Queering the Writing Center

by Harry Denny

Writing centers are sites around which folklore circulates. Staff meetings, classrooms, newsletters, and journals are filled with tales of individual and collective actualization, celebrating one-to-one teaching as deeply social, collaborative, and empowering. Legends from the writing center also speak to the tensions inherent in the spaces, reflecting divisions of tutoring as prescriptive versus directive, banking versus dialogic, and peer-driven versus expert-owned. Following their review of writing center theory, history, and practice, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner advise, "What is most important is to understand where our practices come from and to unravel the various influences on those practices" (154). Knowing these conditions of possibility makes for more effective tutoring, and this awareness also speaks to a politics about learning and the production of writers. Gillespie and Lerner describe commonplace mindsets about writing centers as garrets for skills building and testing, as generative spaces for confidence and collaboration, and as critical arenas in which to problem pose institutional and social discursive practices (147-150). For each domain, the tutorial and the social actors in and surrounding it are implicated in a certain identity politics. In the storehouse writing center, skill-building and knowledge transmission posit the writer as a vessel in need of filling, and identity becomes conferred as a sort of membership card or rite of passage. In the generative writing center, the writer emerges from social interaction, and identity becomes a negotiation of assimilation.

About the Author

Harry Denny directs the Writing Center at Stony Brook University (SUNY) and is an assistant professor in its Program in Writing & Rhetoric, where he teaches courses on composition studies, writing center theory, and research methods. His current research focuses on the rhetoric of social movements and identity politics around AIDS and sexual minorities. An activist turned tutor turned academic, Harry's scholarship explores writing centers as sites for community-building and for cross-cultural, disciplinary dialogue. He is also active in the Northeast Writing Centers Association and is a planning committee member for Metro-New York City Writing Centers.
separation, and subversion. In the critical/activist writing center, consciousness-raising produces writers aware of the constellation of subject positions and power dynamics cutting through them, and identity becomes a strategic decision grounded in context. Regardless of the roots of writer self-awareness—as expression of inner self, as maturation, or as invocation—the production of identity is central to the mission of writing centers. Producing better writers, to extend Stephen North’s aphorism, involves understanding the manufacture and dynamics of identity, a process that involves on-going self-discovery and reconciliation with collective identities and discourse communities. Just as the writing process is individual and recursive, so too is the process of coming to terms with and reinventing one’s identity. Writing centers inevitably find themselves at the crossroads of that journey for students, tutors, and the other professionals that inhabit their spaces.

Nevertheless, in stories and theories from the writing center, the bodies attached to those narratives and critical projects often lack interrogation and understanding, in spite of the warm embrace and supportive environment that is cultivated. What does it mean to claim an identity as a writer? When unpacking the sign “writer,” what other kinds of markers lurk under its veneer? As tutors and teachers champion a writer-identity, what others are sutured to it? When a writer-identity is nurtured, what other forms of identity get eclipsed? In what ways are writer-identities tied to contexts and spaces? How might these be transcended those spaces? How does becoming a writer mesh with the other identities emerging, circulating, and falling away in writing centers? What role do tutors play in these sets of relations, especially as tutors continually construct themselves as well? Composition classrooms and writing centers are spaces where negotiation of academic, social, cultural, and political identities are ubiquitous, yet research has not produced adequate theory and practice to help tutors and writers navigate identity production and its politics. This article seeks to begin conversations that might lead to better awareness of the interplay of identity, discursive practice and composition, most specifically in the writing center.

Alongside the need for talk about identity politics (and perhaps as a consequence of its absence) is the need to include the perspective of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies (or what some have come to call "queer theory"). This intellectual work foregrounds identity and the experiences of constructing and assuming codes of self, community and nationality for autonomy and pride. Such attention to the politics of identity and their material consequences dovetails with progressive scholarship from/about writing centers and composition studies, and this article draws out those occasions when queer theory may inform our critical lens on tutorials and the positioning of the writing center. Writing and speaking about sexuality are activities that produce discomfort, yet these feelings are familiar terrain for people in writing centers. Like queer people, writing center professionals continually confront our marginality: we daily encounter students and faculty alike who approach our spaces with uneasiness. Though some might understand writing centers as “safe harbors” of progressive politics and pedagogy, our spaces are also liminal zones, transitory arenas always both privileged and illegitimate. Writing centers are known as cutting-edge and institutional backwaters; they are celebrated and denounced; they are noisy and silent/ed; they are spaces where much organic, lasting learning happens, but spaces where often no record of achievement or assessment gets granted. Writing centers are places overflowing with structuring binaries: directive/non-directive, editing/tutoring, expert/novice, teacher/student, graduate student/undergraduate, professional/peer, women/men, “American”/ESL, advanced/basic, faculty/administrator, administrator/secretary, faculty/lecturer, lecturer/teaching assistant, teaching assistant/tutor, white/people of color, black/Asian, latino/black, straight/gay, etc. These binaries and their negotiations of which side is privileged and which is illegitimate are ubiquitous in sessions. Queer theory advances awareness of the presence and multiplicity of these binaries as means for constructing individual and collective existences as well as knowledge of the politics involved in navigating and subverting them.

