

Unmaking Gringo-Centers

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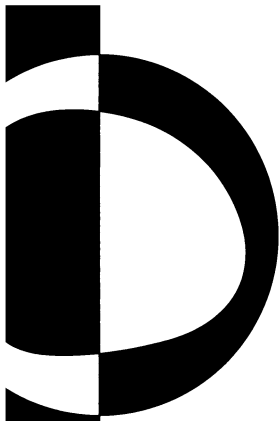
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Romeo García

## Unmaking Gringo-Centers

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### Abstract

The article focuses on the topics of race and power and how they have been addressed in writing center scholarship. It asks the writing center community to listen, well and deeply, to how members have discussed and pursued anti-racist agendas. The article points to the emergence and presence of a white/black race paradigm. It is argued that this paradigm both limits what a writing center might do and undercuts the efficacy of anti-racist agendas. A method of listening is deployed in multiple ways to substantiate an argument that while pockets of progressive politics have taken place in writing center scholarship, the failure to attend to the conditions experienced by and the needs and interests of other racial/ethnic groups such as Mexican American student writers is a limitation to writing centers' democratic desires. The article brings attention to the plight of Mexican Americans, both local and global, and moves to discuss what might be afforded in accounting for Mexican American students within writing center conversations on race and power.

*Keywords:* listening, white/black race paradigm, race, decolonial agents

## Recuerdos<sup>1</sup>

Tengo un recuerdo. Over the weekend, I'd observe my tío work on cars. He'd pop the hood, turn the vehicle on, and listen. He'd step back and look at me and say, "Listen mi'jo to the car." He'd lean back in and work to locate the problem. My tío taught me about the capacious work involved in listening, the type of listening that centers the corporeal body as sensuous within and between the physical, temporal, and symbolic. Learning to listen as such situated me in space, place, and time. My ethos and politics of being, seeing, and doing emerged from these points of references.

I was born in the U.S., raised along the frontera of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV). Situated in-between the geopolitical border that separates two nations and the internal checkpoints that run parallel, I came to embody and experience the legacies behind the phrase *The Mexican*. It is a palimpsest of identity that is resounded in the mythology of normalcy and deviancy. The border/internal checkpoints and the archetypical inscription of *The Mexican*, together, function to accentuate who and what is "in place" and "out of place." From early on, I understood what it meant to carry the burden of meaning associated with this region's histories. You see, sin padre, raised by a single mother who was a high school dropout, I was just another statistic experiencing what it meant to be poor with limited access to resources and opportunities. But, I also learned how to practice survivance, resiliency, and agency through listening. Listening emerged in the crux of incoherencies and disjunctions. It became a form of expression that I found to be transformed and transformative. From listening, I understood that I was situated within a historical space and connected to historical bodies. In the liminal spaces created from my physical and metaphorical crossings and my awareness of how borders and internal checkpoints function and operate in my everyday, my body was thrusting the spaces between societal limitations and new self-definitions.

Tengo otro recuerdo. At grandma's kitchen table I'd sit after school every weekday. "¿Como te fue en la escuela?" she'd ask as soon as I walked in. I believe she'd ask both out of concern and a longing for the educational experience denied to her once she crossed la frontera. "Siéntate," she'd say to me. On the table would be her worksheets where she'd write in English and Spanish and a recorder where she'd practice

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1 This section pays homage to the importance of memory, which as Víctor Villanueva (2004) discusses, is central to understanding how the body is a corporeal vehicle of past and present.

translating Spanish to English (and vice-versa). She was told she could not go to school, but she eventually learned how to read and write in Spanish and English for herself. In our exchanges, at the table and on our daily walks, by means of cuentos and testimonios, she'd look at me and ask if I was listening and if I understood what she was saying. She'd say two things, "te digo esto para que sepas y aprendes" and "no te dejes mi'jo." Grandma was always teaching me. She was not content with the saying, "Así son las cosas," despite her tribulations. She expected no less from me. "Te digo esto para que sepas y aprendes" underscored "no te dejes," both educating me on what it meant to put in the work involved in listening to my surroundings, to know and learn, and what it meant to cultivate listening as a form of resolve in being heard and seen. Today, I continue to listen in these ways for the Mexican American of the LRGV continues to struggle with being heard and seen.

Último recuerdo. I am on my way to the university on a bus. I wait at the Sarita, Texas checkpoint. I've been here before, but this time it was different: I was entering gringoland on my way to gringodemia. "¿Tu papeles y a dónde vas?" the agent asked. The questions were part of his strategy of "checking" me, reminding me that the interpellation of my traceable history and palimpsest of identity (*The Mexican*) made permissible the "checking" of who I was and where I was going. I handed him my Texas identification card and stated I was going to college. This "checking" typifies my experiences beyond the LRGV. My grandma believed in higher education, and I did too. But, as a first-generation college student, accepted conditionally at a conservative and predominately white institution, what was at stake, among other things, was being an accomplice to my own degradation. The accumulation of white student protest against diversity (and students' treatment of people of color) and feedback from my professors had me thinking that maybe higher education was not meant for me. I could not change my accent, mi color, or the fact that I was not as academically prepared as others. I could not write, communicate, or be white. I shouldn't have had to. My tío once told me, "Tienes que enseñarles que puedes abrí un libro y leerlo también." I had to prove myself daily for I was always being "checked." I could not change who I was, but I listened as to know and learn and as to negotiate ways to be heard and seen. Then and now, I have learned that to engage in social action, I must listen in ways that centers my body as sensuous within and between the physical, temporal, and symbolic.

I have turned to listening to speak and research back to an academic community that knows little about students like me. Gringoland and gringodemia are functional and operational terms for me, because

they reflect the circulation of rhetorics of assemblage, the surveillance and monitoring done on behalf of the hegemonic family, and the branding of “other” upon the body, all of which are meant to heighten the internalization of otherness for people of color. In my experiences, writing centers are not absolved from such cultural violence. The idea behind “un-making gringo-centers” implicates the writing center in such violence, but also calls attention to the opportunity for a community of scholars to make and re-make writing centers in productive and meaningful ways.

