

Article

New Tropes for Old: Changing the Conversation in Canadian Writing Centres

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Whitely writing centers, we think, participate in the academy's racial project of defining and containing racial Otherness within acceptable, normative limits, thus preserving white advantage and privilege.

(Faison & Condon, 2022, p. 9)

Listening emerged in the crux of incoherencies and disjunctions.

(Garcia, 2017, p. 30)

Abstract

Many of the celebrated and generative tropes that defined the work and self-image of American writing centres—tropes like Stephen North's "fix-it shop in the basement," Andrea Lunsford's "Burkean Parlour," and Kenneth Bruffee's "conversation of mankind"—also helped create and affirm an apparent scholarly and pedagogic consensus about writing centre praxis in the Canadian context. I examine the way such tropes imagine our practices—dialogical guidance, collaborative learning, scaffolding, and relationship-building—and the bodies and minds that are enacting them. Using sonnets, narrative, and reflection to propose alternative tropes, I explore how the entry of othered bodies and minds, new perspectives, and marginalized cultures into the writing centre world might change the way we relate to each other and the way we re-imagine our collectivity.

We're Seeing Practitioners of Colour in Writing Centre Spaces...

Over the last two decades, writing centres in North America have become spaces for consciousness-raising. Especially in the United States, interest in racial and linguistic justice as an aspect of writing centre work has resulted in new scholarship that tracks how the discipline has both changed and resisted change (Faison & Condon, 2022; Green, 2018; Greenfield, 2019; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Lee, 2019). Consciousness-raising and anti-oppressive pedagogic frameworks have also meant that

voices once categorically excluded from the conversation are more audible, as witness keynote addresses delivered at annual conferences by Black, Indigenous, and racialized practitioners.¹ This last development holds true for the Canadian writing centre field as well.

While scholars like Graves and Graves (2006) and Clary-Lemon (2009) have produced genealogical studies of Canadian writing *programs*, historiographic work as well as sustained (meta)disciplinary critique on Canadian writing *centres* remains to be undertaken. Certainly, it remains to be brought up to date, especially if *updating* implies the tracking and contextualization of developments in epistemic frameworks, pedagogic approaches, and academic power relations. Procter (2011) observed over a decade ago that “[p]ublished discussions of Canadian writing centres have tended to focus on anxieties about positioning” (p. 415), and to some degree, recent attempts to provide an overview replicate these preoccupations. Centres have been enumerated and discussed in terms of their location, longevity, fragility, funding models, and scholarly affiliations (Bromley, 2017; Giltrow, 2016; Hotson, 2021; Paré, 2017), but not in terms of their ideological positioning, their adoption (or not) of transgressive pedagogies, or their stances on linguisticism, racism, white supremacy, and disability.

There are hopeful signs that antiracist consciousness-raising has made a difference in the Canadian writing centre community, as it has in the United States. The changing language in the successive Calls for Proposals on the Conferences webpage of the Canadian Writing Centre Association/association canadienne des centres de rédaction (CWCA/ACCR), and the changing themes reflected in the program details, between 2015 and 2023, tell a story of changes in the self-perception of writing centre practitioners, and a growing acceptance of the idea that educational and linguistic justice should be part of the mandate of writing centres (CWCA/ACCR, Past Conferences). In 2021, for the first time (to my knowledge), CWCA/ACCR consciously inducted racialized members into its Board, created a conference registration fee structure that recognized lack of educational access owing to racialization, saw the creation of a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) caucus within its membership, and invited this caucus to critique and contribute to an anti-racism statement that a group of (white) members was composing (CWCA/ACCR, 2022).

...But Is the Conversation Changing?

If such changes are to be more than a nine-day wonder, it is not enough that the writing centre community merely practice a sort of *laissez faire* “inclusivity.” It is important that the terms of participation be rewritten. Are the identities and ideas of BIPOC members simply merging without

disturbance into an existing pedagogic and epistemic consensus, or will they transform the conversations in and about writing centres? What practitioners may find disconcerting, even when braced for the unexpected, is that truly changing the conversation may lead to changes in zones that have so far been considered sacrosanct: in elements of praxis that are perceived as neutral “technique,” in understandings of what is allowed and what is taboo during tutoring sessions, in conceptions of the relationship—e.g., of “ownership”—between text or speech and writer or speaker, and in tropes that capture all of the above. It is the last subject that I take up in this article.

Why focus on tropes? In their classic work on metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that as well as giving us a means of “conceptualizing a preexisting reality,” metaphors can “create a reality” (p. 163). Metaphors can “sanction action, justify inferences, and help us set goals” (p. 161). Elaborating on Lakoff and Johnson’s argument that in some sense we *live* by tropes that filter, organize, make sense of, and create our reality, Charteris-Black (2009) argues that metaphor is “one of a number of linguistic, cognitive and symbolic resources employed by ... leaders for communicating ideology” because it helps establish “a shared view [as] ... a group engages in a process of self legitimization through which it aspires to power” (p. 100).² Applying this idea to writing centre practitioners, we might reasonably argue that they were ideologically integrated into a community of practice in part by foundational metaphors or tropes.

