

1

TUTORING AS (HARD) LABOR *The Writing Clinic, The Writing Laboratory, The Writing Center*

I now direct a writing center that I *do not* imagine to be characterized by the same sense of dislocation as the one in which I worked with Todd.¹ But I can't be sure of that. In fact, I am less sure of it at this point in the semester, having just held the last class meeting of the year in my tutor-training course. The final few weeks of that course are usually marked—and this class was no exception—by a stream of students visiting my office, not to talk about end-of-term projects (as we might expect) but to work through, quietly and individually, their concerns about beginning to tutor. One after another, they express their nervousness, their uncertainty about their preparation, their concerns even about the appropriateness of their personalities. As they enter and exit my office, they parade through a writing center that, though modest in its appointments, is nonetheless bright and cheery enough, with magnetic poetry and Magna Doodles dotting its tables and student artwork on its walls. Through the doors of my office, these students can hear the low tones of talk between tutors and writers punctuated occasionally (or frequently, depending on the tutor) with bursts of laughter or with rolls of giggles. Yet they don't seem to notice. I wonder about that, and I try to remember what I felt as a beginning tutor.

I don't recall when I first realized that writing centers were called anything at all. I don't think it was when I was an undergraduate, when I rose from the table in the dining hall after lunch, announcing that I had to "go tutor." Elkins Hall was simply the place where I went to do that. I do believe, thinking back, that a faded, hand-lettered sign on the door indicated that this room housed the "Tutoring Center," but the designation seemed insignificant to me.

Such a take on tutoring seems hard to imagine now—now that I have spent more than a decade thinking about and working in writing centers, now that I am writing a book focused largely on the signification of naming, the correspondence between how we talk about ourselves (writing labs, writing clinics, writing centers) and what we do. Nevertheless, I do feel certain that the “Tutoring Center” designation *was* insignificant to me at the time. And I can’t help but believe that the lack of that sign (*The Writing Center*) and my failure to identify a system within which I was working, beyond “just tutoring,” were intimately related. There was no there there. I like to think, and I do have some confirmation of this, that the tutors here at Fairfield name the writing center somewhere in their job descriptions. Often I’ll hear them say that they “work in the Writing Center” or that they “tutor in the Writing Center.” They seem to attach a sense of place to their work, even as I become increasingly suspicious of the connection between the work of creating a community and the tutors’ own experiences in the writing center. (More on this problem later in the chapter.)

This chapter, then, takes up the issue of naming not to privilege one designation over another—to assert that writing labs “experiment” on students or to claim that writing clinics “medicalize” them—but to imagine nonetheless that calling a thing a thing somehow *matters*, to consider that the ways in which we characterize work tells us something *about* that work. To do so, I will both review what others in the writing center community have written and said about the terms *clinic*, *lab*, and *center* as ways of imagining work with students, and I will extend those discussions in ways that I hope will prove provocative no matter what we call ourselves.

MUDDY WATERS: THE WRITING CLINIC AND THE WRITING LAB

My initial attempts at drafting this chapter made more significant, hard-and-fast distinctions between the writing clinic and the writing laboratory, in part because considering each metaphor independently (*clinic*, *lab*, and *center*) seemed to be accepted practice (see Pemberton 1992 and Carino 1992) but also because, like Michael Pemberton and

Peter Carino, I had hoped to tease apart distinctions that might become fused should I consider the two in tandem.

I began by reading (and re-reading . . . and taking notes on) Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, searching . . . searching . . . searching for a hook. The book was thought-provoking. It gave me lots of ideas, and they led me, ultimately, here—to a place where I have decided *not* to artificially impose distinctions between the two metaphors (*clinic* and *lab*) for which I can, frankly, find little evidence in the literature. A cop-out? We'll see.

Carino seems comfortable distinguishing between the two, arguing that the term *clinic* “degrades students by enclosing them in a metaphor of illness” (33). Quoting from the *OED*, Carino does consider the secondary sense of *clinic* as “[a]n institution, class, or conference, etc. for instruction in or the study of a particular subject; a seminar,” but he ultimately rejects this notion of a writing clinic (as opposed to, say, a business clinic) because the student bodies he sees so obviously marked by visits to the writing clinic invoke, for Carino, the medicalized sense of the term.

Pemberton is more willing than Carino to see elision between the clinic metaphor and others, but he too treats it separately. The structure of his article, “The Prison, the Hospital and the Madhouse: Redefining Metaphors for the Writing Center,” in fact, effectively demands that he do so. Pemberton sees the clinic as preferable to the prison and madhouse metaphors (small comfort), primarily because the clinic metaphor at least affords writing center staff a modicum of professionalism and because clinics (or hospitals, to use Pemberton's metaphor) “are places of compassion and healing” (13).

Both authors ultimately conclude that the metaphor of the clinic oversimplifies the work of the clinic and, by extension, the complexity of writing. Here's Pemberton: “Most writing problems are deeply ingrained and quite complex; they are resolved gradually, over time, often over a period of years. They do not lend themselves to quick cures or simple panaceas” (14). And Carino: “Writing clinics were associated with drill and kill pedagogy. . . . This pedagogy did not, however, consider that learning is a negotiation of new habits, values, expectations, turns of mind, strategies of representation, and the like” (34).

