reactions to these readings and discussions. Can the tutors' emotional performances, both in action and voice, eventually help to bring attention to, or subvert, the backlash and attacks antiracism rhetoric tends to invite?

The words that follow, then, are my thoughts/feelings: the beginnings of an antiracist narrative. And, while some might accuse me of not thinking carefully while I write, I know I must tell these stories to explore, enact, and learn. In *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*, Frankie Condon charges:

[T]hose of us who are white may need to admit that we have not yet begun, really, to craft epistemological and rhetorical practices or a performative antiracist narrative tradition that might enable us to join meaningfully and productively with multiracial, antiracist coalitions in doing the work of antiracism. If this is so, and if knowing how to begin is not self-evident (and it isn't), then those of us in academia need to begin admitting that we don't know and lean into the possibility of learning. But antiracist epistemology and rhetoric are neither learned nor created under conditions of passivity or inaction. In order to learn—as this kind of learning requires experimentation—we will need to risk speaking aloud about what we are learning even before we know very much of anything with certainty. (33)

So, I think back to the not so distant past, to scratch through the hard-crust scabs of my own privileged, white memory. This article's narrative "reenactments," then, echo the scholarship mentioned above and set out to reveal the fears and desires behind the resistance I've both witnessed and encountered when promoting antiracism within writing centers.

I might be impressed by the special effects if I weren't horrified by the reality. I'm watching a split screen, as if Gordon Willis (the cinematic "Prince of Darkness") has stepped in as our cinematographer to recycle a film technique used while shooting his famous dual therapy scenes from Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977)—scenes which, on the surface, appear to employ a traditional split screen method, but which actually consist of a two-room set divided by a single wall. One room. Divided. One Wall. In her book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sarah Ahmed writes, "The official desire to

institutionalize diversity does not mean the institution is opened up; indeed, the wall might become all the more apparent, all the more a sign of immobility, the more the institution presents itself as being opened up" (26). So, the scene is set.

The *mise en scène*: as a writing center administrator following the scholarship of Condon, Young, and Ahmed, I consider it imperative that, in listening to and working with students, tutors and teachers implement a pedagogy in which linguistic diversity is valued as highly as academic achievement. In order to further my commitment to this cause, I apply for and receive grants to invite an antiracism activist and esteemed scholar to our campus. After leading a series of discussions and talks regarding antiracism and language plurality as a goal in writing center practice, my invited guest faces a barrage of insulting microaggressions from the audience. The wall of division is conspicuous. I watch in terror as senior faculty and staff degrade diverse forms of communication. One commenter proceeds to compare varied linguistic practices to a racially coded article of clothing: "Yes, but, encouraging writers to blend their non-standards and grammars with Standardized Edited American English (SEAE) is like telling a student to wear a hoodie to an interview." Fact: language is nothing like clothing. Note: there's palpable danger in describing language through fallacious metaphor. Opinion: your analogies don't work. As my rage rises, I want to interrupt and expose this misguided comment's deceptive, faulty comparison. However, as the shallow displays of knowledge surrounding linguistic, racial, and cultural acceptance continue, the wall closes in around me. I don't act. As the events come to a close, though I have not said a word, and perhaps as a result of my silence, several audience members approach me to offer thanks and appreciation. I receive handshakes and smiles, pats on the back, and praise for "my accomplishment," while the vast majority of my adoring fans outright ignore our speaker and guest. I know why: our distinguished visitor isn't white. Ahmed recounts, "People of color are welcomed *on condition* they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture. . . . When our appointments and promotions are taken up as signs of organizational commitment to equality and diversity, we are in trouble. Any success is read as a sign of an overcoming of institutional whiteness" (43). Yet this should be the goal of all of our centers: to overcome our institutions' racialized standards and expectations. In her essay, "Rethorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race," Nancy M. Grimm encourages readers "to define

literacy much more broadly, to incorporate a multiliteracies approach, one that incorporates all the ways that literacy (writing, reading, speaking, listening) is used to learn and to make meaning and one that recognizes multiple varieties of English and multiple literacies rather than a singular standard of English” (92). These struggles for students’ rights to self-determination and their own Englishes in composition are far from new (see, for example, the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” 1974); still, conversations regarding students’ rights and antiracism in writing centers continue to invite insults and agitation. In fact, no matter where I go to promote antiracism within writing centers and our institutions, I often witness aggressions and emotional backlash.