Many of the celebrated and generative tropes that defined the work and disciplinary identity of American writing centres—tropes like Stephen North’s (undesirable) “fix-it shop in the basement,” Kenneth Bruffee’s (desirable) “conversation of mankind,” and Andrea Lunsford’s (desirable) “Burkean Parlour”—have also been influential in the self-definition of Canadian writing centres.³ Such tropes were among the means by which an apparent consensus about writing centre people and praxis was forged and affirmed in the Canadian context, as it was in the United States. But the tropes that scaffolded the self-understanding and self-legitimization of writing centre practitioners in the United States were conjured into being by those select few who had the power to define this academic territory, to invent its shared purposes, to imagine its community, and to carve out its space within the domain of higher education. As racialized writing centre practitioners and their allies began to address the quietly smouldering issues of systemic racism and linguicism in their spaces and discourses, it became clear that the disciplinary consensus was something of an illusion. It never really included the contributions and approaches of Indigenous, Black, racialized, working-class, and disabled practitioners, or of others who were on the margins of academic culture as defined in white, cis-hetero, middle-class, and able-bodied terms. Unsurprisingly, just as writing centre discourses and

practices in American post-secondary institutions, defined over several decades by white practitioners (Bouquet, 1999; Lerner 2009), reflect white values, privilege, and *habitus* (Faison & Condon, 2022; Garcia, 2017; Inoue, 2016; Lee, 2019; Valles et al., 2017), so also do the tropes that capture how we embody and enact writing centre goals, positionalities, and ideological investments.⁴

The Founding Tropes: So White, So Powerful

Both in Canada and in the United States, a key strand in writing centre studies invokes and offers commentary on already definitive disciplinary self-understandings (Boquet, 1999; Boquet & Lerner, 2008; Grutsch-McKinney, 2013). At times, it seems as if the work of figuratively gathering writing centre practitioners into an imagined community has been completed once and for all by the field's founding (white) parents. The tropes that do this work of establishing the *being* of a community can be seen as falling under Lakoff and Johnson's category of "ontological metaphors," which capture the "fundamental values of a culture" (1980, p. 30). Given the ontological expansiveness (Sullivan, 2019) of white culture and its privileged representatives, these tropes can be overwhelmingly powerful, literally *colonizing* the discipline.

As a bicultural and multilingual woman who emigrated twenty-two years ago from India, a once-colonized nation, to become a settler in Canada, a country built on the foundations of extractive capitalism, colonialism, and racism, *and* as a relative "newcomer" to the field, I am acutely conscious of the lack of space for my perspectives and identity within the hegemonic self-understandings generated by ontological writing centre tropes. But I am equally conscious that community-defining tropes need to be revised, renewed, or invented anew if the praxis of newcomers is to be honoured and welcomed for the intellectual and cultural growth it represents. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) remark, "cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphors and the loss of old ones" (p. 165). If we want to reimagine how we come together as practitioners, it seems important for new practitioners to claim the right to flex, reinterpret, and critique established tropes or to generate new tropes that better capture the current state of the discipline.

In this article, then, I examine some germinal tropes for writing centre work in light of my experiences as a racialized tutor and administrator. I explore how the entry of othered bodies and marginalized cultures into the writing centre world might change the way we relate to each other and the way we imagine—and perhaps re-imagine—our collectivity. Arguing that familiar writing centre practices—dialogical guidance, collaborative learning, scaffolding, and relationship-

building—may all look a little different, depending on the identities of those who are doing these things, I offer and elaborate on revised or alternative tropes that capture my own reality, as follows:

Foundational writing centre trope	Alternative writing centre trope
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A warm, coffee-scented space of collaboration (see Grutsch McKinney, 2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An entry point into conflict (over identities, pedagogies, linguistic and discursive priorities, and so on)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Burkean parlour buzzing with conversation (Lunsford, 1991) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place of conversations interrupted by awareness of identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Above all, NOT a remedial fix-it shop (see North, 1984) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fix-it shop where some carefully thought-out editing happens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A space where writers “own” their writing, where fully-formed (westernized?) individual(ist)selves generate “original” ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A theatrical opportunity that invites writers with diverse identities to <i>perform</i> the writing conventions established by North American universities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A space of neutrality towards subject instructors’ ideological investments or assignment prompts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A protest march—a space for activism against linguisticism and racism, even against reductive assignment prompts

Resisting the current empirical thrust of writing centre studies, I also draw on my own disciplinary affiliation with English studies and on my identity as a creative writer to offer these tropes in the form of story, vignette, and sonnet. I hope, without presuming identical experiences, that what I say will prove resonant for other equity-seeking denizens of the writing centre world, with whom I stand in solidarity: writers and consultants who identify as Black, Indigenous, racialized, Queer, trans, or as having a disability, and those who want to support equity work in this domain.

Many writing centre practitioners have affirmed the value of counterstory as a vehicle of scholarly activism (Martinez, 2014; Faison & Condon, 2022). I therefore begin the next section with a story that

captures what working in the writing centre can feel like for raciolinguistically minoritized tutors and administrators.