On one level, this article calls attention to the ways that queer theory can inform what we do in writing centers, but on another level, it cautions against an identity politics that positions any epistemology as offering a totalizing way of knowing. As individual lenses, atomized sensitivities to the dynamics of class, gender, race, and nationality do not correct society’s tendency toward myopia, but these partial perspectives do come together to change/challenge the individual’s comprehension of the world. For example, one can examine the material consequences of class struggle in most writing centers: we find students whose struggles with academic literacy reflect the effects of under-funded primary and secondary schools or the effect of working-class culture where academic intellectual capital holds little sway. Such claims, while useful, are reductive because more cogent analysis factors in the variety of structuring dynamics and institutions that produce students’ identities (as well as everyone else’s sense of self). Besides the effects of post-industrial economics, students, tutorials, and writing centers constantly engage the dynamics of patriarchy, racial supremacy, nationalism, and psychological/cognitive development as they work to produce better writing and identity construction.
Sexuality is another lens through which we must view the writing center, but it is an interpretive gaze that has received little attention in writing center theory and practice. This call to queer the writing center is not an appeal to recognize gays in the midst and celebrate us as oracles of some standing. As feminist Donna Haraway would say, we must situate our knowledge in relation to other ways of theorizing, and this article offers queer theory as one among the many critical voices that shape and analyze writing center work. Eve Sedgwick puts the issue another way:

An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition, and...the appropriate place for that critical analysis is to begin from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and anti-homophobic theory. (1)

By Sedgwick's view, queer theory and its attention to the operation and liminality of binaries in our culture starts with the production and regulation of sexuality. Its symptomatic practices extend out to, though do not necessarily determine, other discursive rituals around gender, race, nationality, and class. As a critical starting point for exploring any aspect of U.S. culture, queer theory analyzes practices that inscribe meaning, making certain bodies and ways of doing visible and marked and others illusory, invisible or unmarked. Like the predication of sexual identities on their opposites (identity being co-dependent on what it is not), this article hopes to start a conversation about writing centers engaged in a perpetual tango of identity invoked and differed.

Queer Theory meets Writing Center Theory: From Liberation Activism to Critical Practice

Queer theory comes out of a history of political struggle and is located at the intersection of sexuality studies and feminist, critical race, social, cultural, and literary theories. In response to AIDS and homophobic activism, the lesbian and gay movement reclaimed the meaning of "queer." This practice was part of a larger history and set of rhetorical moves in which contemporary civil rights and identity movements have long engaged. People of African descent have shifted between signs of self-naming from "negro" to "Afro-American," "black," and "African American," and other people of color have followed similar paths and cycles of re-coding. After questioning their own identity and place in society, the women's and feminist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s challenged the popular signifiers of sex and gender. Naturalized

expectations of women's roles and status started to give way to a new era of opportunities and challenges. Just as racial minorities and women worked to open up meanings and spaces available to their communities, organization began to happen for lesbians and gay men, eventually culminating in increased visibility and place for diversity of sexual expression and identity. At the peak of a second wave of gay liberation activism in the late 1970s, the AIDS crisis launched an ongoing struggle over knowledge construction that had material consequences for public health and community self-identification. Activism around HIV/AIDS challenged governmental authority to speak for and about people living with the illness themselves or in their community, particularly when its policies had deleterious effects. The complexity of the epidemic provided occasions to question the symbolic meaning of sexual practices and identity, especially as they might aid in education to reduce HIV infection across communities defined by and overlapping sexual, racial and class boundaries. Against the backdrop of that health crisis, the gay community also fought continuing neo-conservative and evangelical moves to parlay public anxiety about the epidemic and wider progressive change in the culture as an occasion to roll back the advances of the New Left and its Great Society policies and programs.

This lesbian and gay activism became associated with a loosely-networked national social movement known as Queer Nation. Though its political and cultural influence waned during the 1990s, Queer Nation's questioning of sexual mores and practices took up and built on contemporary forms of social criticism and theory. The product of this marriage was queer theory, a school of criticism that has gained widespread visibility in humanities and social science scholarship. Despite its conventional usage as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) studies, queer theory represents a specific set of intellectual and cultural commitments. More precisely, it reads against the grain of dominant codings of language and considers ways in which language and epistemology construct and constrain possibilities for (sexual) identity and their implications for public and private practices. For example, Cindy Patton analyzes governmental and healthcare systems' discursive responses to the HIV pandemic, and she shows how AIDS is used to re-inscribe marginalizing codes of sexism, racism, homophobia, and nationalism (Globalizing AIDS: Inventing AIDS, Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS). Patton argues these clashes over definitions and their manufacture have tangible effects for gay communities, ghettos, and developing countries in terms of access to treatment, drugs, and public engagement of the epidemic. Through dialogue, forced at times, each of the social actors (gay activists, doctors, pharmaceutical researchers, public health officials) has come to appreciate how the
discursive practices around HIV/AIDS had an impact on pedagogy for HIV education and for research methods around the epidemic, from transmission routes differing for communities to treatment protocols requiring revision to meet the unique physiology of different populations. Without protest, HIV prevention and AIDS would have continued to be framed in terms of identities, not in relation to practices and bodily composition. By resisting dominant usage and challenging the circulation of privileged ways of knowing, Patton’s research and wider queer scholarship seek to render visible those practices that enforce marginalization of minority identities, practices that often result in greater suffering and death.

Foundational scholarship on writing centers pursues a similar agenda of challenging hegemonic practices and championing pedagogies of empowerment. Stephen North, Ken Bruffee, and Andrea Lansford champion dialogic, collaborative, and process-oriented interaction between tutors and students, and the ideal product is student-centered pedagogy. This approach to teaching builds writers who understand composition as recursive and who engage in conversation with a larger academic community. Christina Murphy challenges the politics at the root of collaborative pedagogy theory where knowledge emerges from community consensus. This theory, she notes, neglects to interrogate the dynamics of power, leaving unexplored the question of whether participants in collaboration ever have equal status or equitable opportunity. Marilyn Cooper also challenges unfettered assimilation of “standard” codes, and she appeals for tutorials to foster critical awareness of academic discourse communities. Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Friere, Cooper calls for writing center tutors to act as “organic intellectuals” who teach students to question their conditions of existence, particularly in relation to social and cultural dynamics at play in academic life. From a feminist perspective, Meg Woolbright argues for tutorials (and students by implication) to question gendered practices of domination and control within conferences. She applauds the different pedagogical environment that writing centers foster:

Both feminist and writing center commentators advocate teaching methods that are non-hierarchical, cooperative, interactive ventures between students and tutors talking about issues grounded in the students’ own experience. They are, above all, conversations between equals in which knowledge is constructed, not transmitted. (69)

Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski complement Marxist and feminist awareness of forces of domination by foregrounding attention to the colonialist tendencies of writing center theories and practices. When writing center scholarship and practitioners speak to/about marginal populations, pedagogy and discourse frequently reifies these subjects as “other,” positioning groups exterior to the political and cultural majority usually without validating their discourse practices as legitimate alternatives and often suggesting their inferiority. The language majority population often couches its discourse in racial and national terms, further confounding tensions and exacerbating divisions. Like the other critical pedagogues, Bawarshi and Pelkowski endorse instruction that highlights questioning and demystifying academic discourse practices.