On day one of tutor training, the tutors and I meet to discuss code-meshing (Young). Any undergraduates who want to become tutors in our institution’s writing center must apply to and complete this weekly class while also tutoring six hours each week. In this particular semester-long mandatory training course consisting of approximately twenty incoming tutor-interns, I’ve assigned “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” and Vershawn Ashanti Young’s “Should Writers Use Their Own English” before we meet. My goal is to challenge many of our incoming tutors’ preconceived notions regarding communication by facilitating a discussion of each reading. We debate and discuss the value of Young’s sociolinguistic term code-meshing, referring to the blending of so-called undervalued Englishes with so-called “Standard” English in both written and oral communication (Young 63). I post an example I know the tutors will recognize:

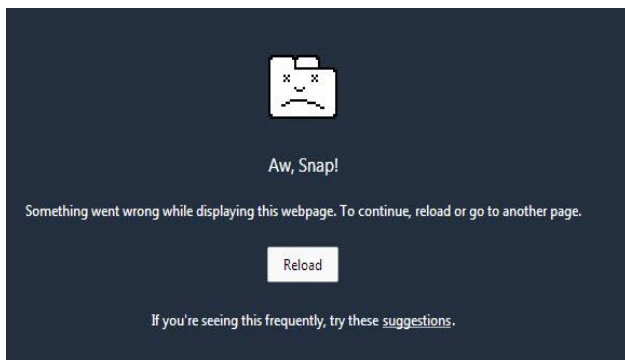


Fig. 1. Google Chrome’s “Aw Snap” image (Brinkmann).

The tutors begin to read how Google—an American multinational corporation—chooses to “tell” its users that a webpage has crashed. One tutor in training notices that, assuming users reading and writing in English scan a typical page left to right and top to bottom, the first code Google displays is strictly visual: a dot matrix style image of a folder with a sad face indicating something’s not quite right. Moving down the page, another tutor explains that Google employs a written message as its second code—“Aw, Snap!”—that would certainly be categorized as “non-standard” writing by most in the academy. As a third code, Google’s used what many tutors identify as more formal writing: “Something went wrong while displaying this webpage.” I ask the new tutors why they think Google chose to blend or mix codes as a way of communicating their message. Some begin to discuss what Young promotes: we all code-mesh, and blend our own unique forms of communication, even in formal writing. Nevertheless, on this particular day, and with this particular cohort, with the vast majority of the class self-identifying as “white,” the conversation begins to spark emotional response. A student raises her hand and vehemently declares that she doesn’t like the thought of using “howeva” in writing. This is fine, of course, and, to my mind, proves Young’s point—it’s important that this student recognize her own standards, and continue to negotiate her own style, voice, and systematic grammatical nuances. I ask if this was something she’d ever use in speech. “No,” she replies, so I proceed to ask others if they use “howeva” in speech. Of course, some said yes, so I explain that just because some writers wouldn’t use certain linguistic variations within their writing, this doesn’t mean others can’t. Some of the tutors begin to promote a systemic “yes, but” argument. I ask, “Didn’t Young successfully employ ‘howeva’ in his published article?” Some tutors clamor, “Yes, but ‘you’d’ never write *that* in a formal paper.” These “yes, but” arguments must be debunked within our centers and institutions. I repeat myself: “No, no; *you* might not write ‘howeva’ in a formal paper. That doesn’t mean someone else wouldn’t. Indeed, Dr. Young did.” For the majority that oppose, nothing’s working. I try a new tactic, and end up sharing an emotional personal anecdote of my own: my whole family was born in New England, and many of my immediate family still possess the ability to employ their New England accents. I suggest, with much affect, that because of this fact, if ever I were to write the word “chowda,” I’d spell it C-H-O-W-D-A. Still, nothing’s working. I feel the wall of division.

