Articles

Pseudocommunity as a Limitation in Antiracist Faculty Professional Development

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This article explores how the racialized discursive and behavioral norms of pseudocommunity interfere with faculty professional development toward antiracist writing pedagogy. The author draws upon original research into a faculty learning community of first year composition instructors to highlight how, without explicit acknowledgment and interrogation, antiracist initiatives meant to encourage collaboration, equitable exchange, and professional learning may reproduce the white pseudocommunity dynamics that prevail in writing programs. This essay contributes to the growing body of literature on antiracist pedagogy and writing program administration by emphasizing the necessity of deep consideration of contextual interpersonal aspects of racism and white supremacy that may go unnoticed or unacknowledged by administrators and instructors.

Speaking generally about antiracist pedagogy, education scholar Alda M. Blakeney argues that "professional development is crucial to successful implementation" for three reasons: to ensure intellectual understanding of associated critical frameworks; to examine one's racial identity; and to construct culturally responsive and antiracist pedagogies and practices (130). Though outside the disciplinary context of writing studies, Blakeney's assertion is relevant to the work of teaching composition, given the field's emphasis on preparing writing instructors, as well as the body of contemporary scholarship on antiracist praxis in writing instruction, assessment, and program administration (Baker-Bell; García de Mueller and Ruiz; Inoue, "Racism," *Labor-based*; Jones et al.; Young et al.). Less scholarship has attended to the formal faculty professional development (FPD) structures through which current writing instructors are exposed to antiracist scholarship, draw connections between theory, pedagogy, and the lived experiences of the students they teach, critically reflect upon their pedagogy, and grapple with their racialized identities within the context of a writing program.

Both practically and conceptually, FPD initiatives risk falling into traps that educator Jamila Dugan identifies as "easy fixes… that don't get to the root of the problem" yet serve as "land mines to deter educators" from instructional

transformation (35). Heeding Dugan's warning that "if we aren't aware of the moves we are making, we are liable to reinforce the system we seek to dismantle" (39), in this essay I analyze a faculty learning community (FLC) toward racial literacy and antiracist writing instruction that I facilitated during the 2019-20 academic year. On the surface, it would seem this FLC was successful, with all participants reporting they had gained something from the experience and most reporting they had learned what they had hoped to, particularly about pedagogy. Deeper analysis demonstrated that, despite these gains, the FLC, intended to be a space of productive, collaborative discourse, was defined by the raced and gendered interpersonal dynamics of the writing program itself. I discuss how these findings underscore the necessity of deep understanding and consideration of interpersonal dynamics when designing and implementing FPD. Ultimately, I call on instructors and writing program administrators to critically reflect upon contextually situated dynamics that may be reproduced even in antiracist and equity-oriented programming.

Literature Review

Though the term "antiracism" is not new, it remains "a necessary but experimental concept that needs to be explicitly developed" in research, for "living in a racist society affects our ability to truthfully and accurately observe reality as it exists vs. how people desire to imagine and invent it" (Lockett et al. 28). Sociologist Sarita Srivastava defines antiracism as "a political philosophy and practice committed to challenging racism as systemic in institutions and everyday life" (36). Historian Ibram X. Kendi suggests antiracism requires "a radical reorientation of our consciousness" (23) and "policies that lead to racial equity" (20). Contemporary definitions of antiracism acknowledge systemic racism's macro and micro manifestations (Twine) and frame antiracism as both a critical orientation and an active practice of resistance. Where racial literacy, the collection of practices by which individuals "probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation" (Sealey- Ruiz 386), is an ongoing process of "learning rather than knowing" (Guinier 110) that facilitates antiracism, antiracism is largely about doing.

Antiracist Faculty Professional Development in Writing Programs

For individual composition instructors, there exist many recommendations for antiracist pedagogy: For generations, scholars have advocated for instructors to recognize, validate, and include multiple Englishes, particularly Black language and rhetorical practices (Baker-Bell; CCCC; Jones et al.; Young et al.). More recently, scholars have called on educators to practice ungrading or labor-based grading (*Labor-based*) and explicitly interrogate racism and

whiteness in the classroom. I have argued that instructors must develop racial literacy to implement antiracist practices meaningfully and equitably (*Teaching*) and to avoid reproducing longstanding inequities through seemingly critical practices (*Race Talk*). Programmatic FPD may prepare instructors to implement antiracist pedagogy effectively in discipline-specific contexts.

Unfortunately, we have few successful models for antiracist professional development within the specific context of a writing program, which arguably is not accidental: Given the deep roots of racism in education, antiracist work may shift the foundation of the very institution in which it is situated, and, as I have noted, "the institution doesn't want to dismantle itself" ("Antiracism"). Antiracist efforts may put additional labor on already racialized and marginalized faculty members (Dugan; Garcia et al.; García de Mueller and Ruiz) and be met with resistance from white faculty and administrators (García de Mueller and Ruiz); where there is no resistance, initial enthusiasm may soon be replaced by fatigue and disinterest.