Alternative Trope 1: The Writing Centre as Doorway to Conflict

Each year, when I designed the tutor preparation modules at the writing centre I oversaw, I would sit down and think about my own tutoring practice. A couple of years ago, getting ready to discuss the pacing of tutoring sessions, I was making notes:

- the session should proceed at a relaxed, not stress-inducing, pace (check);
- the tutor should be attentive to the writer's verbal or body language cues to sense how comfortable the pace was for them (check);
- the tutor could slow down or go a little faster depending on what she observed—
- *Oh, but wait*, I said to myself. There were many sessions in which I had *not* been practicing what I was about to preach to my incoming colleagues about pacing. I had to admit that I often drove the tutoring session faster than the tutee was entirely comfortable with.

To explain this, I have to reference the moment that all too many BIPOC writing centre practitioners have encountered: that moment when a tutee learns that the appointment lottery has paired them up with a non-white tutor (An, 2023; Green, 2018; Huo, 2020; Lee, 2019; Natarajan & Morley, 2020). If we understand “race” as a phenomenon that is constantly re-created, rather than as pre-existing our relationships, this moment, for Brown and Black staff in the writing centre, is pre-eminently a moment of racialization. For example, An (2023) recalls a student who asked her, right away, “Do you even know what you are doing?” Lee (2019) records how the Black writing centre consultants she interviewed in the course of her research “share multiple ‘are you my consultant?’ experiences, where they describe a non-Black consultee questioning their ability to help or guide them by asking the same question” (p. 135). And Green (2018) remarks, “I’ve had students walk up to me and say, ‘I’ve never seen a writing centre person look like you do this work’” (p. 19). Like these practitioners caught in the moment of racialization at the writing centre, enacting the rituals of writing centre hospitality, I experience myself as a subject, present to myself, but also as objectified by the visitor’s gaze. Or sometimes by the lack of it: as Huo documents, the moment is often typified by a looking away, an avoidance of eye-contact (2020, p. 120). I am reminded of my appearance, my unruly hair, and the colour of my skin. I know that my accent, as I greet the writer, is causing cognitive dissonance—in her ear, it has no association with competence.

Trapped in the doorway at the writing centre

“I was going to work with Nicole,” you say,
Scanning the room, you’re not looking at me.
So I smile, “Nicole has no shifts today,”
And I wait for the next step; will you flee,

Or will you stay to hear my usual greeting?
It may come out sounding a little dull,
Because your distrust, however fleeting,
Drains my warmth, makes me mechanical.

Like a Janus standing in my self’s doorway
I see within my house the gifts I could share.
But you decide to come some other day.
My outside-looking head becomes aware

That the gifts will stay in the wrapping they’re in
The brown, brown paper of my immigrant skin.

So, a doorway moment, a double consciousness moment. As subject, I know my own competencies as a tutor and feel secure in my years of experience; as the object of the writer’s distrustful gaze, I feel inadequate. Dismay (sometimes mild, sometimes sharp and perceptible) and distrust in response to racialized instructors occurs in both white and non-white writing centre clients, as Zhao (2017) and Huo (2020) document.

I have digressed from the question of pacing. I hope the digression will be read as symptomatic: it reflects the kind of distraction that often removes a racialized practitioner’s focus from the work at hand to something that seems extraneous yet impossible to avoid because of embodiment. But to return to the question of why I adopt a stressful (and probably stress-inducing) pace: let’s say the writer decides not to wait for Nicole or Nate, and let’s say we settle down to the session. After a quick exchange of pronouns and pleasantries, I begin, almost compulsively, to drive the session towards the point, perhaps 15 or 20 minutes in, when the writer can recognize beyond doubt that they are

deriving significant benefits, that *this time spent with me is not wasted time*. The more skepticism the writer displays, the more the pacing is dictated by the pressure to offer value, rather than by the comfort of the writer.

As I scan the writer's text efficiently, asking the writer questions and engaging them in discussion, I watch them for signs that they are finding my accent incomprehensible. Not that I think my accent is incomprehensible; far from it. But I do know that many white Canadian students can experience what Kang, Rubin, and Lindemann (2015) call perceptual distortion, especially if they have not been exposed to multilingual teachers in their primary and secondary education. Researching attitudes to International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) in American universities, Kang and Rubin note that "students' linguistic stereotyping plays a powerful role adversely affecting their comprehension of ITAs over and above legitimate issues of ITA oral proficiency [Thus] when listeners expect to hear unintelligible English, they very likely will hear that speech as unintelligible" (2015, p. 684).

In compensation, then, partly for uncomfortable pacing, and partly for potential difficulties with my accent, I announce that I am going to scribe during the session. At the end of the session, I offer the writer detailed and carefully arranged notes that, on a good day, might cover our entire discussion about global and higher-order concerns. I also offer lavish motivational scaffolding throughout the session, partly to soften the writer's attitudinal barriers, but partly in hope of relaxing them into offering me some affirmation in return. There is a good deal of talk in writing centre scholarship about feedback to the writer, but not much on how identity can affect feedback from the writer to the tutor. When writers' feedback is hard to parse, it can reinforce tutors' feelings of outsiderhood, as I suggest in the next section.