Explorations of how knowledge, power, and identity happen are crucial parts of cultural studies, feminist and post-colonial critiques of writing center theory, and queer theory seeks to complement their critical interventions. It also extends knowledge of practices of domination to an appreciation for the physics and elasticity of social and cultural codes. By becoming more aware of the codes constituting their identities and the codes’ implications for academic life, students gain a modicum of agency. However, that sense of empowerment is always confounded by dominant interests’ resistance to challenges to the status quo. Knowledge of and being able to act on codes does not diminish the reality and effect of their existence when these codes privilege certain ways of writing and speaking over others. “Standard” vernaculars will always exist to mark status, and crises that erupt over their challenge testify to their staying power. Learning to code-switch between “standard” discourse practices and community-based ones does not necessarily translate into practical empowerment. Speaking a white, middle-class, academic vernacular enables outsiders to gain access to that discourse community, but such code-switchers do not eliminate the ubiquitous presence of racism, sexism, and nationalism and their marginalizing effects. Subject positions are not seamless, natural signs; claiming them—claiming an identity—depends on the acquisition and deferral of codes. Identities become compilations of codes, sets of signs that depend on their oppositions for meaning. Identifying under the signs “writer” or “student” suggests a conscious (or unconscious) reaction to not being a “writer” or “student.” In that moment of claiming an aspect of identity, subjects also depend on rejected or deferred possibilities. This mutually constituting dance of identity assumed and resisted is a primary focus of queer theory scholarship and offers insight for writing center studies.

In supporting writers, we never just sit side by side with them as purely writers; they come to us as an intricately woven tapestry, rich in the authenticity and texture of identities, but this cloth often requires something extra to be legitimated in the academy. Tutorials become spaces where students and tutors alike shore up, build anew, and
deconstruct identities and the ways of knowing that are sutured to them. As students learn to construct essays with an attention to audience that forces them away from safe confines of the personal and local, their ways of knowing confront a complex interplay of the dominant, the oppositional, the subversive, and the self. On top of these negotiations, students must also examine the lenses through which they are viewed. The speech and writing patterns of non-native English language learners are often seen as being at odds with "standard" academic English, and practitioners get marked as ESL, an other in the classroom. The vernaculars that first-generation students from the urban areas use are frequently judged as too "street," and they are positioned as needing "remediation." Women's prose in patriarchal classrooms can be disregarded as too emotional or personal, so they are told to be more dispassionate. For gay people coming to terms with their sexuality, exploration of desire and its expression (and the homophobia that often reacts to it) are shunted aside, and they are encouraged to maintain separate worlds of the personal and the public. Students come to tutoring in possession of rich cultural capital that doesn't translate easily for use in the academy, and schooled often assumes students possess intellectual capital for effective operation in its discourse communities. Both populations need to negotiate beyond the familiar and to contemplate the unseen and unknown; however, this dialectic rarely happens.

As students develop critical awareness of and agency over identity and its implications for academic life, students also realize their proximity to and stakes for acquiring that knowledge are not equitable across populations. The journey to speaking and writing "standard" English is not the same for everyone, and the travelogues of those experiences usually take on a telling rhetoric rooted in highly moralistic and meritorian narratives. Some are initiated into practices of passing and coming out that are analogous to rituals queer people often experience as rites for claiming sexual identity. Fostering a critical relation to dominant practices initiates students into a doubting consciousness that itself is a powerful political act in a society increasingly anti-intellectual and unquestioning of the status quo. Queer people, by coming to terms with their sexuality on some level, continually perform such counter-hegemonic activity, and those lessons learned can be taken up in mentoring writers. In Tenseal Orientations, Harriet Malinowitz writes about the transformative possibilities of a pedagogy rooted in foregrounding sexual minorities' epistemologies (for ourselves and the dominant):

"Sexual identity informs heterosexuals' epistemologies, too, though in ways that may be less immediately apparent to them—just as most social-ly dominant or validated identities are more dimly perceived as players in people's meaning-making operations than are the identities of Others. Heterosexuals, like white people, insofar as that part of their identity is not regularly challenged or scrutinized, are free to regard it as a significant fact demarcating their selfhood; it is possible for them to experience it instead as part of a seamless garment of "humanness"—which is to say, they frequently do not "view" or "see" it until it is touched by the discourse of the Other.

For mainstream society, ways of knowing seem natural, but their very contingency becomes apparent when their assumptions come into proximity to others marked by racial, gender, class, sexual, national and other forms of difference. The seamless narratives that construct dominant people's "humanness" become provisional lenses to be invoked and chosen. Epistemologies become interpretive gazes that open up possibilities for vision and re-vision. In writing center sessions, the practice of questioning our assumptions about ways of knowing is underutilized. For example, at Stony Brook where I teach, tutors frequently encounter immigrant and international students who struggle with well-worn debates about affirmative action, women's place in society, and civil liberties, yet when tutors mentor such students, they fail to understand that white, middle-class, liberal, and "American" perspectives are not necessarily shared by people new to mainstream culture in the United States. Similarly, students from working-class neighborhoods of New York City are often at a loss in our writing center when tutors push them to view issues and the world from beyond the perspective of home in Bensonhurst or Flushing Meadows. For both types of sessions, proximity becomes a crucial tipping point for piercing the naturalized, only by queering their conversation does a different sort of learning happen.