### **A Call to Action**

Writing centers function within a tapestry of social structures, reproducing and generating systems of privilege. Even writing center mottos that are constructed with the best intentions disguise privilege, falling short of “challenging the links between ideologies of individualism and racism” (Grimm, 2011, p. 76). The power of whiteness continues to shape contemporary forms of management and control of practices and writing center scholarship, in particular the imperative to retrofit Mexican Americans into a white/black race paradigm.

The writing center community has witnessed the benefits of cultural and/or critical-race approaches. For example, Anis Bawarshi & Stephanie Pelkowski (1999) illuminate the interplay between colonial power and writing centers. At the same time, however, the reductive racial frames—black struggles and white concessions—constitute a limit to what a writing center might do and reduces the efficacy of the post-colonial turn. The failure to name students of color who are not black, to address their conditions and experiences, and to discuss their needs as an essential aspect in writing center practices and theories illustrates a type of colorblindness at work.

To this day, I know of only one writing center article that responds to the needs of Mexican American students, more specifically Mexican American students at writing centers in borderlands institutions. I want to reiterate, then, Beatrice Mendez Newman’s (2003) arguments briefly. By and large, border students are not ESL writers or speakers, they do not fit the non-traditional student definition, and they have specific needs and expectations that quite frankly cannot be approached by “traditional” instructional training. I am a border student. I am concerned—we should all be concerned—about how access and success can be hindered by the tendency to reduce or retrofit students of color. This concern requires an appropriate response, one that builds on the work of advocating for student voices and the work of providing pathways

so that students can negotiate the academy successfully. This begins with listening, both in the sense that Krista Ratcliffe (2005) discusses it—as a code for cross-cultural communication—and as I conceive of listening—as a form of actional and decolonial work.

I am interested in applying the kind of listening—*para que sepa y aprende*—discussed in the previous section as a form of intervention to writing center work on race, racism, and power. Writing centers, as previous scholarship has reminded us, are not free from power relations (see Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011a; Grimm, 1996a, 1999, 2011; Villanueva, 2006). So, I call upon the members of the writing center community to engage in transformative listening. I do my part, first, by tracing the writing center's racial economy, quantitatively and qualitatively. Then, in resisting the retrofitting and/or reductionism of students of color, I focus on cultivating a *mindfulness of difference* by describing the geo, body, and mobile politics of knowledge that student's from the LRGV carry with them. In these ways, listening is functional and operational towards actional and decolonial work that can expand the role and work of writing centers.

We have been shown and, perhaps, share a vision of progressive politics in the writing center. Unfortunately, no matter how well intentioned and progressive a writing center has been, the “center” cannot hold without accounting for Mexican Americans (and other students of color) in the heterogeneous sense. I believe we can be engineers of theory and praxis, but committing to ethical and epistemically geared projects of social justice requires the undertaking of both transformative listening and “work.” What that work entails is up to the writing center community; as for me, it involves unmaking gringo-centers and bringing into focus students from a community on the cusp of invisibility.

### **Experimenting with a Macro(Analytic) Approach**

Imagine a disciplinary community of writing centers where a politics of knowledge is linked through networks and nodes. Instead of thinking of such politics as constantly being reproduced, consider how information is networked across space and time by language and ideology. Consider how writing center scholars and tutors have performed a “closed” close reading of Mexican American students and their writing. Absent some intervention into those “closed” reading approaches, they, too, function as checkpoints.

The idea of experimenting with a macro(analytic) approach emerged out of a concern for how my arguments in this article would be taken up. My intentions were to conduct a close-reading approach,

but this method can be linear and, at times, limiting. As a novice to digital humanities, I undertook a macro(analytic) approach to visualize relevant topics inside and across texts, as nodes, as nodes in relationship with one another, and as nodes across a range of time(s) and space(s). I complemented my close-reading approach with computational tools that would allow me to contextualize my close-readings in new and meaningful ways.

For this essay, I collected over 30 years of writing center articles, many from The Writing Centers Research Project database and some from outside collections. I used two computational online text-mining tools: *Voyant Tools* for the purposes of revealing “frequency” and “distribution” of data across this 30-plus-year span and *Texttexture* for the purposes of revealing the most influential keywords and most influential contexts of such data. The following are the results:

- 1980s: No-to-Low frequencies for identity terms “Black,” “African,” “African American,” “Mexican,” “Mexican American,” “Chicano,” “Latino,” and “Hispanic.”
- 1980s: No-to-Low frequencies for keywords “race” and “diversity.”
- 1980s: High frequency for keyword “collaboration.”
- 1990s: Mid-to-High frequencies for identity terms “Black,” “African,” and “African American.”
- 1990s: No-to-Low frequencies for “Mexican,” “Mexican American,” “Chicano,” “Latino,” and “Hispanic.”
- 1990s: No-to-Low frequencies for keywords “race” and “diversity.”
- 2000s: High frequencies for “Black,” “African,” and “African American.”
- 2000s: No-to-Low frequencies for “Mexican,” “Mexican American,” “Chicano,” “Latino,” and “Hispanic.”
- 1980s–2000s: Most influential keywords and most influential contexts in the corpus: “writer,” “tutor,” “student,” “experience,” and “identity.”

Although not conclusive, this data is significant for multiple reasons. First, there is the incorporation of “diversity” or “collaboration” without any clear understanding or articulation of how diversity might inform the practice of collaboration or how power dynamics materialize both within centers and their practices. This is indicated, for instance, with the High frequency for the term “collaboration,” but Low frequency in regards to racial identities. This incoherent narrative of “diversity” and “collaboration” is evidence of the degrees in which whiteness shapes the imagining of both centers and practices as “safe” and “inviting.”

That is, although the interplay of buzzwords such as “writer,” “student,” and “identity” are in play, the centering of one (white/black) and the occlusion of all others erases difference with a white/black paradigm.