Alternative Trope 2: The Writing Centre as Burkean Parlour Messed up by Newcomers

I use Andrea Lunsford's (1991) beautifully crafted and germinal essay "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" as a text in my tutor instruction course. Lunsford identifies three tropes to capture three "stages" of writing centre history and praxis: the storehouse, which she describes as "[an] information station ... prescribing and handing out skills and strategies to individual learners" (p. 4); the garret, which is "informed by a deep-seated belief in individual 'genius'" (p. 4), and the Burkean parlour, where collaborative functioning can "chang[e] the face of higher education" (p. 9). The Burkean parlour is the trope that Lunsford feels most sympathetic to, since to her mind it

captures the essentially dialogic, self-reflexive, and democratic environment of the reimagined writing centre.

Let me pause a moment to consider this metaphor of the parlour. As the American philosopher of rhetoric Kenneth Burke uses it, the trope, read superficially, expresses a certain elasticity, and seems to allow space for dialectic, for adaptation, for natural change as changes in social history bring new people into the space. Imagine, Burke says, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1957); imagine

that you enter a parlour. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. (p. 110)

But let's dig a little deeper. The "parlour," etymological cousin to the French "parler," to speak, was a feature of American domestic architecture. In its heyday—the 19th century—it was a space for receiving visitors, for formality, conversation, and music; an interestingly liminal space, often presided over by women, that showcased genteel taste in furniture, polite children, antiques, and artefacts brought back from travels. That maintenance of the parlour ethos required wealth as well as gentility is borne out by the charming description in Lillian Hart Tryon's (1915) nostalgic reverie on the parlour in her book of essays titled *Speaking of Home*. In her grandmother's time, she writes, parlours "were stiff and stately rooms" (p. 33), but by the turn of the 19th century, America was "becoming a parlorless nation" because of the "accidental limitations of space and of service in modern life" (p. 45). By Burke's time, it had been replaced, architecturally, ideologically, and nomenclaturally, by the sitting room and the living room, and one wonders why, except for that tip of the hat to the French verb, Burke invoked it in the middle of the twentieth century.

The 19th century parlour was preeminently a space where etiquette was not to be lightly breached. I imagine that it was a very white space, the kind of space where Black or Brown folk might have been permitted to enter only briefly, carrying the tea tray in silence (i.e., providing the "service" whose disappearance Tryon was lamenting). A place where white readers might have got together in the 1860s to discuss the historical acumen and the admirable prose style of Thomas Macaulay, who commanded an immense American audience (Hook, 1975)—the same Macaulay who said, in his famous Minute of 1835, that

the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are moreover so poor and rude that... it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them... [T]he intellectual improvement of those classes of ... people who have the means of pursuing higher studies can at present be effected only by means of some language not vernacular amongst them. (par. 8)

The same Macaulay whose contempt for Indian languages as well as for Arabic and Sanskrit led to the promotion of English education in India, which in turn, ironically, produced people like me.

So, I have to ask myself: did Burke really imagine someone like me in the parlour? Did the original begetter of Burke's metaphor, the conservative British philosopher Michael Oakeshott? Oakeshott's trope is of a meta-conversation, what he calls the "conversation of mankind," a phrase that will be familiar to writing centre practitioners from Kenneth Bruffee's (1984) use of it in the context of peer tutoring. Oakeshott imagines that this conversation begins in "the primeval forest," but a few paragraphs into his metaphor he begins to oppose the phrase "civilized man" to "the barbarian" (1962, p. 199), revealing his own irreducibly colonial perspective. When I insist on speaking of race in the writing centre, I feel like someone who has made a rude noise or told a scatological joke; I feel interpellated as the opposite of "civilized man."

So did Lunsford, when she borrowed this charming trope, imagine someone like me in the writing centre?

Sorry, Andrea, I can't

Imagine yourself, says Burke, entering
A parlour where people, for hours and years
Have been talking their language, centering
Themselves, their thoughts, their triumphs, their fears;

Imagine china and trinkets from exotic places
Imagine chintz and overstuffed chaises
Complicated taboos, odd airs and graces,
Unending hum of sociable spaces.

But what if you enter and realize
That try as you might, you can't find your beat,

You don't know those themes that they won't reprise,
You feel too gauche to occupy a seat—

You put in your oar but you can't pull it through
The mud of identity you've tracked in with you.

In seeing the writing centre as essentially a locus for collaboration, Lunsford remarks that a collaborative environment “rejects traditional hierarchies” (1991, p. 95). It is worth noting that when the racialized tutor sits down to a session, hierarchy is already disrupted by student distrust and discomfort (An, 2023; Huo, 2020). When a racialized administrator makes changes that serve antiracism, the chain of authority is often already broken by their staff's suspicion and hostility. Sometimes, it is easier for a white administrator to enact antiracism; racialized administrators are all too familiar with the experience of being disliked for things they do that are considered *niche*. For racialized staff, neither of these de-hierarchizing effects moves the centre towards collaborativeness; what does is the emotionally draining labour of convincing writers and staff that no hostility is intended, that the discomforts of a racially mixed environment will pass. To the extent that writing centres are parlours to this day, subaltern voices within their confines are still jarring, still disruptive, and subaltern bodies and manners and doings are still unacceptable. Villanueva (1999) powerfully recounts a racialized woman saying during a meeting in his institution that there is a “difference between speaking and being heard, that if one is constantly speaking but is never heard, never truly heard, there is, in effect, silence, a silencing” (p. 653).