Hegemonic Whiteness

An insidious obstacle to antiracist FPD, not unique to writing programs, is the hegemonic whiteness of our institutions. Whiteness, the deeply embedded "ideology that works to normalize and promote white supremacy" (Nishi et al. 2), influences dominant understandings of morality, identity, and solidarity (Srivastava) and impacts communication, discourse, and behavior in educational spaces (Applebaum; *Race Talk*; Srivastava; Villareal et al.; Yoon), even those ostensibly dedicated to social justice (Applebaum; Yoon). Learning community interactions demonstrate "how dominant white cultural and professional norms are enforced" and how "the interactions that inform a school environment – one that appears inclusive and caring – can belie an undercurrent of hostility toward anti-racist efforts" (Yoon 597).

Despite the wide reach of whiteness, racism is contextual (Guinier). Location, institution type, and student population, as well as the limitations posed by time, departmental requirements, and resources "influence the concept and design" of any antiracist curriculum (*Teaching* 19). Antiracist work may lead to "scrutiny around institutional norms" (21), including those that inform interpersonal interactions. Accounting for institutional culture is difficult and questioning or challenging norms, especially those rooted in whiteness, may put faculty members at risk.

Whiteness-at-Work

Irene H. Yoon argues "white-centered professional culture" prevents an obstacle to "the ability of educators to unlearn habits that impede the practice of just and equitable education" (589). Whiteness is ubiquitous and works

through contradictions, hypocrisies, and paradoxes accepted by individuals and societies. Noting that whiteness is a "social and iterative process" (Yoon 591), Yoon defines "whiteness-at-work" as strategies that signal the "unfolding and perhaps fleeting" construction of whiteness and its paradoxes in conversation (590). These paradoxes manifest even in social justice spaces, such as, as Yoon suggests, when white teachers gather to talk about equity yet employ evasive rhetorical frames and discursive maneuvers. Other individual and collaborative maneuvers of whiteness include proclamations of innocence and victimization (Applebaum; Srivastava), centering white comfort (Applebaum; Yoon), the performance of white fragility to avoid accountability (Applebaum), and, more broadly, institutional "niceness" that prevents calling out racism (Villareal et al.).

While these dynamics marginalize people of color and others for whom they are not normative, including Jewish people ("Antiracism") and those from outside the United States, they may also be performed by people of marginalized identities, for inclusion requires to some extent enculturation into the whiteness of the academy (Grijalva; Villareal et al.). White discourse and behavior are normative and normalized, so people of color may reproduce them, sometimes out of perceived necessity (Nishi et al.). Minoritized faculty "have had to navigate through a system with few people like themselves… cultural competence, as a skill of adapting to various cultural communication patterns and norms, is often born out of the necessity to survive in a world of difference" (Grijalva 32). Thus, even in racially diverse spaces, recognizing and challenging the micro-level discursive patterns of whiteness-at-work are part of practicing racial literacy, a precursor to antiracist change work.

Pseudocommunity

Another example of interpersonal dynamics defined by white cultural norms is what education scholars Pam Grossman, Sam Wineburg, and Stephen Woolworth have identified as pseudocommunity. The term "community" is prevalent in education and writing studies scholarship, but we must "distinguish between a *community of teachers* and a *group of teachers* sitting in a room for a meeting" (Grossman et al., 946, emphasis original). In the latter category, we find *pseudocommunity*, which Grossman et al. define as "playing community," a dynamic in which individuals "act as if they are already a community that shares values and common beliefs" whether or not that is actually the case (962).

The concept draws upon Erving Goffman's distinctions between frontstage and backstage. In pseudocommunity, "the key to maintaining a surface esprit de corps is the curtain separating front from back stage, and the fact that only some group members are allowed behind it" (Grossman et al. 963). On frontstage

is the "illusion of consensus" and the "tacit understanding that is against the rules to challenge others" (962). Problems that arise on frontstage are managed backstage, which allows–or forces–group members to maintain their public identities. Thus, features of pseudocommunity include surface friendliness, avoidance of personal space, and suppression of conflict. These behavioral and communicative protocols draw upon white, middle-class, Christian norms of interaction, which perpetuate marginalization, avoid detection by those for whom they are normative, and prevent critique by pushing it backstage.

From one perspective, the stark distinction between frontstage and backstage sets up a binary that doesn't account for the various backstage spaces individuals occupy. Spaces where white people freely express racist views (Houts Picca and Feagin) certainly differ from support circles "for sharing experiences and expressing solidarity" (Garcia et al. 56) and "networks of trust and mutual support" (Kahn and Lynch-Biniek 18) that enable broader workplace organizing. From another perspective, however, because pseudocommunity depends upon the suppression of conflict and the uncritical acceptance of hegemonic values and practices that have never actually been agreed upon, even backstage support networks can perpetuate pseudocommunity if they never challenge the hegemonic norms that define the frontstage.

There is an "inherent 'dishonesty' associated with interpersonal relations within pseudocommunities," evidenced by groups that ignore hierarchical realities or pretend power differentials do not exist (Whitelaw 55). Honesty is paramount to productive race talk, particularly around hegemonic whiteness: "Without such honest dialogues the hope for antiracism or the deconstruction of whiteness will remain aspirational" (Nishi et al. 4). Thus, the inherent dishonesty of pseudocommunity marks the dynamic as particularly detrimental to antiracist efforts.

