THE MYTH OF NEUTRALITY: Decentering whiteness in the writing center and library
Who We Are

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Link to our slides: tinyurl.com/TCAL2020
Our plan for today:
- Background of Libraries & Writing Centers
- Literature on Whiteness Studies
- Politics of Whiteness in Libraries & Writing Centers
- Anti-racist practices
  - Conflict Management resources
  - Decolonizing the syllabus
  - Steps for right now
1. History of Libraries & Whiteness
WE WELCOME

ALL RACES AND ETHNICITIES
ALL RELIGIONS
ALL COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN
ALL GENDER IDENTITIES
ALL SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS
ALL ABILITIES AND DISABILITIES
ALL SPOKEN LANGUAGES
ALL AGES
EVERYONE.

WE STAND HERE WITH YOU
YOU ARE SAFE HERE

*Content adapted from the original 'We Welcome' sign created by ERC members Lisa Marquand and Sean Utter.*
“In 1956 at the age of 16, with some of my bothers, sister, and my first cousin, we went down to the public library in the little town of Troy, Alabama, to try to get library cards, to try to check out some books. And we were told by the librarian that the library was for whites only and not for coloreds. I never went back to the Pike County public library, in the little town of Troy, Alabama until July 5, 1998, for a book signing of my book Walking with the Wind, and hundreds of black and white citizens showed up. And at the end of the event they gave me my library card.” - John Lewis
How this appears in our work today

**Systems**
- Catalogs
- Organizational systems
- Collections
- Fines

**People**
- White librarians
- Banking model of BI instruction
- Focus on mechanics of citation
- “Library anxiety”
2. Writing Centers & Whiteness
“Because so many writing center administrators are white, because the professional organization is predominantly white, most of our programmatic and professional decisions have been based on assumptions informed by white experience.”

~Nancy Barron and Nancy Maloney Grimm
“Writing center directors have a vested interest in remaining ‘colorblind’ and pretending that color makes no difference. ‘It is easier to believe that race doesn’t affect what we do in writing centers’” (Weaver 80).
So...what is the Writing Center’s role in colonization??

Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski compare the “writing center to a colonizing site, one where ‘basic writers are expected to speak an academic language foreign to them’” (qtd in Camarillo 1).
As most writing tutors and other traditionally-successful students of all races and linguistic backgrounds have been rewarded for their execution of academic writing in SAE, it can be hard for some of them to recognize the privileged nature of SAE or to give it up as an ideal…” (Aikens).
Asao B. Inoue argues that

“...students, particularly students of color, are forced to approximate a white racial habitus and are judged by this approximation. This assessment is seen as a neutral practice, leaving it unquestioned” (Camarillo 2).
3. Critical Whiteness Studies
Definition - Critical Whiteness Studies:
Frame of analysis that examines whiteness as a socially constructed racial category that systemically affords social, political, and economic benefits and privileges.
Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)

- Acknowledges the very real privileges that are afforded to those socially marked as white
- Works to dismantle the scientifically inaccurate concept of race as a fixed genetic marker
How CWS fits with Critical Theory

Critical Media Studies
Critical Race Theory (CRT)
Critical Whiteness Studies
Critical Pedagogy

Working to dismantle the scientifically inaccurate concept of race as a fixed genetic marker.
Much of the power of whiteness comes from its invisibility, and of its history of being coded as “normal” or “neutral”

-Leonardo, 2002
Critical media studies + CRT

Dr. Safiya Noble,
Prof of Information Studies,
UCLA

*Algorithms of Oppression*,
2016
Dr. Safiya Noble, Personal Democracy Forum, 2016
“Because of its insistence on not naming itself, whiteness largely remains invisible (especially, it has been argued, to white subjects).”

-Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016
4. The Politics
Whiteness in Libraries
and Writing Centers
Doing the work of decentering whiteness

Requires:
- more radical politics
- Engagement in critical-epistemic process
What are the politics of your library?
What are your politics?

- Conservative
- Liberal
- Radical(ish)
“The...field’s unwillingness or inability to name its liberal [or conservative] politics, to examine those politics, and to articulate an ethical point of view means that in practice our work is serving to perpetuate systems of injustice most of us in theory would reject.”

-Laura Greenfield
5. Anti-racist Practices
Integration Adaptation Model

Internal integration
+
External Adaptation

= Integrative Adaptivity

Requires development of macro and micro skills, process, and structures

- Awareness
- Accuracy
- Adaptivity
- Accountability
#Critlib Activity

Library research activity
Compared/contrasted search results from internet & databases

Watched clip from Dr. Safiya Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression*

Discussed: What might be helpful and/or problematic about the way information is organized and labelled?
Student Responses:

“Certain information could be prioritized over other information, limiting what people learn.”

“People in power get to decide how information is organized and can prioritize the sources that other people see, so it’s easier for already marginalized groups to become even more marginalized.”

“Something problematic about google is the relevancy ranking it uses to show you the sites in order and something problematic about databases is that not everyone has access to it.”
“Resting in the comfortable position of ally means that white people never have to take responsibility for actually doing the work to dismantle racism. White people need to know whether they are in or out, and that this work is not about “saving” Black folks and other people of color, but that this work is about saving their own righteous minds from the sickness that is white supremacist ideology and systems.”
Sharing reading lists is NOT enough

- Pass the mic
- Do not expect BIPOC to do the work for you
- Be willing to give up some power and privilege
Addressing the everyday Language of Oppression

By Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Shan-Estelle Brown

“How Language Can Perpetuate Oppression”
- “Avoids Discussing Difference”
- “Erases Differences”
- “Assumes Uniform Readership”

Group Discussion
- In our own writing center, what are some ways we as tutors can help limit oppressive language in ourselves and in the students we tutor?
Social Justice Resources: Writing


Smitherman, Geneva. “‘Students’ Right to Their Own Language’: A Retrospective.” *English Journal* 84.1 (1995):
Thank you!

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Slide link:

tinyurl.com/TCAL2020
Bibliography

Disrupting Whiteness in Libraries and Librarianship: A Reading List

Academics for Black Survival and Wellness: Anti-Racist Resources
Aikens, K. ( ) Prioritizing Antiracism in Writing Tutor Education: How We Teach Writing Tutors. Writing Lab Newsletter, Ch. 14 Digital Edited Collection, https://wlnjournal.org/digitaleditedcollection1/Aikens.html

Weaver, M. (2010). A Call for Racial Diversity in the Writing Center. In Murphy, C., & Stay, B. L. (Eds.), The writing center director’s resource book. (pp. 79-91) Routledge.

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