I’m certain a tutor of color feels it too, for as she reveals her own propensity to code-mesh, several

white tutors continue to question the concept's legitimacy within academia. Once again, I refer to Young's article, and ask the tutors to consider whether they should question code-meshing's acceptability within the academy; more poignantly, should the question be, "who is able to mesh without rebuke?" The lone tutor then asks her classmates why they've seemed to turn so strongly against code-meshing. She wants to know how her peers would respond to her own code-meshed writing. Suddenly, a white tutor responds, "Well, you know the rules; *they* don't." *They. Don't.* The words just hang in the classroom: two simple words that might as well be tacked to the wall on some educational word chart—the kind you might find in an elementary school classroom. Despite my efforts, these two words have now claimed their place, like so many other words prevalent within first-year writing and university handbooks. In this moment, the figurative chart from which they swing might be misleadingly titled—as so many pedagogical practices regarding language often are—"Words Rule/Word Rules." The nuanced rhetorical reversal of this unseen—but nevertheless implied—title serves as a gentle guiding reminder of what shall remain right and wrong for the privileged among us: there's power in language as long as we adhere to *the* language of power. At the same time, these two words enact their violence by propagating and proliferating the discriminatory language used to subjugate Black lives. It's all too clear whose "words" and "rules" are ruling here. *They*—apparently—aren't welcome, and don't have a say. I want to be fair, but this use of *they* isn't a misstep, or simple thoughtlessness. This is the academy—an institution in which people of color "are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else's home" (Ahmed 43). I wait for a response. Calmly, but with affect, the tutor of color places both of her hands on the table, slowly propels herself out of her seat, and proceeds to march out of the classroom. Given the chance, we could hear a pin drop. The whole class was affected. Such an act of performative emotion is defined at length in Micciche's book, *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching*. Within its pages, Micciche suggests that we *perform* emotional appeals rather than simply *make* them. Through performance, she claims, we present emotion, not as something that resides in people to be shared or withheld, but as "encounters between people, so that emotion takes form *between* bodies rather than residing *in* them" (13). The tutor's described linguistic choices were marginalized and disregarded, and her performative act of walking out mirrored a similar sense of disregard for her classmate's (unintentional?) racism.

The remaining tutors had no choice but to respond and work through what had happened.

So, that's exactly what they did. Tutors began to ponder the emotional performances they had just witnessed and think through the rhetorical power of emotional affect. The tutors debated the causes of what had happened and came to the collective conclusion that in each case the emotional response was caused by something specific. In the case of the tutor's misguided choice of words, it was a self-proclaimed lack of empathy, awareness, and understanding. And, seeing as how, shortly after leaving, the tutor of color returned to class, we were able to listen as to how those misguided words stirred a powerful emotional response. What started off as a seemingly dangerous and uncomfortable situation shifted to an engaged discussion. As a group, we continued to think through and weigh in on each other's unique forms of communication. Slowly but surely, the tutors began to see that their peers, often holding different or unique perspectives surrounding academia's marginalization of "non-standard" dialects of American English, are just as emotionally charged. This, in turn, made it easier for the tutors to understand how emotionally involved and attached we all are with our own unique and diverse forms of communication. As the weeks passed, many now felt more inclined to experiment with narrative modes, languages, and styles to find their voices. And, after the incident described above, I was able to meet with the tutor of color, exchange questions, and discuss the situation outside of the classroom. Above all else, though, I simply listened and learned. The tutor's ability to reflect upon this emotional response revealed a maturity and complexity of thought I rarely witness within the academy. She knew her own emotional performance would spark conversation and ultimately help to educate the class. I also met with other tutors from the training course and listened. The tutor's solo performative act of walking out spurred an exigency, and honestly helped our training cohort form a deeper discourse community as the tutors reflected upon their own ideas and emotions. The tutors then brought those contemplations back into the course and began to analyze how they might help enhance their tutoring sessions. By allowing these young tutors and writers to explore their own emotions regarding such topics early and often within my tutor training classrooms, I was able to encourage their curiosity. If, I've found, in addition to discussing "Standard American English," tutors are equipped with readings and theories of marginalization as well, we work as a class towards fostering a sense of language acceptance in a university