### **A Close-Reading Approach**

In this section, I look at six texts chronologically, texts that have been recognized as participating in conversations pertaining to race and take up cultural and/or critical-race approaches. This approach is not meant to minimize the contributions of other writing scholars (see Bennet, 2008; Davila, 2006; DeCiccio, 2012; Dees, Godbee, & Ozias, 2007; Denny, 2010; Diab, Godbee, Ferrel, & Simpkins, 2012; Zhang, Amand, Quaynor, Haltiwanger, Chambers, Canino, & Ozias, 2013). I use these six texts, however, to substantiate an argument that while there are pockets of progressive politics reflected in writing center scholarship,<sup>2</sup> such scholarship is limited by a white/black race paradigm. While productive, theoretically and practically, current scholarship fails to attend to the conditions experienced by and the needs and interests of other minoritized and racialized groups other than African Americans, such as Mexican American student writers.

Nancy Grimm, a prominent writing center figure, in her multiplicity of works, continuously demonstrates an understanding of both the complicity of writing centers in institutional racism and the need for sustainable dialogue based on race for writing centers. In “The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center,” Grimm (1996a) implicates the disciplinary community of writing centers:

I am going to take an unhappy approach to writing center work and suggest that we don't always accomplish as much as we think we do and that in the long run we sometimes do more harm than good. (p. 5)

Grimm's (1996a) work brings awareness of how the writing center's politics of knowledge creates social order and acts in service of maintaining the status quo of academic literacy. In explaining how important it is to think beyond the “local” and move towards reflecting on the politics and issues that underlie a “global” structural system, Grimm's (1996a) goal of developing an ideological model of literacy and an articulatory model of social change reveals how narratives of modernity as

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2 See also Kail & Trimbur (1987), Lunsford (1991), DiPardo (1992), Grimm (1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2011), Bawarshi & Pelkowski (1999), Pemberton & Kinkead (2003), Murphy & Stay (2006), Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet (2007), and Greenfield & Rowan (2011a).



“progress” hide racist and classist agendas. In asserting the importance of confronting normalizing cultural beliefs as they bleed into a range of social spaces, Grimm (1996a) insists we must view literacy as multifarious and as possessing political and ideological significances. While not the first to establish the relationship between writing centers, social structures, and ideological processes (see Ede, 1989; Lunsford, 1991), Grimm’s (1996a) article does stand as one of the few significant writing center publications of the time to recognize that theories of knowledge are unfolding during tutoring moments and are always contextually bound to race.

Bawarshi & Pelkowski (1999) problematize the relationship between race, language, and the idea of a writing center from a postcolonial stance. In “Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center,” they expand upon the cultural theorist approach by Grimm (1996a) by articulating a relationship between colonialist agendas and the work of writing centers. As they discuss the consequences of subordinating marginalized discourses, they hold responsible institutions and institutional spaces that force upon student writers (e.g., basic and marginalized writers) a subjectivity of “other” all the while inculcating a rhetoric of modernity as emancipation. Coded within this rhetoric is the inscription of a colonial subjectivity onto exchanges between tutors and student writers, which are always already shaped by hegemony. In proposing a postcolonial writing center, Bawarshi & Pelkowski (1999) open space in the scholarship for a more efficacious account of race and racism by emphasizing that centers should take an active role in “postmodern” positioning—guiding and translating—and in engaging critically with students to “examine the axioms upon which academic structures are formed” (p. 54). This article demonstrates a critical turn in writing center scholarship that mirrors other larger critical conversations on critical literacy, culture, and postcolonial discourse.

The vein of progressive politics continues with Nancy Barron & Nancy Grimm (2002) whose resistance to colorblindness and racism shares a commitment to racial, generational, and cultural perspectives. “Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center” centers the relationship between race, tutoring moments, and writing centers. Barron & Grimm (2002) write:

Colorblindness is a way of avoiding the mess of racial history by pretending that racial differences don’t exist. Students of color are supposed to write as their color didn’t matter. . . . We suspect that many writing center workers have encountered students from diverse cultures who have implicitly been expected to engage in literacy in ways that deny their difference. (p. 59)

In moving from theorizing “productive diversity” to materializing “social change” in practical ways, Barron & Grimm (2002) discuss critically what it means to raise questions about race in tutoring moments and within writing centers. Thinking about racial difference, Barron & Grimm (2002) reflect on narratives of modernity as salvation (e.g., education as the road to equity) and progress (e.g., liberal ideology) and begin to consider how race affects almost every aspect of what we do in writing centers. They conclude that because racial encounters occur in unproductive ways every day in the writing center, the way to make transformative change is to make actionable peer tutor commitments to social responsibility within writing centers, particularly with regard to anti-racism.

In “A Call for Racial Diversity in the Writing Center,” Margaret Weaver (2006) explores the philosophical and pedagogical contours of whiteness as it manifests within writing centers. Weaver (2006) holds culpable writing center scholars for their complacency with whiteness by analyzing and applying interventionist models that illuminate the gaps and limits of writing center discourse as it pertains to race. Weaver (2006) writes:

Whether or not we like it and whether or not we acknowledge it, White writing center administrators are enmeshed in the maintenance of a racial educational system. We must begin to interrogate what is at stake in managing racial diversity. (p. 88)

Weaver (2006) concludes by asserting directors and tutors need to avoid being the “White Center” and learn how to be the “Write Center” (p. 89). She concludes with the conviction that writing centers will continue to face ethical and complex issues surrounding race and power.

In *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth Boquet (2007) explore the degree to which, on one hand, the writing center has championed itself as a site of diversity and collaboration, while on the other, has been complicit by championing practices that reproduce dominant hegemony. Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet (2007) mount an argument for “dwelling” in uncomfortable places, and in the process they implicate the writing center community of practice in focusing too intently on safety and comfort. In combining theoretical and practical explorations, the “betwixt-and-between state” of writing centers and the everydayness of writing center work, Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet (2007) argue writing centers possess the structural authority to contribute to institutional change. Further, they call upon members of the writing center community of practice to recognize and resist the temptation to posit writing centers

as politically neutral spaces. In their chapter on identity and racism, they relate racism within and across writing centers as social spaces to everyday manifestations of racism embedded within cultural logics and patterns. In discussing the deployment of racist rhetoric, aimed at an African American tutor, for example, they shed light on effects and affects of racism. Ultimately, they call for tutors and writing center scholars to become “change-agents” who actively engage in anti-racism work.