Challenging hegemonic or dominant epistemologies and practice is not exclusive to queer theory, but it adds pedagogical value by deconstructing privileged practices in relation to their companion subordinate forms. For every privileged epistemology, action, and identity, queer theory assumes a companion set of marginalized ways of knowing, doing, and being. This form of criticism has its genesis in Michel Foucault's study of language, medicine, psychology, incarceration, education and sexuality. The production and deconstruction of "problem" writers in writing centers is analogous to Foucault's genealogy of sexuality and knowledge of its "deviant" forms. In The History of Sexuality, he traces the historical emergence of discourse about sexual beings as an allegory of the appearance of contemporary intellectual inquiry, modes of thinking that underlie modes of academic study and teaching. What we understand today as..."
homosexual and heterosexual identities are not formations that step outside of historical contexts and culture; rather, these identities are the product of a set of discourses rooted in time and place or the result of people putting their sexual practices into discourse. As scientists and psychologists came to replace priests as culturally-sanctioned counselors, sexual diversity came into relief, and categories came into existence (utterances were related and weighed). “Normal” sexuality was not so much a set of activities in and of itself so much as an opposition to a set of activities it was not – the “abnormal.” Heterosexuality emerged and precipitated itself on knowing and being opposed to homosexuality (or better, the set of discourses we have come to associate with same-sex desire). In our contemporary epistemology, sexuality is a tango of encoding and decoding meaning, a perpetual dance of signifying the other that extends to additional modes of inquiry.

These discursive operations—the interplay of oppositions—are not always readily apparent to society because dominant codes seek to naturalize themselves and turn attention to discordant forms. To deflect awareness of those constructing logics of the social and cultural, public attention often turns to individuals: those out of step with or unlike the dominant become problems requiring correction, institutionalized practices and ways of thinking remain stable and continue the unfettered production of individuals. Homosexuals become curious figures needing explanation (or to be explained away): pop culture wonders aloud what made them that way. Women become suspect creatures if professional and public existence challenges dominant codes of femininity and roles of motherhood and supporter. People of color become problematic when they step out of submissive roles and segregated spaces of popular culture and consumption. In their own corner of the academic world, writing centers become sites where problems are individualized and made legible, if not on the bodies of students, then at least on the surface of their papers. In Good Intentions, Nancy Grimm champions awareness of the gulf between the dominant culture and those from the subaltern, and she argues success in college is often predicated on one’s ability to master and practice institutional codes and ways of thinking.1

The dominant ideology of individual liberalism that structures the system of higher education and the writing programs and writing centers within it has historically distracted our attention from systemic influences on our work and instead focused our attention on the individual student who is expected to change, to become normal. As [Iris Marion] Young explains, within an individualist ideology, we hold individuals rather than institutions accountable. Sometimes we blame students for not trying hard enough or not setting the right priorities or not learning enough in high school and sometimes we blame teachers for creating unfair obstacles or for having unfair attitudes or for not preparing students for college or sometimes we blame parents for not having the “right” family values. (108)

Failing to code themselves as “normal” or perform within a band of normative expectations, students are often dissected in all manner intellectual, philosophical, and psychological. Students become the target of critical attention as individuals, and systemic dynamics and institutions escape culpability. Though Grimm and Young do not couch their analyses in queer theory, their appeal is similar: writing center practitioners must queer the dynamics that put forth particular codes of identity and intellectual practice as “normal” and others as not. Administrators, teachers, and tutors too often deride the literacy practices and educational capital that students bring to writing centers, making students personify those problems while larger social and cultural logics go unexamined. Instead, writing mentors ought to help students bridge the multiple literacies to which they have access and those dominant forms they require for academic success.

Queer theory explores discourse practices that privilege particular epistemologies, ontologies, and practices, and it also foregrounds the mutually-constituting nature of forces of domination, privilege, and normativity for all those marked as marginal. For queer activists and scholars, pedagogical practice is rooted in a subversive agenda to demystify and de-naturalize structuring dynamics. As with most people who lack status in our society, sexual minorities develop mechanisms to cope with forces of domination. Queer folk create subcultures comprised of neighborhoods and support networks, and we develop ways to integrate with larger society, making strategic decisions about when to invoke our identities and experiences and when to proselytize about who we are. For many people of color and women, their bodies encode their identity and speak for them, yet for working-class people, religious minorities, and queer people, our legibility can confound. Regardless of visibility, these marginalized people share techniques for navigating public space beyond the safe confines of home and community. In writing centers, people from the margins are frequently the majority population, yet tutors and other writing center professionals often do not tap these students’ own innate social and cultural literacies as resources for aiding their academic work. Having learned how to survive in a society marked by racism, sexism, class-bias, nationalism and homophobia, students marked as other have sophisticated tools, yet writing center staff and the students’ instructors usually do not mentor
them on ways to manipulate these devices for use in the academy. I next discuss two such practices, "passing" and "coming out," that are central to the gay community and that can advance our critical understanding of tutorials, as well as the institutional positioning of writing centers.

"Passing" in the Writing Center

In Our Kind of People, Lawrence Otis Graham recounts the history and politics of race within the American black community. Though conventional treatments explore interracial dynamics, Graham charts the complexity of competing perceptions and relationships to race and realigned identity between African Americans themselves. One dynamic he examines is the politics of passing, and this social practice seems to have had its earliest articulation and most explicit expression within African American communities where complexion enabled some light-skinned blacks to pass as (and assume the privileges and power of being) white. A hierarchy based on skin-tone was built upon this foundation, and blacks with lighter tones assumed privileged status over those with darker complexion. These dynamics then dovetailed with social cleaving around class, and Graham argues all sorts of community-based institutions arose in response to an individual's ability to pass among the white mainstream, both economically and racially.