setting—possibly, for some writers, for the first time.

One may well ask, though: aren't these emotional responses a liability in the classroom? Indeed, Micciche asks, "If emotion is ... produced during collisions of contact, then how do we make collisions the site of instruction?" (50). In his book *Theatre & Race*, Harvey Young notes, "To talk about race feels dangerous. There is the possibility of slippage, a verbal gaffe, or, perhaps worse, a sincere and honest opinion that does not jibe with contemporary groupthink" (3). Both tutors tapped into such danger throughout their emotional exchange, though I'd like to argue that this exchange was unavoidable and necessary for learning to occur. This isn't a new idea: Susan Jarratt has criticized the notion that classrooms are best when kept conflict-free. In "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," she claims that students think more critically when confronted with opposition. And, Micciche contends, "Even as we tend to think of emotion as emanating from a 'first place,' a kind of first response, there is a history, a social context, and a set of experiences that come to constitute that 'first place'" (67). All of our tutors come to our centers and unique forms of training with transferable ideas and experiences. Despite institutional demographics, all tutors bring cultural and communal histories, which, if explored, have the potential to unlock and leverage the unique discourses and knowledge all writers bring to our centers. It's a concept tutors, in turn, bring to (and begin to leverage within) their sessions, as they learn to value the linguistic variations and unique writing strategies diverse student writers use and possess. The liability, then, lies in not allowing our students the time to perform such emotions in order to explore their assumptions. As Ahmed accounts, "Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (29). By bringing such discussions to the fore, our tutors gain the space and time to learn how to "use strong feelings as a resource for doing analysis" (Micciche 67). By beginning tutor training classes or sessions with readings and discussions regarding students' right to language, and continuing the conversation throughout such training, tutors learn to recognize an affective dimension to their writing center work. Tutoring sessions and writing consultations are often emotional encounters. Just as emotions can lead to anxiety and vulnerability, they also have the power to yield healing and acceptance—something all tutors should strive to understand as they set out to work with a diverse population of writers in sessions capable of eliciting strong emotional reactions.

So, can tutors' emotional performances, both in action and voice, eventually help to bring attention to, or subvert the backlash and attacks antiracism rhetoric tends to invite? I now know they can. Weeks after our first meeting, the tutors in training were assigned to read Kristi McDuffie's "Helping Students Negotiate Dialects in the Writing Center." McDuffie asserts that her proposed approach of discussing standards and grammars with writers of "non-standard" dialects establishes a link between students' writing and their speech. She proposes that tutors tell such writers, "There are certain grammatical forms evident in your papers that you may use when you talk to your family and friends; can I show you what forms are required for an audience of your teacher and classmates?" (15). Despite her "enthusiasm and good intentions," ALL of the tutors in my training class reached back to Young's article, and that very first (emotional) discussion, to help expose McDuffie's proposal as a racially charged contradiction, no different from "separate but equal." Each and every tutor had considered the power and potential of emotion when reacting to and dealing with others. During our in-class discussion, the tutors in training decided that emphasizing fluency as a full and complete understanding of a language in constant flux can create confusion and frustration for writers. By failing to recognize marginalized forms of composition as legitimate rhetorical choice within their sessions, my tutors in training felt they'd limit the opportunity to provoke new questions regarding the field of writing.