In a 2017 survey on diversity among (North American) writing centre administrators, Valles, Babcock, and Jackson found that nearly 97% were native speakers of English, or native but bilingual, and only 1.6 % were non-native speakers. 91.3% of the writing centre administrators were white, 2.9% were Black, 1.6 % were Hispanic, 3.9% were multiracial, and only one of the 313 respondents identified as Asian. In short, the writing centre has traditionally been a very white space, arising from, and feeding into, the conflation of whiteness with linguistic and pedagogic competence. Given this, though I have been thinking for quite a while about what writing centre critical pedagogy might look like from my point of view, I still hesitate to fold elements like straightforward editing (as I note in the next section) into the anti-oppressive tutor preparation pedagogy at my own institution. I am still not sure the parlour is an ethos where what I have to say will be *truly heard*.

Alternative Trope 3: The Writing Centre as Fix-It Shop

During a CWCA/ACCR BIPOC caucus discussion, some racialized consultants and administrators wondered how it helps multilingual writers with whom they work to be told that writing centres encourage their unique code-meshing or translanguaging abilities, when their instructors expect conformity to Standard Academic English (SAE). In the Canadian context, therefore, where I do not yet see a significant number of professors across the disciplines taking critiques of linguistic racism seriously, I see the need for a double movement: an institution-facing one that advocates for multiple vernaculars, especially Black Language (Baker-Bell, 2020) and Global Englishes (Canagarajah, 2013; Kachru, 1986; Pennycook, 2017), and for code-meshing (Young, 2011); and a writer-facing one that supports writers as they attempt to present documents that approximate to SAE. This puts me in mind of something else I do when I am scribing during a tutoring session. I make editorial suggestions.

One of the most persistent and entrenched of ontological writing centre metaphors—one that I fully bought into when I began doing writing centre work in 2003—is Stephen North’s (1984) *repudiation* of the writing centre as a “fix-it shop” (p. 435) or a “proofreading-shop-in-the-basement” (p. 444). Mobilizing the value of cerebral labour over manual work, setting up “conversation” at the heart of writing centre practice (“our talk in all its forms,” p. 443), spatializing writing centre work as a movement out of the remedial “basement” and implying that the worth of practitioners ought to earn them space on a higher, more respectable disciplinary floor, North’s essay provided a framework for tutoring that worked through *rejection* of the vividly evoked negative model.

Tracking the massive impact of North’s “Idea of a Writing Center” on practitioners through the shadow it casts across *Writing Center Journal* citations, Boquet and Lerner (2008) observe that North “issued a declaration, throwing down the gauntlet, and defining a field” (p.170). Perhaps because of North’s position as a leader in the field and a founding editor, along with Lil Brannon, of *The Writing Center Journal*, many practitioners took this to be a comprehensive and definitive framework rather than a productive but tendentious and crotchety response to English Department snobbery about writing instruction of the kind that was happening in North’s writing centre. The result: editing is still frowned upon or happens *sub rosa* at the writing centre.

Unauthorized editing at the writing centre

Pre-empting the student's forbidden ask,
Before she can say the proofreading word,
Tutors were taught to repudiate the task.
We're not a fix-it shop, haven't you heard,

Authorship boundaries must never be blurred.
When each small slip makes a nick in her grade,
Is it, after all, really so absurd
That the student asks for editing aid?

I wasn't around when the rule was made
That Socratic talk must be what we do;
That cleaning up grammar is not allowed.

Though editing is a tool of my trade
I don't teach it to those who join the crew.
I do it, I just don't say it out loud.

Tutors at most writing centres are taught to receive the proofreading request with a rejection (oh no, we don't edit here) and a redirection (but we do discuss your argument, so come right on in!). Why is editing considered so peripheral to the important work of writing centres? First, because it is considered the pedagogically lazy alternative. And indeed, if editorial suggestions are the only content of a session, then the work may be too mechanical, too focused on micro-issues, to be productive. In my sessions with multilingual writers, any proofreading work I do is incidental and quick ("you need a parallel comma here; this noun needs a definite article, not an indefinite one" and so on). It happens in the interstices of the higher-order discussions that writing centres privilege. Some of the work is pedagogic—where I perceive patterns of error, I begin to teach the rule. I teach the rules until I perceive that the writer has reached the point of cognitive saturation. But where the error is random, when it is usage or idiom that dictates the correction, rather than a teachable rule, and when we have crossed that point of fatigue, I simply suggest the correct spelling or punctuation

or rephrasing. I know this benefits multilingual students in a practical way; even with excellent ideas, they are penalized for non-standard usages, and are marked down. Yet I have not gotten around to recommending this practice as the norm for tutors in my institution.

Why does this feel like a confession, like a flirtation with the illicit? Let me go back to Lunsford's garret, the place of individual text-production. The way we conceptualize the act of writing still retains elements of the solitary figure fiercely pouring their self out in language. Strip the image of the romantic glow of lamplight, and juxtapose with it the hoary writing centre chestnut that tutors must allow writers to retain *ownership* of their texts, and what we have, I propose, is a model of text production within the framework of possessive individualism (Inoue, 2019; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Shen, 1987). This is the second and more important reason why we don't edit.