*Writing Centers and the New Racism*, edited by Laura Greenfield & Karen Rowan (2011a), builds on existing frameworks established by prior scholars and attempts to respond to Harry C. Denny’s (2010) questions about the importance of identity politics, social and cultural forces, and writing centers. The authors in this collection explore how writing centers are already raced (see Greenfield & Rowan, 2011b), how they are not immune to racism (see Esters, 2011), and how centers contribute to the reproduction of white privilege with center “mottos” that disguise systems of privilege (see Grimm, 2011). Learning how whiteness works requires that tutors become theorists of race and racism (see Geller, Condon, & Carroll, 2011). In this process, there must be recognition of the absence of racial harmony in tutoring moments (see Valentine & Torres, 2011) and careful attention must be paid both to the type of anti-racist agendas implemented and the local and institutional culture in which such agendas are conceived and enacted (see Ozias & Godbee, 2011). Like the previous examples, this edited collection attempts to sustain conversations on race and racism and offers support for interventionist work in writing centers.

### **The Insufficiency of a White/Black Race Paradigm**

As well intentioned and progressive as the writing center community has been in taking up race and racism, the insufficiency of a white/black race paradigm—the black subject as the default “colonial” subject and the white tutor as a functional colonizer—poses a limitation. Remember, this paradigm does not need to be reproduced overtly, because it is sustained through its affective value. Consider Ratcliffe’s (2005) description of how whiteness functions “overtly as a racial category that is privileged even if all white people do not share identical and economic privileges” (p. 12). A similar cultural logic works within a white/black race paradigm. My point is that because this paradigm is a consubstantial part of a dominant presentation and representation of race, writing centers may not be as equipped to account for how race operates and manifests. To move beyond the limits of a white/black

race paradigm, and into a pluriversality of anti-racist agendas, a cultural dialogue of recognition, critique, accountability, and responsibility is needed.

Grimm's (1996a) argument to shift from the local to the global to understand colorblindness and racial injustice is constructive. But, before we can make this shift, we have to recognize how a white/black race paradigm functions as a scalar logic that minimizes the plight of Mexican American history (see Carrigan & Webb, 2003; Delgado, 2009; Kaplowitz, 2005; Perea, 1997). Members of the writing center community should be aware and critical of the ways in which blackness in this paradigm is meant to stand for all struggles, as well as of the failure of this paradigm to account for the particularities of the experience of people of color who are not black. Grimm (1996b) writes, "Writing centers are supposed to deal with heterogeneity...and writing centers are expected to master and control this heterogeneity rather than interpret it" (p. 524). There is now a dialogue on race, power, and the status quo, but still, there remains a gap "between theorizing about difference in higher education and working with differences in the writing center" (p. 524). To see into fruition our democratic desires we must "work" to make that of which has remained absent present—other students of color. This means acknowledging difference and recognizing the differences within difference that play out in the particularities of the local and global.

Barron & Grimm (2002) do argue that race is much more complex than the historical binary construction of white and black. And, yet, there is still this false impression that Mexican Americans were not targets of white consolidation or participants in the struggle and discourse of civil rights. Members of the writing center community should be aware of the particular histories they privilege and those they simultaneously deny. Some scholars have taken up this argument, but inadequately—as if to apologize for not accounting for race beyond a white/black paradigm would be sufficient. There are alternatives to the apology. As a starting point, it is our responsibility as members of writing center communities to listen, well and deeply, in space and time, to material social conditions and social relations. This would counteract the reductionism and retrofitting of students. It is also our responsibility to acknowledge how writing centers are sites of space and place, memory, meaning, and knowledge making. The opportunity is there for cultivating relationships of difference and for strategically circulating how those relationships inform our pedagogies and contribute to the (re)-making of our centers. This involves so much more than theory, because what is at stake is the exclusion of others. What is further at

stake is the opportunity to learn from the encounters and interactions that take place in our writing centers.

Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth Boquet (2007) and Weaver (2006) argue race and racist legacies inform writing centers and practices and call for a writing-centered anti-racist approach. But again the writing center community lacks critical awareness of how much or the degree to which a white/black paradigm limits this call. So when Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth Boquet (2007) focus on the example of discrimination against a black tutor without identifying and theorizing the experiences of other students or tutors of color, or when Weaver (2006) situates her critiques of whiteness within the frameworks of other scholarship that focuses on black subjectivity, they participate in this limiting. This occlusion, regardless of intention, continues to deny the lived experiences of racism that condition the writing lives of other students, such as Mexican Americans, as well as our membership and agency within writing center communities. What is needed is a transdisciplinary approach to the topics of race and power. This will help develop a different type of analysis, one that reevaluates the exigencies within which students are actually situated. To change the terms and content of writing center work on race and power, listening (*para que sepas y aprendes*) is needed in order to work beyond the limitation of a white/black paradigm. A transdisciplinary approach calls attention to space, place, and time.

Bawarshi & Pelkowski (1999) situate writing centers within a postcolonial context to attend to race, academic structures, and power. However, we must acknowledge that there are colonized subjects across the U.S. and around the globe still not living in a postcolonial world. The writing center community must be conscious of how histories of racial violence continue to be ignored and suppressed in the present. We must also be conscious of the extent to which students of color who are not black continue to suffer from this suppression. Some incorporate the concept of contact zones to describe students of color interactions. I am hesitant towards the use of contact zones. Yes, contact zones are about space, social relations, and negotiations. Problematic, however, are the fixity of space and the absence of time. Local contexts and circumstances require a more nuanced application of listening. Students carry with them the burden of their histories and geographies, they are marked with difference, and this is a truth for which we must account. It is our responsibility then to recognize the degrees to which historical and material conditions generate and reproduce everyday practices, as well as to acknowledge how the performativity of those practices are in the

production of space and time. If we listen, well and deeply, writing centers are not stable or fixed, but the degree to which we offer up this space to be changed and transformed by student writers has yet to be observed. Writing centers have spatial and temporal attributes, and because of this, they are always becoming in the sense that centers are made through the particularities of bodily movements and actions. The degrees to which these actions are attributed to student writers, as makers of space and negotiators of macro and micro contexts, have remained to be discussed.