Original Research

This IRB-approved research is part of a series of examinations of writing program and departmental culture over a four-year period at South Lake State University (a pseudonym), a commuter campus in an economically underserved suburb of a major U.S. city ("Antiracism;" "Working"). The research presented here was conducted over the course of one academic year in the space of an FLC I designed and facilitated for nine instructors.

Methodology

Initially, I conceptualized this study as an ethnography to enable a comprehensive look at how the culture of the group developed and evolved over time. As the research continued, I became increasingly influenced by portraiture, a qualitative methodology that incorporates ethnographic methods. So-

ciologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, who is credited with conceptualizing the methodology, explains that, in portraiture, the researcher is compelled in part by "the impulse of the storyteller and the power of storytelling. The portraitist wants to document the specifics, the nuance, the detailed description… as a way of illuminating more universal patterns" (12). Lawrence-Lightfoot notes that writer Eudora Welty's distinction between listening to and listening for a story "identifies one of the key contrasts between ethnography and portraiture: ethnographers listen *to* a story whereas portraitists listen *for* a story." In other words, the researcher helps to "shape the story's coherence" and "admits the central and creative role of the *self* of the portraitist" (11, emphases original). In this way, portraiture allowed me to share my participants' stories as well as—and in conjunction with—my own.

The methodology also enabled me to paint a complex, nuanced, and dynamic portrait of the (pseudo)community of the FLC, which was particularly valuable given my emphasis on context in this study. Of additional, if symbolic, significance is the constructedness of portraiture: Unlike the constructedness of identity on the frontstage of the pseudocommunity, the creative aspect of portraiture is meant not to disguise but to reveal. Like phenomenology, portraiture seeks to uncover the essence of an event, person, or experience, while embracing the paradoxes and contradictions that are "so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationships" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 9).

Importantly, portraiture has been used by critical race and whiteness scholars in education (Nishi). Contextualizing portraiture within the longstanding intellectual "intersection of fiction and social science," Lawrence-Lightfoot points out, like social scientists, novelists and storytellers have sought "to capture the texture and nuance of human experience. But both artists and scientists recognized the limits of their mediums, their inability to capture and present the total reality" (6). Because portraiture is a methodology of "boundary-crossing" that appeals to both "intellect and emotion" and seeks to not only document and interpret but also intervene (7), it has been well suited to critical research on race, whiteness, and power. Critical whiteness scholar Naomi Nishi explains that in a critical approach to portraiture, "the researcher, in addition to understanding the participants and their dynamics" must always be "acknowledging and assessing the power structures at play and how they are impacting participants." For this reason, and to acknowledge the creative role of the researcher in the process, "self-reflection is necessary and even central to understanding the work" (Nishi 5). Therefore, in the portrait I depict of the FLC, my analyses and interpretations of its interactions are interwoven with reflections upon my contributions to its dynamics.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data through interviews, documents, artifacts, archival records, participant observation, and surveys. During FLC meetings, I documented observations via jottings, which I turned into field notes. I conducted mid-year semi-structured interviews with participants to gather their impressions and their hopes for the rest of the year. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Participants shared reflections, questionnaires, and emails throughout the academic year, and they completed an end-of-year survey to reflect and provide feedback. These multiple forms of data collection and their distribution over time enabled a broad picture of both frontstage and backstage interactions to emerge, which provided me tools to paint a clearer and more nuanced portrait of how the group communicated as well as how individual participants communicated outside of it.

In keeping with interpretive methods of portraiture, I immersed myself in notes, documents, and transcriptions, listening for frequent refrains, expressions that revealed participants' depictions of their realities, and especially "themes expressed through cultural institutional rituals that seem important to organizational community" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 193). To examine the pseudocommunity dynamic, I categorized data as frontstage (observations, materials shared during the FLC, participants' first-person narratives of events in the FLC) or backstage (interviews, surveys, emails, and other means by which participants shared those narratives). I coded and cross-coded data for emergent themes, which I highlight in the findings. To make sense of my assumptions and impressions of the pseudocommunity informed by situations and behaviors outside the FLC, I recorded my own experiences in a narrative journal. I also kept a researcher journal where I recorded notes and reactions to data.

Institutional Context

Informed by Nishi's approach to framing the portrait, I begin "with a description of the canvas and the setting that holds the depicted scenes" (7), in this case, the writing program at South Lake State University. South Lake is one of more than twenty campuses in a public university system. Officially designated a Hispanic serving institution, the school enrolls the system's most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student population and more students who qualify for federal financial aid than does any other campus. The student population is majority Latinx.[1] A dynamic notable to South Lake is the large number of alumni who hold faculty and staff positions.