Let me try to unpack this a little. The Canadian political philosopher C.B. Macpherson used the phrase "possessive individualism" to describe "a form of individualism arising in the seventeenth-century in which the individual is 'seen as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them'" (Macpherson, 1962, p.3). The attributes the individual possesses include "intelligence; cognitive capacities such as memory; the ability to process information; and such personality characteristics as desires and wants" (MacPherson, 1962, p. 3).

Extending the concept of possessive individualism to the writing economy, I would argue that property in oneself is also property in one's text. The sovereign subject owns their words, down to syntax and diction. The labour of the writer is their possession. Insofar as they mix it with language and cultivate their text, the text is theirs. The labour of the tutor is his possession; if he mixes some of his labour—by editing, for instance—with the writer's text, then, embarrassingly and illicitly, a piece of the text becomes his. Universities are places where students cultivate their future earning power, and since competition is moralized in capitalist thinking, any intervention in that quotient of earning power, anything that equalizes advantage rather than heightens competition, becomes morally suspect. Thus SAE, a form of linguistic expression already possessed by white middle-class writers, is rewarded; and a conception of ownership stands in the way of tutor intervention in the mechanics of writing. Thus, again, while we often feel the need to disavow the tutor's authority, and to initiate a conscious sharing of power with the writer, we continue to ignore, deflect, or redirect the most basic of the requests that many students make, as Moussu (2013), Kim (2018), and others have pointed out—the request for proofreading of the text they have produced. And this in the academic setting, where it is considered quite normal for scholars to have their work proofread by others prior to publication.

Possessive individualism, in Macpherson's (1962) view, creates and sustains market relations. When we exhort tutors to never succumb to the temptation to pick up a pen and edit, never to suggest a word that did not emerge from the head of the writer, what we are afraid of disturbing is precisely the free market. Students are supposed to be able to cash in on their language only as far as they have acquired skill, and no further. Market relations define everything by exchange value. People are buyers, sellers or cultivators of property. The last point is significant. Locke, one of the political philosophers Macpherson parsed, mooted the idea that people could own property insofar as they mixed their labour with it; in the case of land, for instance, Locke argued that since white settlers in North America had the means to make the land fruitful, they had the right to appropriate it for private ownership.

Bhandar (2018) argues, "Being an owner and having the capacity to appropriate have long been considered prerequisites for attaining the status of a proper subject of modern law, a fully individuated citizen subject" (p. 5). The moralizing of individual effort, the belief that we are helping the development of sovereign subjects with individual responsibility, allows us not to notice the hidden racism of this refusal to get involved in editing. But race and property, especially in colonial contexts, come into being as inextricably intertwined. Tracking the ways in which writing assessment tends to reproduce hegemonic values and white supremacy, and citing Lipsitz, Inoue (2019) remarks that "one might see a strong link between white supremacy and the primacy of exchange value in all markets, including the writing classroom, where the unit of exchange is grades and where grades are based on a white racial standard" (p. 376).

Though we know that students are writing at least partly for grades, we disavow transactional approaches to writing when we imagine the writer as expressing their "self" in writing, as I suggest in the next section.

Alternative Trope 4: The Writing Centre as Theatre

In writing centre literature, there is the implication that if the tutor does not respect the writer's ownership of their text, they are liable to violate the writer's selfhood. From my own pedagogic background, which I share with many multilingual students who come to our universities from outside Canada and the United States, this model of the relationship between writer and text magnifies a contingent connection into an essential one. We are in that old garret again, of individual text production; or perhaps we are in the parlour, where conversation, flowing between equals, dialogically elicits the writer's essential message. We are in North's ideal writing centre, where the

writer is the one worked on, not their text. If the writer is from a culture in which individual selves are not epistemologically salient, they must nevertheless be forcibly acculturated and inducted into the academy as a “critical thinker”; they may even have to acquire *a new self* (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Shen, 1987).

The beginner writer’s ownership of their text is heavily mediated by factors outside their control; often, because they are not happy with the error-filled text, or because they have produced text that an instructor has required of them, because the text is “on demand,” or because they are not writing in culturally familiar ways that actually “express” them, they are not invested in the text as fully-formed sovereign subjects. For a pedagogy that takes this contingent nature of the relationship between writer and text into account, I will propose the trope of the writing centre as theatre. I am proposing that we teach the performance of academic literacies without demanding deep belief in the values that such literacies piggyback on. To the extent that instructors in the North American context read student texts as emanations of fully formed selves, I am even proposing teaching *the performance of a self* rather than the insistence that the writer, no matter what their cultural background, present an authentic self that we can recognize *qua* self.

Here is a simple example of how this would work in practice. In explaining the thesis to a multilingual student from China, I might say that one way of looking at its placement in western writing culture is in terms of return on time spent in research. If the writer gathers the main argument together, thread by thread, through the body of the essay, and presents the knotted tassel of ideas at the end of the essay, as some Chinese students tell me they are taught, the reader must spend a great deal of time before they can arrive at the argument. When academic time is money, and a great deal of academic reading is pragmatically focused and directed by defined purposes, the reader wants to know quickly if an article is relevant to their limited purpose. If it is not, they want to stop reading. Hence the placement of the thesis: the argument can be quickly accessed at the start of the essay, or, better still, encapsulated in the abstract. There is no cultural superiority implied in placing it at the start. Can you, I say to the student, while you are writing essays here in Canada, play this game or put on this act of placing the thesis up front?