The idea of tutors as theorists of race and racism is bold (see Geller, Condon, & Carroll, 2011). As Ozias & Godbee (2011) illustrate in their conversation on grounding discussions of racism, there are substantive frameworks for envisioning and engaging in anti-racism. But, even the most well conceived political agendas continue to be permeated by Western thought. In this global current, difference seems to matter less and less, and with the erosion of local culture due to the production of homogenized global spaces (see Cresswell, 2004), it seems commonplace to flatten and/or erase the coexistence of other histories. But, difference matters. It is not possible to enact and engage in anti-racism agendas without a more robust analysis of race and power. The writing center community is in a unique position to research capaciously and position itself as a leader of critical discourse on race and power. But, in this struggle for changing the terms of conversations—to tutors as theorists of race and racism—the content and structure of the conversation must be revealed and altered. To attend to ideological apparatuses and structural oppressions (see Davila, 2006; Grimm, 1999), to “re-make our consciousness” (Condon, 2007, p. 30) and be “designers of a new world” (Barron & Grimm, 2002, p. 72), and to undertake a project of identity politics (see Denny, 2010) is messy work. While this work is taxing, we should rest assured that when we situate the locality of our centers and practices within socio-historical and political contexts, we are improving the ways we listen and work with student writers.

I am invested in the anti-racism movement because I believe tutors can become engineers of critical praxis and theory. The question we must answer as a community is what is our rhetorical imperative? If our rhetorical imperative is anti-racism, then our transformative task must go beyond the white/black race paradigm. I mentioned earlier that we must reevaluate the exigencies within which students are actually situated and do so through a transdisciplinary approach. In the next section I apply listening, as passed down to me and cultivated through experiences, to the historical and material conditions of the LRGV. I incorporate space-time and materialist analysis, focusing on spatio and

temporal difference and local/regional expressions of action and agency. I do so to bring attention to the exigencies in which these students are situated. Such analysis is required to move anti-racism agendas in the direction of pluriversality, to re-orient the writing center to the dynamics of space and time, and through this re-orientation, begin to see tutors not only as theorists of race and racism, but also as decolonial agents.

### **Towards a Mindfulness of Difference and a Mobile-Decolonial Framework**

In listening to the historical sense of place (e.g., the LRGV) and bodies (e.g., Texas Mexican Americans), a simple analysis of colonialism from a postcolonial lens cannot suffice. I draw upon decolonial scholars to understand the intricate entanglements of a colonial matrix of power, spatio and temporal colonial difference, and a modern/colonial world. I do so, because even though colonialism as a political order has been destroyed in the U.S., there exists very effective means of management and control in the LRGV. I am interested in how the successive mapping of people and territories as “in place” and “out of place,” “of time” and “stuck in space and time,” applies to the Texas Mexican American in the LRGV. How, specifically, that is, does the colonial traffic in the present. I am also interested in the cultural displays of expression that adapt, reject, and/or transform global meaning. The following is not meant to be capacious in review; rather, it is meant to open up a space for a more nuanced type of analysis. I do, though, offer a list of references, parenthetically.

Race and ethnicity played an important role in the aftermath of the “discovery” and “conquest” of the Americas. Aníbal Quijano & Immanuel Wallerstein (1992) connect the discovery and conquest of the Americas with the construction of a “new” modern/colonial world system. Capitalism, according to Quijano (2000), produced a new mental category to codify the relations between inferior and superior. This new mental category would center on the idea of race—biologically and structurally—and racial classifications, creating an “interstate system” of hierarchal layers for control and rank order. The role of modernity (salvation, emancipation, and progress), uniquely, would be to conceal, and yet reproduce, imperial epistemologies and homogenous totality. Imperial epistemologies denied the dominated people their geographical locations and body-graphical politics of knowledge, while the imperial concept of totality, under the names of modernity and rationality, led to theoretical reductionism and the metaphysics of a macro-historical

subject (see Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). For the Americas, race and the logic of coloniality, cloaked in the rhetoric of modernity, became the locus and testing ground for management and control over domains of power, knowledge, and subjectivity.

Decolonial scholars argue the modern/colonial world and its power differentials are unavoidable.<sup>3</sup> I find this to be true in listening to the local and regional histories of the LRGV and the effects of spatio and temporal colonial difference. The LRGV was the space where the barbarians lived (see De León, 1983). The “other” needed to be saved and civilized, or so goes the rhetoric of colonization. Yet, what ensued was the ideological strategy of delineating space for the “other” and the ideological belief that the “other” should be taken out of cultural and social life (see Pratt, 1992). To ensure inferiority, a subject/object paradigm of rational knowledge would emerge, wherein the “rational” subject would characterize the “other” either as absent or present in objectivized ways (see Quijano, 2007).<sup>4</sup> We see this today both in the lack of acknowledgment of Mexican Americans in history books and the legacy of *The Mexican*. As noted, *The Mexican* is a palimpsest of identity, a racialized imaginary that functions as an archetypical inscription of racial symbols and myths. The ability of this marker of difference to transcend space and time says something about how the colonial continues to traffic in the present. Nonetheless, spatial colonial difference created a social structure wherein *The Mexican* would remain “out of place.”