I include a brief description of my own positionality here as well, because I believe my positionality in the context of the South Lake writing program posed unique challenges (which I discuss throughout this article). I am a white-

privileged Jewish woman whose research and teaching focus on rhetorics of racism, antisemitism, and whiteness. I have a background in teacher education and FPD, and, prior to joining the faculty at South Lake, a teaching-focused institution, I'd spent two years conducting similar FPD in a racially and linguistically diverse research institution where I routinely studied my own instructional practices.

At the time of this research, I was a new tenure-line faculty member at South Lake, where the department had just revised its first year composition (FYC) program, essentially for the first time in its forty-year history. Assessments in the year following implementation demonstrated that FYC sections were still taught in ways that were out of alignment with contemporary writing studies and implicitly racist. Also apparent was what my new colleagues called "low morale" among lecturers who taught FYC classes, a result of their exclusion from program revision ("Working"). Though not the WPA, I served on South Lake's composition committee and the university task force to assess changes and develop related programming. I was encouraged to propose FPD to address the misalignment between program outcomes and classroom instruction, so I applied for and received internal financial support to facilitate a yearlong FLC toward racial literacy and antiracist instruction. I applied for and received separate funding to study the FLC.

Nine self-selected participants joined the FLC. A stipend of $1,500 was provided for each participant, the most compensation offered to composition faculty for FPD to date. We met monthly during the subsequent academic year in the department conference room, where we sat around a single oblong table. Lunch was provided at all sessions for practical purposes and to facilitate collegiality.

Program Design

Professional learning communities "bring together small groups of instructors, usually from similar teaching contexts, such as the same course" to "meet regularly, focus conversation on teaching practices, measure success via student work, and manage the difficult work of collegial critique and assessment with discussion protocols." A benefit of the learning community structure is its "focus on collaboration and equitable exchange" (Teagarden A17). The learning community model has been shown to be useful for equity-oriented FPD, for it "engages faculty as learners" over time (Costino 119), and, because it is more structured, intensive, and collaborative than other approaches to FPD (Beach and Cox), it can be an antidote to "one-shot" workshops "not substantive enough to foster… systemic, equity-minded institutional change" (Costino 121). Thus, this model may hold promise for FPD toward racial literacy and antiracist writing instruction.

The FLC structure was similar to Blakeney's tripartite structure for antiracist FPD in that it included readings, discussions, and activities focused on three areas: critical frameworks, individual positionality, and classroom practices. The FLC was designed to move from self-reflection and engagement with critical frameworks (iteratively and simultaneously) to an emphasis on classroom practice. Materials drew upon the framework of racial literacy (Grayson, *Teaching*; Guinier; Twine) and scholarship on the racialized historical and contemporary realities of FYC, antiracist learning outcomes (Kareem) and assessment (*Labor-based*), and linguistic justice, "an antiracist approach to language and literacy education" that "does not see White Mainstream English as the be-all and end-all" but instead "places Black Language at the center of Black students' language education" (Baker-Bell 7). FLCs rely on members' active participation (Costino), so, on the first day, we discussed what active participation looked like for each of us, how others could identify if we were upset, and how we preferred to be engaged as peers and learners. We discussed a respectful honesty policy (*Teaching*) and shared individual definitions of respectful communication. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon the social and cultural situatedness of those definitions, behaviors and preferences.

Participants

Participants included three Black women (Lisa, Sheila, tasha[2]), three white men (Lucky, Steve, William), two Latina women who identified as white (Alison) or white-privileged (Liz), and one white woman (Greta).[3] Most participants had long histories with the institution: They had earned graduate degrees from South Lake and had held various positions on campus. Steve and Alison had coordinated the program that placed Liz as an embedded tutor in Alison's and William's classrooms. Liz had worked with Lisa in the graduate support office. Both programs closed following the creation of the writing center, where Steve and Alison now worked (and which I was hired to direct halfway through the academic year during which the FLC met). As with the teacher group Grossman and colleagues formed, "the conflicts and tensions of the workplace accompanied us from the start" (954). As I will discuss, the FLC's pseudocommunity dynamics both illuminated and exacerbated these tensions, all of which were situated within the power imbalances of the program and department.

All participants were informed from the start that I would collect data, separately, for both research and program assessment and all participants provided informed consent. A separate $100 stipend was provided to participants for participation in interviews. To alleviate any potential concerns about research data being used institutionally, I explained that I would not analyze interview data until after the program had concluded and that nothing shared

in interviews would be part of formal assessment. Participants did not express concerns. This separation, however, may explain, at least partly, why the assessment I conducted depicted the FLC as a success, while the research offered more insight into the racialized labor dynamics of the writing program. From one perspective, this may be seen as a limitation of the research; from another, the separation, which both I and the institutional review board deemed necessary to ensure participant confidentiality, illuminates the impacts of institutional structures on antiracist FPD.

Findings: A Portrait of a Faculty Learning Pseudocommunity

In the following sections, I first paint a broad picture of the separation of frontstage (FLC meetings) from backstage (individual communications and interactions), after which I depict two frontstage episodes in which the dynamics of pseudocommunity and whiteness-at-work were apparent.