Like African Americans, the gay community has its own history of constructing itself in relation to the larger heterosexual population. In the early twentieth century, lesbian couples in nascent urban gay ghettos could survive without social harassment if one partner passed as a straight man by performing conventions of masculine dress and behaviors (D’Emilio and Freedman; Peiss and Simmons). The other partner would assume traditional gender expectations of women of the period, and thus to the dominant society, the couple could appear as "normal" or heterosexual. For gay men from the late nineteenth century on through gay liberation to today, social spaces like the fashion world, entertainment, and the arts would become safe arenas where they could be "outs" or visible, so long as they conformed to specific codes of conduct (e.g., being fay, campy, etc.) and expressed no overt attraction toward other men. For men outside those historically safe spaces, passing as a straight male became (and still remains) a highly valued trait: To ensure personal safety and job security, these men seek to blend in with and be indistinguishable among heterosexual men. Each of these occasions for passing requires individuals to acquire particular types of cultural capital as well as knowledge of their relative value to both privileged and marginal populations. For people of color, playing upon race themselves presupposes awareness of American ranking of populations by skin tone; for lesbians, knowledge of the gendering of romantic relationships and bodies enables manipulation of male and heterosexual privilege; and for gay men, attention to codes of masculinity permits agency in decisions to be visible.

Learning these codes and practices of passing and developing ways of coping with this knowledge does not happen only for queer people and people of color. Students, particularly those positioned as marginal, "at risk," or in need of "remediation," come to writing centers (or are sent to them) wanting to learn and acquire those skills, markers, and insights that enable them to pass in the academy—both in terms of performance and identity. Writing centers champion this work, facilitating students’ acquisition of these forms of capital. This knowledge helps students navigate between margin and center; it helps the other signify like the privileged mainstream. Regardless of whether tutors or administrators embody dominant society in part or whole (white, male, middle-class, straight, American), codes of privilege and their rules of usage are often natural to or already learned by us. Epistemology, ontology, and dominant practices are stable to us because they have come to operate smoothly through us. For successful academics and students, this "second nature" that many experience as comfort and security with academic discourse is a consequence of position and the ease with which practices of normalization have worked. We know, intuitively at least, elements of genre, effective argumentation, critical thinking, grammar, and usage, and this knowledge allows us to approach communication moments with classes and peers with a greater likelihood of success. For students who lack this capital, academic conversations can be inhibited because of conventions of which they often have minimal knowledge. For students from the margins, acquiring these codes and rules holds real material implications. On the upside, learning and performing the codes of privilege (passing) creates the possibility for greater economic and political power, but on the downside, refusal (not passing) can be tantamount to a resistant embrace of the status quo. This latter move can be heretical in a society that predicates status and social mobility on college-sanctioned education and continual self-improvement.

For tutors and directors from marginalized backgrounds, our language use allows us to pass even if our identities, bodies, or complexions call into question our natural fit in the academy. We have experienced that very cultural negotiation that has been so widely written about and that many of our students engage. Richard Rodriguez talks about moving between two worlds of language growing up in Los Angeles and ultimately being forced to pass in dominant English-speaking culture. Other authors of color
write about the false choice of picking one language culture over another, of necessarily being forced to pass. bell hooks provides powerful examples in her work of learning to move between her rural working-class, African-American community of childhood and passing among elite circles in the academy. Mike Rose, as a working-class Italian American, also writes about his quest to acquire the codes of passing in mainstream linguistic communities as well as tutoring to those on the margins. In learning to signify and code-switch, Rose had to traverse a social and cultural landscape marked by codes of class to become a celebrated academic. In learning to pass, these academics demonstrate the intensely personal and difficult journey that students from the margins encounter. They must face and come to terms with their social position and cultural practices, they must make difficult decisions about personal and professional futures, and they must negotiate their relationship between margin and center. In sum, students must make strategic decisions to bracket, albeit temporarily, stratifying dynamics of class, race, gender, and sexuality at play and interpret such success stories as case studies in the virtue and possibility of meritocracy winning out. Just as queer people must always already occupy a calculated relation to public space, so too must first-generation college students act in assuming a position in academic discourse communities. Dominant culture posits their integration as endorsement of meritocracy and elides the dynamics that students must overcome and paper-over.

To pass, to invoke the literacy codes and identity practices of the dominant, presupposes that doing so is desirable or even an act over which individuals have agency, and it assumes the dominant yields space for the marginal possessing the right codes/conduct. For people of color and women, their bodies usually speak their marginality before their words are audible, and many would argue class and sexuality articulate their presence in non-verbal ways, of course not always approaching the legibility and history that race and sex possess in our culture. For those students who are marked by social cleaving, whose bodies speak before spoken, their ability to code-switch competes with bodily encoding over which they have little power to influence dominant society’s reception. When these students come to college, academic discourse practices operate as a set of codes intended to democratize, but these codes also often separate and exclude. No separatist discourse and epistemology (e.g., afrocentric or gynocentric) will ever upset the hegemony of dominant academic discourse patterns (e.g., Eurocentric, middle-class, liberal, etc.), so having the ability to invoke those codes is a pragmatic necessity borne of the economic and political necessity to have access to the privilege that they carry. However, conventions of academic discourse are widely seen as amorphous at best, and they are continually under assault as being too discipline-specific or not field-dependent enough (as movements toward and away from WAC/WID indicate). At the same time as students from the margins are taught a restrictive set of communication conventions in the academy, our popular culture embraces diversity of expression from spoken word to music and visual arts. For young people, consumption of culture focuses not on the normative, but looks to the margins. As suburban and rural youth revel in a “ghetto-ized” Christina Aguillera and don FUBU and Eminem-inspired dress, the academic mainstream teaches them to bracket these urban, ethnic, working-class impulses in their official language. Larger cultural and social forces foster a mixed message: Blend, but don’t blend too much. Though these admonitions celebrate a veneer of diversity that enables an illusive individuality, they simultaneously condemn codings of difference that approach a tipping point of potential paradigm shift. Blending signifies assimilation and a lack of recognition by the dominant; one gets the privileges and benefits (proximity, safety, material success). Not passing signifies a separation and an abundance of recognition by the mainstream; one gets the benefits of self-actualization and risks the costs (distance, violence, and economic loss). For women and people of color, the politics and consequences of this dynamic long have been known, but for queer people, knowledge and testing of the limits of passing are still dawning as the recent public debate over “gay marriage” attests. (At what point does mirroring the structures of heteronormative culture transform into assimilation? How are special rights eclipsed for equity sake rather than for being co-opted?)