In addition to the colonization of space and construction of spatio colonial difference, the colonization of time and construction of temporal colonial difference reflect yet another ideological strategy and belief. Arnolde De León (1983), in his study of Texas Mexicans, writes, “What whites found in Texas...was that Mexicans were primitive beings who during a century of residence in Texas had failed to improve their status and environment” (p. 12). The shift from barbarism to primitive reflects an ideological strategy of temporalization. Johannes Fabian’s (1983) notion of *denial of coevalness* and Walter D. Mignolo’s (2007) *modern-time consciousness* are valuable here in that they offer insight into how temporalization meant the “other’s” time was not the time of civilized

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- 3 Mignolo (2000) writes that the “imaginary of the modern/colonial world system is not only what is visible and in the ground but what has been hidden from view in the underground by successive layers of mapping people and territories” (p. 24).
- 4 Quijano (2000) writes, “The inferior races are inferior because they are objects of study or of domination/exploitation/discrimination, they are not subjects, and most of all, they are not rational subjects” (p. 221).



history. Fabian writes, “temporalization is not an incidental property of historical discourse,” it is an intentional practice of distance that requires “time to accommodate...one-way history: progress, development, modernity” (p. 78; 141). Stuck in space and apart from evolution, *The Mexican* would become and remain the “essential alterity of modernity” (see Dussel, 1993, p. 74).

The logic of coloniality would lead to historical and structural transformations that continue the oppression of the Texas Mexican American in the present. “The Mexican” problem took center stage on a local (and national) level. Texas Mexicans were displaced from their lands (see Carrigan & Webb, 2003; De León, 2009), politically and socially disenfranchised (see Bedolla, 2009; Rodriguez, 2007), taught inferiority both in the context of inferior schooling equipment and facilities (see Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; San Miguel, 1998; Spring, 2005; Valencia 2000) and the undertaking of a pedagogical approach (see Blanton, 2007), and exploited for labor (see Gutiérrez, 1995). Because of a white/black race paradigm, this history is ignored or forgotten. Yet, I carry the weight of civilizing *The Mexican* people and saving “it” from itself, while struggling for political, social, and educational rights. Henry Giroux writes, “Colonizing of differences by dominant groups is expressed and sustained through representations in which the Other is seen as a deficit, in which the humanity of the Other is posited either as cynically problematic or ruthlessly denied” (p. 130). The colonial wounds remain fresh, because we are still seen as the “other” in society and approached as deficient in the academy. We continue to occupy a space in the American imagination, which my experiences can attest to, as “wetbacks” and “aliens.” I carry the weight not only of the effects of colonization of space and time, but also that of the mind and body. The inequity gap in higher education between whites and Mexican Americans is just one example of this history trafficking in the present.

What the colonizing campaign found was that in this *Tejano cultural zone*, a people refused to reject their languages, traditions, and cultural identity and that this region was a distinctive subcultural area that reinforced cultural identity to place (see Arreola, 2002; De León 1982). Now consider this. Take U.S. 77 South towards the LRGV. No passport is needed. Yet, the almost 100-mile border that edges this region to the south, and the internal checkpoints that run parallel 70 miles north of it, are features that suggest a design meant to limit mobility. A border(ed) land is created, signaling the perception that “we”—my people in the LRGV—are stuck in space and outside of time. Literally, these features create a geography of exclusion (see Peters, 1998). We are interpreted

as an othered space, monitored, and deprived of resources. There is no coincidence that this region has one of the highest concentrations of Mexican Americans, with some of the highest statistics for people living in poverty and some of the lowest statistics for high school completion and literacy acquisition. We do not live in postcolonial conditions. Yet, we do not remain in our past nor are we contained by the colonial legacies behind *The Mexican*. The rhetoric and culture of the LRGV is our identity and helps form our expression of representation. We adapt, reject, and transform global flows through our geo-graphical, body-graphical, and mobile-graphical displays of expression that continues to make and re-make place and geography. What is needed in rhetoric and composition and within the writing center community is a *mindfulness of difference*, a framework that re-imagines the common local and global distinction as a dialectical relationship and that begins at the scale of human practice and a community's political economy (see Pred, 1995; Tsing, 2000).

The LRGV has its own language, memory, and meaning making practices, as well as its own historical and collective memories and political economy, which may or may not connect with other Mexican American community's. It should go without saying that Mexican Americans have evolved in disparate ways. Yet, because of this global current of interconnections and universal cultural logics, Mexican Americans from the LRGV remain on the cusp of invisibility. I propose a mobile-decolonial interpretive framework to counteract this global effect of no units or scales counting except for that of the global (see Tsing, 2000). In this modern/colonial world, it is imperative for me to briefly account for how we, in the LRGV, respond to the rhetoric of stillness and fixity through place, knowledge, and meaning-making practices. This involves accounting for geo-body-and-mobile-graphical displays of expression (human practice) and how these cultural displays of expression say something about locality, regionality, and globality.

The idea of historical spaces and bodies suggests social and cultural practices and actions that are constellative (see Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This is partly central to the significance of the *Tejano cultural zone* and the meaning and knowledge-making practices that make it possible. In the LRGV, our integration of Spanish and English in the everyday occurs both in the physical (public and home) and material forms (billboards, documents, etc.).<sup>5</sup> This is a bilingual and binational area.

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5 Michelle Hall Kells (2002, 2004), in her longitudinal studies of language practices in South Texas, argues Tex Mex functions as a code, which promotes social cohesion and solidarity against the homogeneity of the English language.

Our ethnolinguistic and ethnoracial identities stem from historical discourse, but also from our experiences with macro and micro forces. They are reflective of our meso-political negotiations that are created and performed in the locality of language practices (see Pennycook, 2010). The type of language practice that occurs in the LRGV undercuts English as the lingua franca and deserves to be studied in-depth for its structural and linguistic features. It deserves such study, because it is the circulation and flow of bilingualism that makes the LRGV a unique subcultural area.

