

Introduction

Recently, we got together with another writing center scholar to talk about research projects. What started out as a writing group of sorts quickly turned into a conversation about work. Reviewer feedback and revision plans were put aside as each of us, in turn, chatted about circumstances in our institutions and our centers. We talked about institutional austerity, the reasons why we got into writing center work, and the joys of working with students and of mentoring. Suddenly, we have become mid-career scholars, though there are not often major signs that accompany these transitions, even if some of us have tenure and have been promoted. A deeper thread in this conversation was existential: after a decade or two working in our field, did we recognize it anymore? Did we recognize the institutions where we have worked? As the current landscape in higher education changes rapidly due to COVID-19, AI, the enrollment cliff, and changes brought upon by neoliberalism and the managed university, we wonder where our profession and our careers are headed. We wonder, as part of the title of this section suggests, where we are going. This might seem like an individual existential concern—a kind of mid-career crisis—but this book argues it is also a communal concern shared by many in the field.

Of course, in looking forward, we need to look back: where have we been? In part, this project is about that, too. We later share our stories about our own educational journeys and some of the challenges of writing center work. Here, however, we share how we landed in this work in the first place, as well as some of the challenges and opportunities we see in writing center work and the future of the profession. The challenges and opportunities are relational as our connections to one another and to the field have grown and continue to grow.

As two first-generation college graduates, we each came into this field serendipitously. Dan needed to work extra hours to save for future semesters at his community college. That early opportunity shaped much of his later career. Genie studied psychology and English in college and later worked as a writing center tutor—and later a graduate administrator—as part of their assistantship (which, ultimately, was also for pay). It was intoxicating to get those one-on-one thunderbolt moments where everything seemed to coalesce around an activity or a concept, and Genie was immediately hooked on the rewards of tutoring work. As serendipity would have it, work (unpaid service work) also brought Genie and Dan into each other's orbit. In 2016, Genie and Dan met at ECWCA—a regional writing center organization—and commiserated about workload, the field, scholarship, and life in general. Year after year, we continued to orbit one another through conferences, service work, and, eventually, collaborations. But long before this project on labor, we both had our own labor crises that we worked through together. We have learned that others have had similar experiences: in conference bars, break rooms, Zoom Rooms, and other social and private spaces,

practitioners like us found their way to one another as they tried to make meaning out of their work.

This is not something that only happens in writing centers—there are a lot of places where these “watercooler conversations” happen, but because of the highly individualized (and often idiosyncratic) nature of our work, we are frequently the only writing center administrator at the watercooler. Yet, it is often only in collective and larger-scale events that we find community around writing center labor. This book brings together dozens of practitioners to document their labor stories, and it also explores ways to move our field forward. This project represents a collective effort to bring out into the world the private and often hurried or secret conversations that we have about our work. These can often feel catastrophic or overwhelming, but they can also be triumphant, funny, and joyous. During and right after COVID-19, our labor—as well as the labor of millions—shifted in dramatic ways. But many workers have also shifted their relationship to their work and questioned what they want from their jobs. The time to create a field-wide conversation about writing center work in its vicissitudes is *now*. Because what we do is highly relational—and because we believe that there is power in collective action—it is critical for us to document these stories and learn from them as we take further action and advocate for ourselves and other writing center workers. Writing center work is joyful, but, as we explain momentarily, it is also under-researched from a labor studies perspective.

While we talk methodologically about the role of stories in restorative justice and equity and inclusion work—and the history of counterstorying in the legal field and for BIPOC rhetors—we believe storying serves many different and inclusive purposes. For one, stories slow us down; they ask us to ponder, to ruminate, and to linger, echoing Berg and Seeber’s (2013; 2016) calls for the Slow movement in academia. Stories also prompt us to action. Stories are anti-capitalist: they do not optimize meaning; they do not get right to the point; they are not, in other words, part of the efficiencies we might otherwise gravitate towards in our research and in our lives. In these ways, stories and storytelling help to materially represent the futures we hope for—futures that are sustainable, slower, calmer, collectivist, equity-minded, and not always pushing towards optimization of production. We find that many of the themes emerging in the narratives in this project respond to the pervasive logic of late capitalism omnipresent in the current neoliberal climate of the American university, even as the method of storying resists this very logic.

We acknowledge here that framing our work as anti-capitalist may be unsettling for some readers. We urge those readers to bear in mind that capitalism, strictly defined, is an economic system wherein capital is privately (or corporately) owned, and decisions are thus driven by profit rather than by the common good. Education is a common good. As we will explain in detail, capitalism—especially in the context of the neoliberal university—has negative consequences, and we argue throughout the book for new paradigms in which to envision our work. To be clear, as Terkel (1974) found many decades ago, many of us love our work and the legacy of our

production. In fact, *we love our work*. However, given the neoliberal structures informing our industry, among many others, we also believe the current labor model we function within is unsustainable. We need to forge a new way forward, which we believe can be found through self-examination, collective action, and a framework of eroding capitalism provided by Erik Olin Wright (2019).

The first Act of this project thus outlines the state of writing center research on work as well as how neoliberalism impacts labor in higher education. We then examine intersectionality and its relationship to writing center labor before presenting our counterstorying and testimony methodology. We document and discuss how the collected narratives for the project were developed: writing center practitioners participated in a larger meaning-making process that began with a call for stories, a collective writing workshop, and series of feedback sessions. We then share the key concepts of the project and offer ways to engage with the book, concluding with a call for clear-eyed optimism informed by data and the realities of current labor conditions in the field. Act II contains stories of labor conditions from 34 contributors. Act III proposes ways forward informed by the anti-capitalist writing of Erik Olin Wright (2019). There, we imagine anti-capitalist futures that include wall-to-wall organizing of academic workers and provide methods to unlearn internalized capitalism. Along the way, we offer frameworks, key terms, and discussion questions for readers.

In the end, we hope that this project will be used in many ways that we detail more specifically below. Personally, we wanted to capture a series of moments in the early 2020s when labor manifested in the zeitgeist in ways not seen in over a generation and when unions enjoyed broad popularity and support. As we write these words (in fall 2023) union actions like strikes and walkouts are only increasing across countless sectors such as car manufacturing, health care, casino work, entertainment and so on (Associated Press, 2023). Higher education is no stranger to union actions, either, with Rutgers winning a new contract (Burns, 2023) after a spring 2023 walk-out that included broad support (faculty of all ranks, graduate students, postdocs, staff, etc.) and the UC system winning a new contract under similar circumstances in fall 2022 (Associated Press, 2022). At the same time, while unions are enjoying a reputational renaissance and worker actions increase, our legislative landscape is such that union battles are hard fought but do not always result in contract ratification or good faith bargaining by management. We began this work hoping to extend the knowledge base of the field, to document the difficulties of current labor conditions, and to identify opportunities to organize. But serendipitously in the process, we found community and collectivity, and we rekindled our joy and hope. We believe that the way forward is in collective action, in labor organizing, and in imagining an anti-capitalist future. We also believe stories can unite us in common purpose and in empathy.

In Solidarity.

Genie and Dan