The passing that is taught in writing centers also possesses a problematic logic. We teach students to move toward and privilege the academic discourse community, and we subtly disabuse movement back to home discourse communities. We foster passing as and discourse coming from. Assimilation is lauded just as separation is viewed as suspect. Boundary incursions between home and academic discourse spaces are seen as violations tantamount to threats to national security (at least as we receive it in the national political rhetoric of “homeland security”). In my writing center and larger writing program, culturally-privileged faculty, staff and students alike bemoan non-native English speakers using their first (or second or third or fourth) languages outside classrooms ("They’ll never learn to speak like us if they keep doing that."). But cross-cultural conversations that enable discovery and dialogue between identities and linguistic usage rarely happens. Students of color and those with working-class backgrounds are implored not to write like they speak, yet talk about and validation of the dynamics and politics of English dialects are illusive. Ironically enough, despite my university’s location in the New York City suburbs, a metro-region that celebrates its...
immigrant roots and multi-ethnic character (even though its history has a more dubious record), actual practiced appreciation for that heritage and flavor can be vexing. Continual talk and learning are required to bridge the experiential gulf between students, tutors, and professors, and that reflective work promises to transcend the educational outcomes for all participants. If writing centers accept the mission to enable students and tutors to learn about and reconcile competing discourse community expectations, they must be wary of only fostering the passing part of the equation. Writing center professionals must encourage awareness that knowledge and expression are not socially-constructed but are coerced and appropriated. Communication conventions in the academy are not the results of tidy agreements, but the souvenirs of clashes and encounters between margin and center.

For students who use writing centers to engage this confounding game, a kind of queer reading must guide their instruction to pass in the academy. In teaching and fostering this rhetorical identity, tutors often inadvertently encourage a unidirectional passing. "They" get to pass in "our" world. Mentors do not encourage students to become aware that identities are invoked; they are assemblages to which individuals must have a critical relation and assemblages that can be moved between and piled on one another. Tutors risk creating, in the vein that Richard Rodriguez talks about, separate worlds and languages that possess implicit privileging and distancing. Students should not come to see that their "home" or "private" worlds and languages are less legitimate or valuable. Instead, they need to read communication situations and make strategic decisions about conforming, resisting or subverting the existing patterns or conventions. Blending in by speaking and writing like the dominant has obvious material consequences (good grades, less conflict, greater integration), as does resistance have clear material effects (poor grades, more conflict, less integration). A third way means taking on a subversive approach to communication, by assessing constraints (What is possible? What is not?) and self-consciously manipulating codes. Students could invoke dialects as part of introductions and descriptions of personal experiences, or they can trade upon identity as a means to push frames of reference for their audience and subject matter. Confessinals for their own sake and dialects deployed without strategic referent usually do not impress academic audiences, but they can be won over when these strategies serve as evidence of personal engagement with content material and effective argumentation. This coming to read the communication situation for safety and possibility for subversion is a hallmark of queer theory; the lesson is that identity can be invoked to the degree and extent that the individual chooses and over which she has agency.

By queering sessions — seeking strategic occasions to subvert conventional dynamics — the limits of the ordinary can be tested by students and tutors. Their bodies and performance also may serve pedagogical ends that challenge normalized academic discourse practices. While tutors of color embody difference in most academic exchanges, racialized approaches to critical thinking only become legible when individuals encounter the other in physical as well as intellectual proximity. Discourses trumpeting sexism become harder to defend when one's tutor is a woman or when the tutor pushes a student to consider a different lens through which to view the world. Rhetoric that regurgitates conditioned liberalism (or conservatism) can be checked by tutors who seek out oppositional viewpoints. Queering tutorials involves what Nancy Welch calls an engagement of the mirror stage and movement to learning-play. In this view, tutors and students work together to find "potential spaces" where students can develop a relationship with academic writing, not by necessarily conforming or resisting convention, but by mutually exploring creative ways to experiment and play (Welch 54). Welch's theory undermines the standard duality that tutors face and offers a third way: Assimilation and resistance give way to subsersive or queer play. The ideal/real dialectic visioning of the world moves toward a sort of harmony.

Welch’s use of Lacanian psychoanalytic also helps to bring into relief the queer place that writing centers themselves ought to occupy at most colleges and universities. Just as students and tutors need help reconciling idealized visions of themselves and the world with a reality replete with contradictions and tensions, so too must writing centers confront a gulf between theory and practice, between ideal and real. Welch argues against a false binary of "ideals and theories" on the one hand and a real politik of institutionality on the other hand; instead, she lauds space over-brimming in "activity, questioning, and change that a writing center in pursuit of the practical would eclipse" (54). This writing center would be an arena where noise, as Beth Boguet explains, would be literal and figurative, disruptive, improvised, and energizing. For many writing center practitioners, the reality is often quite different: like many of the students we serve, we feel a pressure to pass, to blend in, and to not chafe. As contingent staff or untenured faculty, we fear real material consequences if we fail to conform or adapt to conventions of pedagogy and performance, or, more directly, if we fail to pass. We fear budget cuts for recalcitrant activity; we fear the loss of tenure if we do not play well with senior colleagues; we fear further marginalization when we counteract administrative edicts. Hallways and panel presentations at regional and national conferences are choked full of this folklore, so such anxiety is often real and not the stuff of academic urban legends. But as Welch notes, we need not slip into reifying dualisms.
of assimilation and resistance. Perhaps there is a liminal, queer zone where writing center practitioners seek out "what disrupts and what exceeds" and develop ways of identifying writing centers as integrative spaces where oppositions co-mingle and come into an uneasy existence (Welch 57). Just as gay people must come to terms with how and if they can articulate their identity by knowing what is possible in their local context of safety and needs, so too must directors navigate between idealism and abject resignation to pragmatism. Writing center directors and staff must find strategic occasions to evangelize and give testimonials of what we do, not just to build the faith among the unconvinced, but to destabilize conventional wisdom of what we do and who we are.