It can be a challenge to evidence a local and regional identity, especially because I am aware and critical of the romantic essentialism that takes place in the academy. In this context, I find myself thinking about the importance of communicating and circulating stories. Judy Rohrer (2016) writes,

We are the set of stories we tell ourselves, the stories that tell us, the stories others tell about us, and the possibilities of new stories. I am these stories. I lived them or I inherited them, and they live vibrantly and turbulently in and around me. All stories are political; they involve power that has structural underpinnings and material consequences. (p. 189)

Stories, as Malea Powell discussed in her 2012 CCCC Chair's address, "take place" and "practice place into space" (p. 391). The essence of storytelling is discourse and rhetoric in action. I believe it is possible for both to delineate a collective ethos and regional identity. If places are about relationships and the "place of peoples, materials, images, and the systems of difference that they perform" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 214) and if place is a "meaningful component in human life" (Cresswell, 1996, p. 51) "produced through action" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 7), what is the import of a regional identity and what does it say about locality and globality? There is a phrase from a billboard that can be seen and read in and across the LRGV. It reads "Pa' Los Que Saben," which translates into "For those who know." Pa' los que saben, we say, "soy del Valle y somos Valle." This form of self-representations undercuts the totality of national identity and is a statement of how Western values and systems breakdown. Our bodies are constellative, evidenced in the stories we tell, but we are the possibilities of new stories too as we have and continue to make and re-make place and geography in ways that illuminate our decolonial imperative—to be seen and heard. "Valley/Valle" is a regional form of representation.

The import of "soy del Valle y somos Valle" is made possible through the flow and circulation of *politics of mobility* in place (see Cresswell, 2010). Micro-bodily movements have traceable histories and

geographies. The rhetoric and culture of the LRGV does not exist on its own. Movement, Tim Cresswell (2006) argues, is “rarely just movement” because it “carries with it the burden of meaning” (p. 4). The gente of the LRGV, with their historical and definitional struggles over creating meaning, have made and continue to re-shape a political economy by which dissent is possible. Attentiveness to the entanglements of meaning, representation, and praxis involved in mobility illuminates, according to Cresswell (2006), how people are agents in the production of space and time. The people of the LRGV are not stuck in space or behind in time, quite the contrary. Being literate in “contexts for movement” and “product of movement,” I see the LRGV as constantly being made in ways that allow the people to be heard and seen in and on their own terms. Yes, micro and macro structural properties generate and reproduce time-space specific social systems and social/cultural practices. But, our meso-political negotiations offers insight into our residual cultural displays of human agency and practice, as well as the emergent features of our politics of being, seeing, and doing. This is where the possibility of new stories exists and where bodies thrust the spaces between societal limitations and new self-definitions to be heard and seen. This is where contested modernities meet alternative modernities.

Pa’ los que saben, the LRGV has and continues to be a stronghold for Mexican values and traditions. Despite the legacies of colonization and the manifestations of coloniality, our movement, representation, and praxis have created a kind of slippage that results in a “sad oppressor complex.” The people of the LRGV have, to some degree, flipped relations with whites who live and move through that region. The “oppressor” becomes “sad” as the “other” has understood and overcome, at least partially, their racist and material conditions.<sup>6</sup> Whites continue to exert domination in this region, but their practices of domination have to be adaptive. While full decolonization has not been achieved, social relations have been changed and transformed.

Look, my point is this: the flattening of difference, the representation of sameness within difference that so saturates writing center talk about race, is untenable and damaging to people like me who come from the LRGV or from other Mexican American communities. If we are going to talk about and attend to race in writing centers, either in the historical or contemporary sense, Mexican Americans cannot be absent. Civil rights’ is so often regarded as a predominantly black effort.

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6 The idea of a “sad oppressor” emerged out of conversations with colleagues at the 2016 Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Pa' los que saben, there are court cases that preceded and created legal precedent for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954): *Del Rio ISD v. Salvatierra* (1930s), *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* (1931), *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947), and *Delgado v. Bastrop ISD* (1948). We have and continue to struggle with being heard and seen. As a site of place, meaning, and knowledge-making, the writing center is about interactions and encounters, co-existing histories and trajectories, and is always in the process of being made. Imagine, then, if we included other groups into conversations on race and power and engage in micro-scales of observation. We'd not only be able to see all students as shaped by meaning, but also observe them in production of space-time. Our writing centers would be forever transformed for the better. Mexican Americans like me, are knocking on the door, will we acknowledge them?

### **Decolonial Initiatives and Agents**

There is impact, regardless of intention, when anti-racist writing center scholars make a call for action for members to be agents of change, and yet, in the historicizing and premising of this change, occlude the lived experiences of racialized others. Members of the writing center community need to continue to make an explicit commitment to addressing race and power. This much, prior scholars in our field have gotten right. But, any acknowledgment that does not account for differences will be insufficient. We need to change the terms and content of writing center work. For instance, there is a contradiction when the objective is to create a "safe space" and articulate an ethical appeal of anti-racism. The terms have changed, but the cultural logic surrounding the notion of "safe space" is still steeped in the dialectic of management and control. To redefine and re-orient our work, I offer the following suggestions.

Tutors need to cultivate a mindfulness of difference and be mindful of spatio and temporal attributes. The writing center was once promoted as a "safe space" or "home." Let me remind you, this space has been historically, culturally, and rhetorically marked by whiteness and white culture (see Grutsch McKinney, 2005; Zhang, Amand, Quaynor, Haltiwanger, Chambers, Canino, & Ozias, 2013). For me, the writing center is neither my safe space nor my home. To be mindful of difference is to: call attention to the structural practices in which re-create realities of dwelling; engage in social justice goals by a retraining of the mind that works to understand capaciously how race and power influences all; and participate in a different logic that invests in a pluriversal understanding of differences. A mindfulness of spatio and temporal attributes approaches students as makers of place, shapers of subjectivities, and engineers of

negotiated linguistic and literate practices. Alastair Pennycook (2010) argues that a “focus on movement takes us away from space being only about location, and instead draws attention to a relationship between time and space, to emergence, to a subject in process—performed rather preformed—to becoming” (p. 140). I suggest that we imagine student writers as having the capacity to change and/or transform face-to-face consultations, and, having the capacity to change and/or transform the writing center as a whole. We must remember that space and place is the product of interrelations and social and cultural actions that is always in the process of being made (see Massey, 2005). I believe the writing center can be re-made from being a “white center” to being a center in the process of becoming.