If identity is important, then performance is empowering, since academic role-playing will sidestep the demand often made on students from other cultures—the demand that they accept the cultural inferiority of their past learning practices. At a more complex level than in the thesis example, writing centre practitioners can cultivate the kind of “critical consciousness” that Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999), and Garcia (2017), among others, advocate for. If writers are ready for it, the

writing centre session can be a way-station *en route* to the deeper metacognitive awareness of the mechanisms of power in academic institutions and their discursive practices, and an examination of how each of us could fit into or resist that framework.

For racialized and multilingual tutors, tutoring with this kind of critical consciousness, this ability to create an affordance for the critical consciousness of tutees, this accompliceship (Green, 2018) in allowing writers their identities while at the same time supporting them in bringing their text closer to the demands of SAE, may feel like the most natural pedagogic mode. But it is a stance that all tutors can take, if they are willing to suspend their belief in English as conferring superior intellectual status, their belief in standard language ideology, their belief in models of selfhood embedded in certain types of language use, and their belief in text as property.

Being theatrical

Good job on the audition, you got the role.
Come in downstage left in a certain way
Speak your lines, remember, this is a play
You don't have to bare your immortal soul.

Here is the dressing room, here your dress hangs.
In the mirrored rectangles of harsh light
The tutors will help get your make-up on right
And some will follow you up to the wings

Fussing with the cloak that hangs anyhow,
Tweaking a tassel, teasing a stray curl,
Whispering, "Good luck! And break a leg, girl!"
And you're on, you can feel the lights and the heat
You speak your lines right, you take your bow,
Applause and the curtain, flowers at your feet.

Alternative Trope 5: The Writing Centre as Protest March

North's essay, in addition to reconfiguring the topography of the writing centre, launched the axiom so many writing centre practitioners have lived by, that we must "produce better writers, not better writing" (1984, p. 438), with its concomitant ideas that the writing process is essentially an individual/ist, monologic one, and that the tutor is a sort of helpful but neutral eavesdropper. Even as he fulminated on the pages of *College English* about his own colleagues, North (1984) insisted that the writing centre practitioners should refrain from commenting on the design of assignments, the demands made by course instructors on students, or any other aspect of the course instructor-student relationship. This has meant that writing centres often turn away students who are desperately trying to understand why they received low grades on assignments they had put a lot of effort into. In the writing centre I took over in 2017, a predecessor's rule was: "marked assignments will not be discussed." Using the trope of the protest march, I want to repudiate writing centre practitioner neutrality at two levels: the individual and the collective.

Individually, each of us can use our body and voice to stand against academic racism and white supremacy through writing centre praxis. If a student needs more active tutoring than the Socratic dialogue model allows, we can and should use our thumbs for actions other than twiddling during a conversational lull. For instance, we could actively reach into Lunsford's storehouse. Lunsford (1991) notes that her tropes are not arranged chronologically; the garret and the storehouse continue to be of value alongside the parlour. For beginner writers at university, the storehouse can function as a place for building academic literacies, and straightforward teaching may work better than dialogic inquiry with some students who are accustomed to teaching-based pedagogies. Thus, when I scribe for an inexperienced writer, and especially in cases where I am sure the writer's own language will not be welcomed by the instructor, I do more than merely transcribe the exact words in which they have responded to my question. Regardless of whether the writer is a native or a multilingual user of English, I take them with me into the storehouse of formal phrases, of transitions that maintain register, and word choices that sit well with SAE, writing them or typing them into the student's text. The writer's metacognition comes into play when it is explained to them how specific registers, usages, idioms, syntactical structures, and so on, fit in with academic cultural norms in the North American context. Clearly, while not all sessions should be about mere information sharing, my own distance from the conventions makes it one of the modes of tutoring I most frequently gravitate

towards. I play the cultural informant (or “native informant,” if you will, in all the rich irony of that phrase).

At the individual level, again, writing centre practitioners can and should break the convention of neutrality when they perceive assignment design as seriously racist. They can demonstrate what Neisha-Anne Green (2018) called *accompliceship*: an entering into a confidence with the writer, an expression of solidarity and sympathy that acknowledges the conflict between the student and unfair educational expectations or racist classroom practices, and perhaps even helps the student carry their own protest forward. How else does one respond to such writers and situations as have been part of my own experience: the writer, for instance, who identifies as Anishinaabe and is wrestling with a huge writing block in the face of an assignment prompt that asks her to discuss “the pros and cons of residential schools”? Or the writer who identifies as an Iraqi Muslim refugee, whose instructor has sent her off with the instruction that she improve her essay on Palestinian-Israeli relations to “more fairly represent Israel’s position”? How else does one address the anger of the African Canadian student whose Psychology textbook has an article by a right-wing white expert who suggests that “many stereotypes are accurate,” shortly after a chapter that lists degrading stereotypes about Black people?