Separating Frontstage from Backstage

The majority of communication happened behind the scenes. I learned backstage that Liz, a soft-spoken white-privileged Latina woman, was offended that Steve, a stoical white man, and Alison, an ebullient white Latina woman, arrived late to a meeting together. I learned from Steve and Alison that they had been in another meeting at that time. I learned backstage that Lisa, a Black woman who was always first to speak in meetings, didn't actually want to "do the heavy lifting." Via separate emails, I learned that tasha, a Black woman who listened intently while her colleagues spoke and often nodded as she took in their perspectives, was offended by the uncensored use of the N-word by Sheila, another Black woman, during an impassioned share-out, and that Sheila, who spoke slowly and deliberately, recognized her speech offended tasha but felt the word was warranted. All of this was volunteered away from the group, as is common in pseudocommunity, wherein "even if the whole group hears a hurtful remark… the victims wound is dressed offstage," not in the group (Grossman et al. 963).

White Silence

White members were particularly quiet during meetings, a common dynamic among white people and reminiscent of what sociologists Leslie Houts Picca and Joe R. Feagin call the "studied avoidance" (52) of race talk in frontstage settings to prevent being "seen as racist" (54). During our interview, Steve admitted that, because he is often "the most privileged person in a room," he didn't want to "dominate discussion" or perpetuate the "defensive" behaviors of white fragility. From one view, Steve's self-silencing can be seen as a process of "monitoring certain ways of speaking and acting in the front – and not

necessarily in the backstage" (54) to avoid appearing racist. The contrast is evident in Steve's openness with me, another white person, about this dynamic. Thus, Steve's behavior can be seen as a form of "impression management" (Goffman), wherein individuals perform identities they already are comfortable sharing (Grossman et al.). In other words, Steve's silence can be seen as a performance designed to offset his preexisting—or presumed—ethos of authority, informed by whiteness and masculinity.

From another view, Steve's silence can be seen as an attempt to resist the confines of his frontstage identity. Backstage, multiple participants lamented the "special treatment" they thought Steve received in the writing program, having previously served as lecturer representative on the department's composition committee, as did Steve himself: "I'm associated with tenured faculty. And over time, what that's meant is that I've gradually become a pariah." His silence arguably worsened the perception his colleagues held of him, for, in avoiding his own "expressions of white privilege," he demonstrated what Frankie Condon suggests may be a white "paternalism conditioned by implicit convictions about the weakness and vulnerability of peoples of color" (115). By withholding out of an impulse to protect his Black and Latina colleagues, Steve weaponized his whiteness and betrayed his expectation that they would do the bulk of the sharing.

Silence & Silencing

Black and Latina participants had other reasons for staying quiet. Speaking of all meetings she attended at South Lake, Sheila wrote: "I cannot overcome the feeling that I might be silenced if I contribute." Such fear is learned and longstanding, and for some of the participants it had been reinforced by their experiences as graduate students in the department. Liz described a time she was afraid to challenge a fellow student's in-class microaggression: "She [a classmate] just put her hand on my arm and said, 'Let it go…You know that if you respond, the instructor in this class is not going to back you up.'"

Concerns about challenging a colleague are common in pseudocommunities (Grossman et al.) and educational spaces in general, given prevailing norms of "niceness" that emphasize agreeability and positivity (Villareal et al.). These concerns are greater for Black and Latinx people, whose communication styles may differ from white norms (Villareal et al.) and whose careers in academia often rest in the hands of white people, from graduate school professors and advisors to members of hiring, tenure, awards, and promotions committees (Baca; Garcia et al.).

Of her own experiences with departmental racism, Isabel Baca writes: "I have learned that silence helps no one, and if it does, it helps the oppressor" (70). Many who have experienced other types of discrimination or marginalization

in our workplaces have come to similar conclusions, myself included. Still, on a temporary, individual basis, silence can feel like protection, especially during race talk, which has the potential to evoke unwarranted defensiveness and anger from white people (Condon; Srivastava). For Liz, who admitted, "with only two and a half years teaching here, I'm very aware of how quickly I can disappear from these hallways," silence had "become a survival tactic." Liz and Sheila had learned that their participation, and indeed their existence, in the writing program depended in part on their complicity in pseudocommunity.

Comfort(ing) through Affirmations

During a fall semester conversation about how whiteness limits racial literacy, I shared that in my first semester of graduate school, I'd mistakenly used the term *post-racial*, which I had heard in passing but hadn't interrogated and which was not even close to *intersectional* or *intersectionality*, the concept I now know I was seeking. (I'd been trying to say that race functioned alongside other systems of oppression and domination. I hadn't known what the word *post-racial* meant, perhaps because, as a white-privileged person, I hadn't had to.) This had not gone over well: a Black classmate said I was racist; a white classmate told me to check my privilege. In the FLC, I said I now understood, but that in the moment I was confused and wished the professor or a white classmate had told why the term had elicited the reaction it had. tasha posited it was the professor's job to explain, to ensure the labor did not fall to Black students. A dialogue began about how participants could address similar situations, considering their own positionalities and emotional responses to race talk. Conversation stagnated when Greta, a white woman who generally spoke matter-of-factly, expressed sympathy for me having been misunderstood, and William, a white man who rarely spoke at all, agreed it wasn't fair to be shut down because of ignorance rather than malicious intent.