Tutors need to become decolonial agents. This “work” will look and be different from tutor to tutor. Laura Greenfield (2011) in, “The Standard English’ Fairy Tale” writes,

If most educators allow their unchecked racism to guide their beliefs about language, it stands to reason that the teaching and tutoring practices long advocated in the fields of composition and rhetoric and writing center studies that are premised on these attitudes are necessarily racist, too. Included in this indictment are those contemporary pedagogies—especially those contemporary pedagogies—celebrated by those of who fancy ourselves ‘progressive’ in the world of teaching and tutoring writing. (p. 35)

Progressives continuously return to the idea of contact zones. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) defines the contact zone as a site “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (p. 7). Consider Greenfield’s (2011) argument that tutoring practices and contemporary pedagogies cannot go unchecked. It stands too, then, that in approaching consultation sessions from the approach of “contact zones,” the projection of fixed finite sets of rules and features in space and time too needs to be checked. We cannot just accommodate differences nor should we approach differences as that to be solved. I suggest that we consider and “check” tutoring practices and contemporary pedagogies for how they maintain center/periphery binaries and uphold other forms of management and control. To be a decolonial agent is to be ethically and socially committed to social justice for all. It is having those critical conversations that question even the well-intended progressive and leftist practices.

Tutors need to become theorists of race and racism. Cecilia Shelton and Emily Howson (2014) pose the question, “How, then, do writing centers ‘escape’—even if imperfectly or incompletely—from co-

operation in racially-biased academic practices on an institutional level” (n.p.). It begins, I argue, in conversations on race and racism (blatant and micro-aggression), no matter how uncomfortable it makes us, especially in this age of celebration of diversity in writing centers. In, “Blind,” Victor Villanueva (2006) suggests, “Those of us dedicated to anti-racist pedagogy, to addressing the current state of racism find ourselves everyday trying to convince folks that there really still is racism, and it’s denied” (p. 11). He argues that “We can’t buy into the silencing of what we know is still racism” (18). I agree. Consultants must acknowledge the material reality of race and the reality of racism. But, this is not enough. I suggest that consultants add a rhetorical feature to their pursuance in becoming theorists of race and racism. So while we may be told not to worry about race and racism, with an education in rhetorical discourse, we know this to be a matter of articulation from the centers of power, rather than truth. To become theorists of race and racism, we must have a greater understanding, then, of how rhetoric works.

Tutors need to engage in reflection and reflexivity. I suggest tutors become researchers of their everyday experiences and researchers of the everyday of writing centers. The idea of rhetorical listening and thick description complement each other, and so, I propose the use of portfolios as a meditational and reflexive activity of decolonial action. Portfolio writing should start at the beginning of the academic year, with the tutor initially responding to what it means to engage in anti-racist work. With weekly or monthly reflections, it would be in the best interest of the tutor to begin describing the everyday thickly, accounting for the ways in which power, issues of race, and social relations play out. In the process, the tutor should be working towards a transdisciplinary approach in putting race and power into dialogue. This way, race and power go beyond the content and scope of writing center work and into the global issue of race and power. This way, the tutor does not only work to reveal and alter the structures that limit social justice agendas and goals in the writing center, but takes on this ethical and epistemically geared project beyond the writing center space. I see the directors playing a critical role in this type of transformative learning and praxis. The director should be the one to initiate these conversations on race and power, holding professional development sessions and monthly meetings dedicated to such topics. On the individual level, the director should hold accountable the tutor and their contributions to a portfolio. That being said, the director should open up space for the tutor to present and discuss what has been learned and practiced and what remains to be learned.

On a final note, tutors as decolonial agents should not make assumptions about students, no matter how well intended those assumptions are. Part of engaging in decolonial initiatives and action is to change the content and terms of conversations. So, in preparation for working with the Mexican American population, for example, you might read a text such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. But, tutors might also find books like Américo Paredes's *George Washington Gomez* or José Limón's *Dancing with the Devil* useful. This will provide a greater perspective on the dynamic and complex community of Mexican Americans. To universalize Mexican Americans in the experience of Gloria Anzaldúa, as is the case with academics, is to perpetuate the same logic of sameness of difference, which fails to see differences within difference.

The history for professionalization by the writing center community of practice and its efforts towards sustaining a vital positionality in the academy are well documented (see Barnett, 1997; Carino, 1995, 1996; Harris, 1982; Kail, 2000; Riley, 1994; Simpson, 1985; Summerfield, 1988; Yahner & Murdick, 1991). We are now in a position to create new knowledges and practices and to create meaningful coalitions that can work together for sustainable change. To be pedagogical and epistemic engineers, new perspectival horizons must be explored, and in charting those horizons, new tools must be used. In this process, a new design must be engineered for attending to race in the writing center. At the center of this design should be a new, not merely renewed, practice of listening: listening as a form of understanding and action.

## Conclusion

Some might say: "my writing center does not have students from the Valley." You will. Remember, not accounting for the Mexican American community in conversations of race and power is to be complicit in a white/black race paradigm. My own academic viaje has taken me from the LRGV to Upstate New York. While my circumstances have changed as a writer, my experience of being in "white" centers with all their many manifestations of "whiteness" continues to make me conscious of being a writer and now a tutor of color. But, like my grandma used to say to me, "no te dejes." So, when I hear some argue that race or racism does not exist in their writing center, I challenge this assertion. I've seen white students switching their appointment in order to work with a white tutor. I've heard white tutors apologize for other students' discrimination. In those moments, I am reminded of how important it is to continue to listen. My grandma was a great mentor in this way. I



carry with me those memories of sitting in the kitchen, learning from her how to listen to the world. Listening to the world, well and deeply, is a lesson that all of us should learn, whoever and wherever we are. Like my grandma would say, *para que sepas y aprendes*. This type of listening will help nuance what it means to talk about race and difference(s).

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### **About the Author**

Romeo García recently earned a Ph.D. from Syracuse University. His research focuses on the visibility of marginalized students and critical approaches to working with students in institutional spaces. Romeo recently accepted a position in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies at The University of Utah.