

Chapter 24. Writing Center Exile: Third Gender as Third Class in a Third Space

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My story begins as an exile from my heritage culture, where I am called a third gender. In the culture I was born and grew up in, I should not be a doctorate or Ph.D. because of my gender. The culture, which practices binary categories of gender, has labeled female Ph.D.s as the third gender which has negative valences of being odd and abnormal. The connotation of this third gender is that female Ph.D.s are too knowledgeable and professionally powerful to deserve male partners. The stigma expects female Ph.D.s to live a forlorn life. Before the cultural stigma was somewhat lifted, I fled to the US, a land without this stigma and with support for me to become a female Ph.D.

But now here in a current U.S. institution, being put in the third-class category (i.e., neither tenure-track nor non-tenure-track line) in a third space (i.e., the writing center) brings me back to why I fled. Writing centers were generated with some impossible missions—fixing students' writing products and skills, catering to larger minority populations, and countering perceived declines in literacy skills (Boquet, 1999). But they are not classrooms. They are seen as an extended academic space between academic and non-academic spaces. It is a type of third space.

I chose to be a writing center administrator with the ambition to apply my background in teaching English to speakers of other languages to training pre-service and in-service peer tutors and helping multilingual student writers. Even though teaching is the only recognized form of academic labor in my contract, more is involved in reality and expected in my annual evaluations. I mentor pre-service and in-service peer tutors and encourage them to engage in scholarship. I cheerlead them to present in conferences and guide them to submit for publications. I advise them to use their experience and reflections as data to make their agency and voice in academia. As to the tangible outcomes of such mentorship during the last four years, there have been six academic publications from the collaborations with my mentees, four of which are replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research as advocated by Driscoll and Perdue (2014); there have also been four creative publications solely from my mentees. Thanks to such extensive interactions with student tutors, I know them more and more deeply. We inspire each other academically, professionally, and at times personally. From my end, it is an ecosystem of academic, intellectual, affectionate, and emotional labor. Such a system helps support the writing center to be progressive, inclusive, and humane and inspires student tutors to infuse positivity in their tutoring sessions for their peer writers. Peer writers understand writing and publishing as a progressive process with multiple layers of labor.

Despite the academic achievements of my mentees and myself and excellent teaching evaluations, I am still in a third class in terms of my position classification. My faculty work, no matter how outstanding it is, is in limbo when it comes to potential recognition, like faculty awards, and tenure and promotion. There is no clear pathway for professional growth for people like me who occupy third spaces (Kim, 2020). According to the National Census of Writing (Gladstein, 2017), 28 percent of the 240 WCAs were tenured or on tenure track and 24 percent of the WCAs were on non-tenure track. These two categories, though, as majority, do not represent the whole story of WCAs because many in these two categories were hired as faculty first and as WCAs second. I, unfortunately, did not belong to either of the categories. I was hired as a WCA with the job category faculty administrator, below tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. The category was fully absent from the institution's tenure and promotion manual. After I learned the problematic category that I was in, I started to advocate for myself by reaching out to different levels of stakeholders at the institution and seeking category transition and promotional pathways. I talked to my direct supervisor and the college equity advisor, and nothing happened, even after two years of advocacy. I emailed the college supervisor and the email was a stone to the ocean. Some diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders intervened but nothing came out. Some of the institution's top leaders know the issue of the job category and decided not to solve it. At my institution, there are 49 individuals in the database in this category among thousands of employees. In the writing center, there are two faculty administrators out of four full-time employees. I have no clue why the job category hasn't been proposed with a solution because there are either so many or so few affected employees.

And the unsolved status might have something to do with the underrepresented minority (URM) identity that many people in this position also occupy, including me. Like other individuals in this category, I don't look like the mainstream university worker and I don't have a native accent. I don't know whether I was hired because I am an URM. In other words, I am contributing to the institutional diversity in some matrix but suffering from the institutional policy that makes this job a dead-end.

The complexities of my working environment—lovely students and student employees, supportive but powerless colleagues, and institutionalized microaggressions—perpetuate my inner fight. I have been proactively seeking changes about the third-class job category for years, but with slight progress. So, what leaves me now is one of the following:

- To leave the third space to find a clear pathway for my faculty advancement, which describes me as a WCA exile.
- To leave higher education for industry, which turns me into an academic exile.

I am aware that no matter what option I choose, I passively allow the existing

systematic oppression that other individuals with terminal degrees may also experience. I feel dark many times in this fight and I believe I am not the only WCA with such feelings. Can WCAs form a union or some form of organization with a collective voice for field negotiation and bargaining? Editors, contributors, and audience, please advise.

References

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