In pseudocommunity, open discourse is replaced with unquestioned silence and redirection from conflict, such as through the use of affirmations (Yoon). These white FLC members "engaged in a strategy of avoiding critique… by complimenting" my intentions instead of my actions or their impact (601). They "offered affirmation rather than constructive questions" (602) and did not examine how my classmates might have experienced the conversation, thus centering my (white) experience. In avoiding more critical forms of engagement with whiteness, Greta and William interrupted their racial literacy development and redirected a conversation in which Black and Latinx participants were actively exploring ways to address such incidents in their classrooms. The whiteness-at-work was noted by Liz, who later told me:

> How quickly they became defensive of white privilege and of you in a context where you were trying to express 'Look, this was my misstep.' You were trying to acknowledge that and… like it was just – [Moves hand over head] – *whoof*… I didn't understand why people were so defensive and I left that meeting very perplexed, a little disheartened, and just weirded out… It felt like we weren't comfortable going into the uncomfortableness, right? And it felt very defensive of whiteness in that moment, and given what we were trying to do in that space, it did feel very counterproductive.

In the FLC, however, Liz, who herself identified as white-privileged, did not call out her colleagues' defenses of whiteness. After all, in pseudocommunity, members are discouraged from challenging or disagreeing openly with one another (Grossman et al.). Knowing that white individuals shy away from "taking responsibility for challenging problematic statements" (Yoon 607), I urged Greta and William to consider the impact rather than my intent. Still, I distinctly remember thinking I had to tread carefully as facilitator to deemphasize my position as the sole tenure-track FLC member and to encourage participants to communicate with one another rather than rely on me as intermediary. By not explicitly calling out the whiteness-at-work, I allowed it to continue; thus "white comfort was recentered" in a space "whose purported aim was exactly the converse" (Applebaum 863). As Steve had done when he self-silenced to avoid being seen as "a pariah," I attempted to mitigate my frontstage image by pretending the power differential between participants and me did not exist, thereby perpetuating the dishonesty of pseudocommunity (Whitelaw).

Echoing as Affirmations

While some white members reinforced whiteness-at-work through affirmations, some Black and Latina participants used affirmations to show resistance, though in the context of the FLC, even resistance betrayed signs of pseudocommunity. Over time, Lisa, Liz, and Sheila began using the collective pronoun *We* to speak of themselves as a group (which appeared to include tasha, though tasha rarely spoke in the same manner). This discursive move signified to me that they saw one another as allies and that they perceived their individual experiences to be representative of broader racial dynamics in the FLC. On the post-FLC survey, Sheila wrote: "I understand that the work of becoming anti-racist is a process that requires a lot of self-reflection, but the self-reflection that I began to see as something that others constantly sought to engage in also began to feel unnecessary to me and the other women of color in our group." Sheila speaks not only for herself but also for "the other

women of color in our group" (though Alison, who identified as both Latina and white, did not appear to be included).

In addition to the collective *We*, some Black and Latina participants used affirmations and echoes to support one another. Whereas affirmations signal an "avoidance of conflict" (Yoon 599), "echoing," or stating one's agreement with an antiracist utterance can build solidarity in challenging whiteness (Nishi et al.). In this FLC, echoes also served as affirmations, for, while they indicated resistance to the perceived whiteness of the space, they also prevented productive critique.

When the FLC discussed codemeshing, the combining of multiple Englishes (Young et al.), during a spring meeting of the FLC, Sheila did not share, as she had in written reflections, that her instruction emphasized "Standard English" and codeswitching, or alternating between codes or dialects based on setting or audience. She did, however, state that she knew Black students and did not believe anyone could teach her how to teach Black students. Lisa, Liz and tasha echoed Sheila's stance. Backstage, Liz and tasha had expressed different perspectives on literacy instruction and identity. Liz thought too many instructors focused on grammar, which she saw as "a waste of time." tasha told me, "I may not have any information [about antiracist pedagogy] just because I'm Black. I mean, that's not my specialty." Yet, frontstage, Lisa, Liz, and tasha affirmed Sheila's stance that her identification as Black made her an authority on South Lake students (the majority of whom were not, in fact, Black).

Racial literacy involves experiential knowledge, but understanding one's lived experience differs from familiarity with the application of critical frameworks, even culturally situated and sustaining ones, to writing instruction. Arguably, as bell hooks suggests, "combining the analytical and experiential is a richer way of knowing" than relying upon either alone (89). Sheila, whose education was in TESOL, not writing studies, said she "did not necessarily need this FLC to understand what students of color have to deal with" but that she wanted "pedagogical insight" and "theoretical scaffolding" to inform her classroom practice. In the FLC, however, Sheila disengaged from critical conversations about pedagogy and missed opportunities to consider her own assumptions about teaching writing.