The point here isn't to simply challenge institutional learning outcomes regarding "Standard Written English." My tutors learned that within their home institution, in both the Academic and Professional Writing Programs, "Standard Written English" is highlighted as a major learning outcome for all students. Within my institution, one learning outcome for Academic Writing states that students will "Use Standard Written English and edit and revise [their] own writing for appropriateness." A major learning outcome for Professional Writing states that students will "Demonstrate competence in Standard Written English, including grammar, sentence and paragraph structure, coherence, and document design" ("General Education and Student Writing"). My tutors also learned that, within the academy, this remains the norm, of course. The problem lies in how our centers, and the varied instructors and students within our institutions, define "Standard Written English." In his article review, "Authority and American Usage," the late David Foster Wallace gives us an idea of how some instructors of English (still) define the so-called

“Standard” to and for their students. Here’s Foster Wallace addressing a Black student in his classroom:

[W]hen you’re in a college English class you’re basically studying a foreign dialect. This dialect is called Standard Written English . . . it’s not that you’re a bad writer, it’s that you haven’t learned the special rules of the dialect they want you to write in. Maybe that’s not such good news . . . That they won’t let you write in [Standard Black English] . . . I’m not going to let you write in SBE either . . . In my English class, you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call ‘Standard White English’ because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people . . . I’m respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. (108-109)

If this counts as respect, it’s no wonder Baraka called for the death of this “white” thing. Despite acknowledging the power of language diversity and plurality early in his review, Foster Wallace here egregiously misrepresents the teaching of college composition as a necessary promotion of and adherence to a mythical “white standard.” In fact, his assumptions which equate any standard with whiteness are far from true, and students and teachers should know better. In “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” James Baldwin writes, “I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound” (650). Indeed, within our centers, don’t we tutor or consult with assignments written in more than one standard? In a digital age, in fact, students are often engaging with writings that rhetorically rely on so-called “non-standards” to make their point (once again, consider the Google image above). Throughout different disciplines and curriculums, student writers are certainly taught more than one structure. Given the nature of our varied courses and student populations, then, shouldn’t we train our tutors in multiliteracies, empowering them to tutor/consult with/discuss/learn from different grammars/spelling variations, and unique and helpful linguistic syntaxes and forms of punctuation?

It’s a question I continue to explore as I strive to come to terms with my own work regarding antiracism in writing centers and the institution. In terms of my earlier story regarding my invited guest, I’m afraid I got it wrong; my miscalculation and reluctance to act were dead wrong. I feel an emotional response from an active bystander would have worked to help

combat the insulting microaggressions and bias. Too often, so-called “allies” of antiracism work remain inactive, and thereby unproductive. In their introduction to *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, Condon and Young admit:

Expressions of surprise and shock each time some new example of racism in the academy come to light grow wearisome . . . Given not only the frequency, but the long history of American racism, we wonder why folks continue to be surprised by the exposure of racism at work among us. We wonder why each new exposure of the ubiquity of everyday forms of racism is attended by claims of innocence and ignorance (“I had no idea!”). The fact of these ongoing expressions of shock, we think, is less evidence of genuine ignorance than of the extent to which many academics labor to preserve their insulation from those quite regular conditions that compose the everyday lives of students, faculty, administrators and support staff of color on and off campus. (5)

It is this sense of preservation that all writing centers must set out to dismantle. Rather than tutors who potentially have “no idea,” tutors ready to “fix” writers, or tutors who feel it is their duty to “give permission” for writers to use their own standards and grammars, we need tutors who understand emotions as well as they do rhetorical choice. As for me, as Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins explain in their chapter, “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable,” it’s time I move beyond narrative and into action. The next time I encounter bias, maybe I’ll follow in the footsteps of a courageous tutor, and perform my silence, arms crossed to illicit discomfort, with a simple, but questioning, cold white stare.

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