"Coming Out" in the Writing Center

Intertwined with the public visibility of queers is the ritual of coming out, a speech act that marks discursive movement away from the private domain of the closet. In American culture, being queer never just involves the sex acts in which one engages or the community to which one identifies, but also requires a particular and perpetual practice of naming and re-naming ourselves to others. This coming out narrative has its origins with the production of homosexuality that Michel Foucault famously wrote about. As reviewed above, concepts of heterosexuality emerged in relation to articulation of homosexuality, the normal has been predicated on the abnormal. The production of these identities is not done through positivistic observation but through dialogue, conversations where uttering one's thoughts on self make them true and real. Foucault charts the genealogy of those confessed as and argues where once priests conferred meaning on them, sociologists and psychiatrists assumed scientific authority over interpretation and subsequent pathologization of individuals' identities. As a consequence of identity movements' (civil rights, women's, lesbian and gay liberation, etc.) actions during the twentieth century, agency over self-definition has shifted from pastors, scientists and physicians to individuals themselves. Though we no longer sanction most public expressions of homosexual identity as threats to public or mental health, its presence or proximity still does not pierce the dominant heteronormativity of society. Coming out challenges the unmarked and naturalized discourses of compulsory heterosexuality and upsets normative assumptions about interlocutors. Putting homosexuality into discourse is just as productive as failing to do so, not complicating the discursive practices of heteronormativity enables its existence as a normal that elides its mutually constitutive abnormal. Coming out does not undermine the practices of heteronormativity; rather, coming out brings into relief discursive relations with the other. By putting one's sexuality into discourse when dialoging with others — by saying, "I am..." — a person integrates her private and public sense of self and forces her interlocutors to perform their own negotiation of identity on some conscious or unconscious level. The audience must reconcile being and not being.

This experience of coming out is ubiquitous to writing center tutorials, yet our scholarship has not talked about them in these terms. Though sessions likely do not involve cathartic proclamations of one's sexual identity ("Yes! Yes! Yes! I am gay and proud of it" or "Hi, my name is Harry, and I'm a homosexual.") conferences do turn on confessional moments that are intimately woven with students' and tutors' sense of self in relation to writing center ritual. Common tutorial practice centers on starting sessions with ice breaking and self-assessment talk. Tutors draw students out with background information on their majors, course work, prior experiences with writing, assignments, and thoughts on their composition strengths and weaknesses, each turn becoming more intimate in the level of disclosure. Before turning to collaborative learning, students must offer themselves up for analysis and interpretation by laying their writing sins and self on the table for absolution. Students are compelled to come out, to mark themselves, as writers with particular sets of needs that individualize themselves in a context, where no one else is being marked as different or coming out themselves. If sharing writing is an intimate and vulnerable act, then tutors' rituals of enacting public self-analysis of students' ways of producing writing is doubly so. Writing centers are sites where to traverse them means coming out as someone wanting help and support. Then, once in the writing center, students are expected to continue coming out and confessing in greater detail their needs and expectations. Like the parish priest or therapist of bygone days (for gay people), the tutor is positioned as a confessor who aids the confessor in coming to terms with her thoughts and expression. Students must put into discourse what they feel they are doing well and, often more important, what they think they are not doing well and struggling with. Once discursively expressed, tutors are positioned to validate or repudiate students' practices, and the tutors are then empowered to assist students with coming to terms and developing plans for dealing with their knowledge. Their mentorship is predicated upon the degree to which students can offer up discourse for interpretation and act upon it. This dialogic tutoring does not just facilitate collaborative learning about concrete issues; it also aids students' integration within academic communities, ideally with a critical sensibility to the process.

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This coming-out practice is not necessarily problematic so much as it presupposes students’ experience and comfort with self-disclosure to others with whom they are not necessarily familiar. Since students require a certain level of trust and security to confess and reflect upon self to a public figure like a tutor, creating a safe space is crucial for effective work in sessions. However, such safety comes with proximity to people like oneself, but writing centers are not always staffed by individuals who look and act like the students they serve. Embracing diversity in writing centers is a never-ending project because student bodies are in perpetual flux. Mirroring student demographics does not address inevitable experiential gaps between tutors and students, even if their physical identities are alike. As tutors become more attuned to generalized traits associated with specific groups of students, such awareness may unintentionally reaffirm stereotypes and be patronizing. At the same time, knowledge of cross-cultural differences can offer cues to interaction styles and expectations so long as that knowledge does not take on the feel of recipes for action with particular types of people. Cultural and social resistance to the practice of confession may be not only an issue of one’s identity—coming from a community where speaking to (or speaking in particular ways to) “outsiders” is not a routine practice—but also a factor of one’s experience in academic discourse communities. For many students, collaborative writing, active learning, and recursive process are educational rituals that are not well known or comfortable. Because students frequently reach writing centers while participating in first-year composition programs, their awareness of conventional practices and the reasoning behind them is often nonexistent or immature, as Nancy Sommers has explained so well. For students, in this sense, offering up their experiences (or lack thereof) is a fruitful enterprise, yet obtaining that knowledge requires an uncomfortable disclosure, an act most would find tenous.