At a more collective level, writing centres, influenced by the brilliant work of Smitherman (1977), Villanueva (1999), Grimm (2009), Canagarajah (2013), Inoue (2019), Young (2011), Green (2018), Garcia (2017), Faison and Condon (2022), Baker-Bell (2020), and many others, have been in the vanguard of the academic movement towards acknowledging identity, and in particular raciolinguistic identity, as a key element in academic power relations.⁵ A considerable proportion of the writing centre community acknowledges that students have a right to their own language; how could it not, given the breathtaking demonstrations, by scholars like Smitherman (1977), Young (2011), and Green (2018), of how successfully Black language can be code-meshed with SAE in scholarly writing? On the other hand, as we noted, many disciplinary instructors who advise their students to make writing centre visits have neither accepted, nor even, for the most part, acknowledged this linguistic paradigm shift. So writing centre staff and administrators know the feeling of being suspended between two kinds of expectations, and two kinds of practices: the kind that welcomes Black English vernaculars and Global Englishes in work submitted by students, and the kind that takes the monolingual, monocultural native speaker as the only acceptable linguistic model, and sees language in static and synchronic rather than dynamic and diachronically fluid terms.

What can the writing centre community do? Every opportunity we get, we can advocate for a more flexible approach to assessment, taking our protest march beyond the walls of writing centres.

You Standard Language enforcers

Today I'll stand on the library floor
with a sign that says I'm docking a dime
for every mark you made in red; for each time,
bristling gatekeeper at language's door,

you ignored good ideas, and pounced with glee
on vernacular usage, semantic flaw,
minor violation of syntactic bylaw,
misplaced semicolon, or uncrossed T.

Dear prof, fond of saying "How will meaning be
Clear if people aren't taught their grammar?"
You're skint in the heteroglossic bazaar
In the bodega you have no currency.

Today I feel like a fight, won't be keeping the peace.
Hey, they should defund you, language police.

Conclusion: Troping the colours at the writing centre

Canadian academia, which has hugged a kind of exceptionalism to itself, has been slower than American academia to come to an acceptance that racism is alive and active in this habitus. In the last little while, the activism of Black Lives Matter, the pandemic, which changed our ways of listening to each other, and the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children near residential schools across Canada, among other developments, seem to have opened a path to discussions of racism that are not weighed down by white scepticism. These upheavals and the prolific writing of Black and Indigenous authors that has framed them and drawn the writing centre community into dialogue

about them have underscored the presence of racism and raciolinguistic discrimination in academic settings.

Today, a broad consensus seems to have been reached in the Canadian writing centre community about the importance of targeted hiring of BIPOC tutors and administrators. The potential shift in exclusionary hiring practices is bringing more BIPOC bodies to the tutoring side of the writing centre table. But if BIPOC bodies are not to be merely brought in to be sucked into mainstream culture, then space should intentionally be made for cultural shifts and plasticity. The assumption of the adequacy of the same strategies for all staff and writers in a writing centre is a form of race-evasiveness. In other words, for the Canadian writing centre community to be the rainbow coalition it claims to be, its frameworks must be rebuilt to accommodate disjunctions and ruptures, its pedagogic ground rules and professional norms must be challenged, and its understanding of relationships must be broadened to include realities and practices that may be culturally or pedagogically “incoherent” to the largely white leadership.

One way of doing all this, as I have argued in this article, is to revisit the founding tropes that helped the writing centre community define itself, to read those tropes against the grain, to challenge them, and to replace them with new tropes. In exploring alternative tropes for writing centre work, such as the trope of writing centre as a space for theatre or for resistance to possessive individualism, I have had to overcome my own reluctance to buck established writing centre approaches to pacing, scribing, proofreading, and other practices. I have had to overcome my sense that new immigrants are allowed into Canada on sufferance (captured in the microaggression “then go back to your country”). To display the colours of one’s own imagination and to enable their recognition by others who share one’s identity or positionality is to claim the right to participate in the fashioning of epistemes as a part of intellectual life.

Endnotes

1. A version of this article was given as a featured talk at the International Writing Centers Association’s (IWCA) annual conference in 2021 (Natarajan, 2021). Since I wrote the first version of this paper, antiracism has emerged as a key theme in writing centre conferences. For example, most recently, Vershawn Ashanti Young and Chantal Gibson emphasized antiracism in their keynote addresses at the 2023 Canadian Writing Centres Association/association canadienne des centres de rédaction (CWCA/ACCR) annual conference. Among other examples, Neisha-Anne Green’s powerful keynote addresses at IWCA’s annual conference in 2017 and at CWCA/ACCR’s annual conference in

2021 explored racial identity and solidarity in writing centres. Gregory Younging presented on publishing and Indigenous style, and Jack Saddleback on intersectional approaches to supporting students at CWCA/ACCR's 2018 conference. Avasha Rambiritch 's plenary address at the 2022 CWCA/ACCR Conference focused on social justice in South African writing centres.

2. Technically speaking, a metaphor is a specific type of trope or figure of speech, but it has often been used as an overarching term for figurative language, and this is the sense in which I am using it here.

3. See North (1984), Lunsford (1991). An instance of this cross-border influence is how Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's views on collaboration were reflected in the 2016 Call for Proposals issued by CWCA/ACCR for this professional body's annual conference, the key scholarly meeting ground for the Canadian writing centre community (Energizing (Writing Centre) Communities, 2016).

4. The historical contributions to writing centre theory and praxis made by Black academic leaders and scholars working in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the US have barely received recognition; see Mendelsohn and Walker (2021).

5. These authors have made the case for antiracism across all their works, not just the ones referenced here.

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