To point, though she stated that her aim was to foster in students a "Black consciousness," her approaches relied upon assimilationist theories of literacy. She wrote:

> To have grammar skills – to understand why the Standard functions the way it does and culturally dominates in our society – means having access to communicative prowess that can pave the way for ef-

> fective and strategic code switching. The reality is that we, people of color, face judgment when our language deviates from the Standard.

Sheila's arguments echo existing reasoning in writing studies, but "arguments about ethical imperatives to teach dominant white discourses to all students because we allegedly know what is good for them" are incomplete because it takes more than "dominant Englishes… to be successful in our world" ("Racism" 142). As April Baker-Bell explains, "insisting that Black students code-switch to avoid discrimination… essentially penalizes Black students for the existence of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism" (21). Moreover, Sheila's framing—"why the Standard functions the way it does"—suggests that there is an intrinsic value to a standardized form of English rather than a value associated with the bodies that use such forms. It also suggests that there is a single standard English, a supposition with which even linguists disagree. Of course, Sheila's concerns are legitimate ones, likely informed by her own experiences, and they have been addressed in writing studies scholarship informed by Black cultural frameworks (Baker-Bell; Young et al.), some of which I shared with participants.

Unlike Sheila, Alison was vocal and enthusiastic about challenging standardized English. Alison and I had spoken many times about inclusive language pedagogies since I'd been hired, only weeks earlier, to direct the writing center, where she and Steve were employed and where Liz and Lisa, despite their tutoring experience, were not. The surprising dynamic in the FLC–a white-privileged participant advocating for an ostensibly antiracist practice a Black participant resisted–suggests that the echoes by Liz, Lisa, and tasha may have been expressions of allyship against whiteness, and, arguably, a colleague they perceived as privileged racially and institutionally.

As Alison's voice grew louder, Sheila's eyes grew wider and her lips tightened. Steve looked down at the conference table. Lisa was shaking her head. I sat still, opening my mouth to speak then closing it again. I was distracted by three thoughts looping through my mind: First, the knowledge that Liz and Lisa had not been hired by the previous writing center director in part because of their resistance to contemporary antiracist writing instruction, a personnel matter I was not authorized to share; second, my nagging, discomforting conviction that an antiracist writing center shouldn't have zero Black tutors on staff; and third, a sneaking sense that my multiple roles–FLC facilitator, writing center director, researcher–were quickly creating conflicts of interest.

Both Sheila and Alison left the meeting frustrated. Alison later reflected: "I am officially exhausted of surrounding myself with educators that have varying levels of knowledge and experience." Sheila said she was "determined to continue" using the same approach to language in her writing classes. Though

she expressed interest in having critical discussions with her students, her resistance to the FLC, however warranted, the uncritical support she received from colleagues she saw as allies, and my failure to push her further may have prevented her from engaging in critical discussions herself.

Discussion: Pseudocommunity in Context

The FLC's shortcomings were acknowledged in participants' reflections, with multiple participants reporting they appreciated the materials and activities but did not enjoy, and generally felt discomfort, in group meetings. Alison said that, unlike other departmental initiatives, "this was built on an equitable foundation," citing stipends and ongoing support from me as facilitator, but she found reflective writing and one-on-one conversations more productive than meetings. Participants reported gathering "ideas for how to develop and revise [their] current syllabus, policies, grading, and assignments;" learning "how theory relates to the composition classroom" and "how systemic racism exists within" composition; and interrogating their "personal blindspots" and "previously held convictions about how [they] should teach and evaluate writing." I'd hoped the FLC would be a more substantive opportunity to study antiracist pedagogy than a single workshop. To some extent, and on an individual basis, it was.

The pseudocommunity that formed, however, and my failure to recognize and respond to its formation, prevented deeper engagement among participants. The FLC model requires collaboration, but in pseudocommunity, "there is no authentic sense of shared communal space but only individuals interacting with other individuals" (Grossman et al.). Collaboration also requires trust and hope for change; both were in short supply among South Lake's FYC instructors. Small, informal collaborations can potentially serve as support networks for faculty in precarious positions (Garcia et al.; Kahn and Lynch-Biniek), but in the writing program, backstage gossip and denigration had instead created an environment faculty members described as "toxic" ("Working"). I would soon experience that toxicity personally, much of it in the form of antisemitism ("Antiracism"). In interviews, multiple FLC participants admitted they'd had reservations about who would be in the group. Lucky said he had no trust in the department, Alison and Sheila said their experiences left them "exhausted," and Steve said he hoped to take what he learned "somewhere else, doing something else."

Challenging pseudocommunity requires surfacing "conflicts that [have] long simmered underground" and explicit discussion of status differences, hurt feelings, and how the group functions (Grossman et al.), actions verboten in pseudocommunity. White norms instead perpetuate sidebar conversations, prevent transparency, limit the efficacy of even initiatives designed with equity

in mind, and silence those who speak out. As Sheila lamented, "it isn't productive to keep speaking the same words we speak all the time when those we are speaking to are not willing to hear." Now, I can't help but wonder if some FLC participants were looking for an advocate more than they were looking for professional development. Of course, antiracist FPD really ought to be both.