Such risk can be mitigated if tutors themselves engage in a sort of coming out, thereby fostering a transactional dialogue in which knowledge is shared and consumption and transmission of it is not one-sided. By narrativizing their own concurrent experiences with joining academic discourse communities, tutors help students demystify the process as well as make their own struggles less individual and isolating. Tutors, thus, mark experiences that are often deemed transparent and uncomplicated. To know that someone else has experienced one’s anxieties offers a degree of consolation and validation, particularly if tutors are careful not to diminish a student’s own journey as backhanded. The experience of coming out is not exclusive to mentoring modes and practices of academic conversations. Tutors also must contend with disclosing their own components of identity, be they racial/ethnic, religious, class, sexual or political. Although racial and gender codes are usually obvious to interlocutors, less mature students may not understand their import for shaping messages and epistemologies. Ethereal markers of identity have an impact on communication, but students frequently lack the cultural capital to consider them. At the risk of imparting political correctness (from either the right or left), tutors can help students complicate their frames of reference and audience awareness, and tutors can also foster sensitivity and appreciation for diversity. Disclosures of unmarked components of identity are precarious enterprises because tutors place themselves in vulnerable positions for rejection or verbal abuse by students. As anyone else, tutors also require a modicum of safety to come out, thus making conferences critical occasions for understanding and appreciating interactants’ willingness and ability to engage such talk.

Just as tutorials have an interplay and negotiation of self-disclosure that marks and encodes aspects of academic and personal identity, writing centers must engage in a sort of perpetual disclosure. As an institutional space, the writing center obviously cannot speak in the conventional sense, yet its visibility and reputation on campus articulate and inscribe meaning. Like Beth Boquet recalls in connection with her space, the noises and vibe that permeate a writing center’s walls signify in ways that affirm or confound perceptions of students, faculty, and administrators. Directors share urban legends about students and faculty alike coming to writing centers, discovering what we do, and proclaiming testimonials. We also share the disaffected narratives where our spaces are described as recalcitrant, unrelenting, and lacking in utility. Depending on the specifics, either type of folklore poses promise or ruin. To contend with and shore up such perceptions, writing center leaders must also engage in a never-ending campaign of building knowledge of and community for writing centers. At one school where I once worked as a graduate student tutor, my colleagues and I would jokingly refer to our introductory classroom visits as “We’re the writing center, and we’re okay” speeches. In retrospect, those presentations were not entirely different from diversity presentations where lesbians and gay men speak to classes about their experiences as sexual minorities.

As I later took professional and faculty positions in writing centers, those consciousness-raising sessions with students about writing centers expanded to committee and department meetings as well as to university administrators. Today, I find myself coming out more frequently as a writing center person and educating students and colleagues about that aspect of my professional identity than I have ever felt compelled to do as a gay man. Inevitably as agendas are being set, perspectives being solicited, or new business is being invited, I find myself at times sheepishly inching.
my hand up or murmuring, "The writing center could use..." or "In the writing center we try to..." In building up to making a case for tenure, I already must explain all those hours dedicated to service and teaching, explaining once again what the tutors and I do and why they require ongoing training and support. In coming out as a writing center person, in marking myself as dissimilar from other junior faculty who don’t share such responsibilities, I wonder if I am marginalized as a consequence and to what effect. Only time will tell. Until I have a better sense of perspective, I find affirmation and solitude in the stories of/from writing center colleagues around the country. Like the secluded, closeted gay person out there in the world, reading about the experiences and theories of others makes me feel less alone, less adrift.

Towards an Interrogation and Integration of Identity, or Queering Identity in the Writing Center

To queer people, contending with our liminality – living somewhere between being in or out, or existing as figures somewhere between normal or abnormal – is crucial to our quest for acknowledgement and safety. Such experiences in the borderlands parallel the lives in and spaces of writing centers: students, tutors, administrators, and the centers themselves. They seek to validate and to be validated, they seek knowledge and practices and to be known, they want the security to explore. As tutors and directors, we surely can foster that kind of work for students, but we must also help students understand their interlocutors, be they embodied or abstract. We need not reify abstractions; rather, we must explore through dialogue and reflection the practices and dynamics of audience and rhetorical context. Tutors and faculty must articulate and reflect on their own experiences and processes of coming to terms with life in the academy as individuals with a complex set of markers constituting who we are. By speaking to those negotiations, we all learn about the possibilities and pratfalls of consciousness-raising and learning the rules of the academic game. This discursive play is just as central as teaching writing, critical thinking, argumentation, and the like. Students discover that writing and identifying never stand alone outside a context or community; they are always already constructed in relation to both. Mentoring students toward that realization is among our better offerings to academic communities.

Composition and writing center theories laud collaboration, attention to agency in the writing process, and awareness of cognitive, social and cultural dynamics in student learning. Queer theory is not just about seeing the homosexuals in writing centers or noticing the sexual politics that circulate through our spaces; queer theory involves appreciation for how epistemology has an impact on students, tutors, staff and on the institutional position of the writing center. With these insights on the nexus of queer theory and writing center pedagogy, tutors can work with students to discover how they invoke identity in the writing and tutoring process, and those insights influence critical awareness of liminal dynamics elsewhere. Queer people use passing as a technique to "fit in" in spaces where safety is not assured. To many subaltern students, acquiring those codes to pass, in both performative and identity senses, confers a degree of safety, even if only provisional. Passing without a critical relation or sense of its limitations invokes the metaphor of the closet where the mainstream gets to ignore the other in its midst, a figure who is marginalized and not seen. As students master the codes and practices of dominant society (particularly in the communication of knowledge, arguments, and ideas), they must nurture awareness of their own identities and experiences. That wisdom can flesh out (not necessarily trump) theories and information students acquire in their coursework. When our students' knowledge begins to challenge and expand the parameters of discourse and community, so too will the rules that govern those fields begin to shift. As Muriel Harris writes, "Tutorial instruction... introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher... Students readily view a tutor as someone to help them surmount the hurdles others have set up for them" (qtd. in Pemberton and Kinkead 8). Indeed, that middle person, a writing mentor, helps students navigate an academic terrain that can be uninviting and exclusionary. Discovering well-worn paths and learning new routes to self-understanding and awareness of the world is a hallmark of intellectual life, and tutors model and facilitate this complicated and intensely personal work.

NOTES

1 My use of the term subaltern comes from Jennifer Terry's appropriation of Gayatri Spivak's work in post-colonial studies. Terry extends the subaltern from Spivak's usage as a term to understand identities, subject positions and voices of colonized people in developing countries to sexual minorities in the U.S.

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