Given my positioning and positionality in the program, I was ill-informed of the department's history and dynamics and ill-prepared to advocate for my colleagues—or, as I later discovered, myself—in meaningful ways. In that regard, the limitations of this FLC are reflective of my failures as facilitator: I should have known more about the department. I should have considered how participants' positionalities within the institution and in relation to one another might have complicated their willingness to move beyond what some participants noted were "surface interactions" and "empty platitudes." I should have spent more time establishing community norms and returned to them throughout the year. I should have recognized my own complicity in whiteness-at-work and the ways that I, regardless of intention, helped maintain the pseudocommunity of the FLC.

As facilitator, I made an assumption many white-privileged people make in professional spaces: I had acted as though participants–and program faculty more broadly–were "already a community that shares values and common beliefs" (Grossman et al. 962) where antiracism was concerned, an assumption that was naïve, erroneous, and oblivious of my own exploitation and marginalization ("Antiracism"). I should have recognized that, despite financial support and administrative encouragement for the FLC, antiracist work in South Lake's writing program was being treated "as a series of tools, strategies, and compliance tasks versus a whole-person, whole-system change process linked to culture, identity, and healing" (Dugan 35).

FLCs work best as part of a broader community of practice alongside "mini-conferences, book clubs, speaker series, peer class visits and observations, and roundtable discussions" to encourage participation from more members of the community (Costino 122). Equity work in particular requires "a holistic approach to change" (Dugan 35). The South Lake writing program had been mired for decades in problems, yet, in the absence of other efforts, the work of addressing inequity had fallen to a small cohort of instructors and to me, a marginalized yet white-privileged tenure-track faculty member new to the department and largely ignorant of its preexisting dynamics. Sometimes antiracist efforts fail because they are doomed to fail from inception.

Conclusion and Implications

Natasha N. Jones, Laura Gonzales, and Angela M. Haas offer criteria to characterize antiracist work in writing studies: It must be coalitional, reflexive,

pro-Black, intersectional, iterative, sustainable, aware of power dynamics, reliant not upon the labor of Black people but on "those with more privilege and power," and, ultimately, transformative, meaning it must "permeate every aspect of the work of the organization, department, or program" (33). FPD is only one part of that work, but a part that has been undertheorized in antiracist writing studies scholarship. In my own work, I have argued that explicit discussion of contextually situated racial dynamics is necessary, no matter how uncomfortable (*Teaching*), and that all antiracist work requires risk ("Antiracism").

Condon reminds us that "[s]ome significant element of the work of antiracism is to be a student, a researcher of failure" (117). So I have offered this essay as, in part, a reflection on failure in hopes my experiences will help others interested in similar work. As this research demonstrates, implementing antiracist writing FPD is a complex endeavor that must account for not only theory and practice, but also the interpersonal dynamics of the writing program itself. Like the equity traps Dugan describes, pseudocommunity is another way "the system has set us up for false starts" (39). Pseudocommunity perpetuates and normalizes inequity while preventing productive critique. Without recognition of—and willingness to change—its characteristic behaviors and discourses, transforming a pseudocommunity into a more authentic collaborative space is impossible.

To move forward, then, we must make legible (Guinier) the invisible yet salient pseudocommunity dynamics that maintain inequality in writing programs like the one at South Lake. The deeply ingrained white norms of pseudocommunity and the veneer of niceness and collegiality that characterizes its frontstage spaces make it difficult to recognize the whiteness-at-work within. Those who do question its norms may be reluctant to speak up, given that pseudocommunities suppress the expression of disagreement (Whitelaw) and pose risks for members who venture outside the roles they have been "authorized" to perform (Grossman et al. 964), risks that are greater for educators of color and the non-tenure-track majority of composition instructors.

These contextual silences and the power dynamics and hierarchies of risk that contribute to them illuminate why, in my view, research is so integral to ensuring successful antiracist FPD. Program assessment can only show so much, intertwined as it is with program funding and institutional policies and practices regarding instructor evaluation and retention. After all, it is very difficult to form a real community that honors honesty and outspokenness, two qualities I believe would do wonders at bridging the frontstage and backstage, when one's employment may be contingent upon what they say or don't say in a particular institutional setting.

It is imperative, therefore, that educators with the relative, if limited, influence of tenure-track faculty and program administrators, particularly those who are white, consider the interpersonal dynamics of their unique educational spaces when creating programming focused on antiracist pedagogy. WPAs must realistically account for how programmatic contexts might impact participants' expectations, interactions, and experiences for professional development. Facilitators and participants with privileges of rank or identity must be reflexive and critical of the roles they play in programmatic dynamics and acknowledge the hierarchical benefits afforded to them. And we must all work, collaboratively, and within and across institutions, toward explicitly naming and actively dismantling the white discourses, behaviors, and ideologies that perpetuate racism and white supremacy rather than allow our interrogations thereof to be relegated to hallway conversations and individual scholarly endeavors such as this.

Notes

1. Faculty demographic information is readily available via the university website.
2. tasha prefers the lowercase, a la bell hooks.
3. All participants self-identified racially and ethnically.

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