While Pemberton finds no redemption in metaphors other than the *center* metaphor (which I will consider later), Carino views the *lab* metaphor as providing “a powerful counter narrative, advancing a cultural ideology more akin to the ways we perceive ourselves today” (34).² According to Carino, labs were places where writing was more likely to be viewed as a process, where staff would be reconceiving notions of pedagogy according to this new paradigm of composition studies, where people found “a place to experiment, to pose questions, and to seek solutions” (35). Carino does admit, however, that “the metaphor of the lab came to signify a place as marginal as most clinics” (35).

That the metaphoric *lab* has more to recommend it than the metaphoric *clinic* is evidenced for Carino by the fact that the *lab* moniker persists today, despite its negative connotations, precisely because labs can also connote possibility and play (strengths of writing centers that I’d like to take up again later). As I have written elsewhere, however, writing centers have always functioned in the face of inherent contradictions, and it is a mistake, I believe, to underwrite the history of the writing center as one in which practices at any given time and among any self-identified entities are actually monolithic. (See my February 1999 *CCC* article for more on this subject.) So labs were not the only places for possibility and play. Clinics, even though their names might not have implied this, could be such places as well. In fact, one of the most progressive early centers *was* a clinic, the University of Denver’s Writing Clinic, where Davidson and Sorenson, who co-directed it, advocated a psychotherapeutic approach to tutoring sessions. While psychotherapy is a medical model of sorts (and some psychotherapy did follow the diagnostic model), the tutors at the University of Denver were not drilling-and-skilling, were not diagnosing and treating, at least as far as we can tell from the published literature. They were instead advised to question and draw students out using “Rogerian nondirective counseling” (1946, 84), a precursor to the nondirective or mirroring method that dominated writing center practice for decades and is still advocated today.

We can also find a great deal of evidence in the literature of writing *labs* where drill-and-(s)kill type remediation is a priority and where

cures for conditions were frequently prescribed. I am reminded of one of my favorite (so to speak) pieces of (fairly) early writing on writing labs, J.O. Bailey's "Remedial Composition for Advanced Students." Bailey, then director of the laboratory at the University of North Carolina, describes UNC's Composition Condition Laboratory (or "CC" for short), designed for students who had advanced academically but who were still poor writers (1946, 145). If an instructor thought that a student needed to work on his (or possibly her) writing, the instructor would place a "CC" behind the final grade to indicate that the student had a "composition condition" and should be sent to the lab. This lab doesn't sound like the kind of place where there were many possibilities or much play.

In fact, my readings of the early literature on writing centers convinced me that the naming of those early labs was probably largely accidental. In other words, we can tell very little—nothing reliably, really—about the work of a writing center by considering what it was called within its own institution. While many of us now spend a great deal of time inquiring as to what other centers call themselves—not only "The Writing Center" or "The Writing Lab" but "The Writer's Room" or "The Writer's Workshop"—that kind of self-conscious attention to the relationship between the signified and the signifier was absent until recently. As my earlier anecdote suggests, people in those places were, for the most part, "just tutoring." Published pieces on writing labs were quite likely to medicalize students, and published pieces on writing clinics might well report experiments on/with students. In practice, these centers were probably doing all that and more every day. And, in reality, all of our centers are probably doing all that and more still today. I know mine is.



As I played with these metaphors, as I failed to find a reliable correspondence between the name and the thing, I became more interested in the relationship *between* medicine and science, a relationship that has become increasingly less evident in our day-to-day life, where most of us deal with medical doctors who are not, or at least would not consider their primary functions to be, scientists. They are not involved in

cutting-edge research; they don't work in labs; they may not even be formally affiliated with hospitals (particularly if they are primary-care physicians); and if they are affiliated with hospitals, those hospitals are likely not to be teaching hospitals or research hospitals. These people (and patient-care advocates remind us and them that they are, in fact, people) are "just" doctors. Michel Foucault makes the relationship between medicine and science seem self-evident, so the more I read, and the more I wrote, and the more I thought, the more I was forced to reconsider my original intention to distinguish between the two, *clinic* (medical) versus *lab* (scientific), in those particular terms.

I put the clinics aside for a while and turned my attention to labs, particularly to early science teaching labs. We certainly seem to take for granted in this field that writing labs were modeled on science labs, but I wanted more details. Rather than answers, I found questions. In particular, I learned that there is little agreement in the science-teaching community as to the key features of a teaching lab. Issues such as the amount of space needed for a lab (or for different types of labs) are hotly contested, funding is a constant source of distress, ideal reporting lines are debatable, course credit and full-time equivalents for graduation are confusing. It all began to sound strangely familiar.

What seemed less familiar was the gendering of the discussion. Thirteen of the fifteen articles to which I was referred had been authored by men; discussions on the National Association for Research in Science Teaching (NARST) listserv to which I subscribed were dominated by male voices. What was I to make of the nagging feeling I got from these NARST threads? It took an exchange between two students to prompt me.

Martin, the one male student who shows up at our end of the semester meeting for potential tutors, sits quietly in his seat as I talk about procedures and policies in the Writing Center: *This is how students sign up for appointments in the Writing Center. This is the database into which records need to be inputted. This is the schedule you will fill out to tell me your preferred hours. Blah, blah, blah, blah.*

Any questions?

A few students have questions of clarification. And finally, a soft “okay” from Martin’s side of the room as his hand lifts halfway. I acknowledge him, and he asks with a smirk, “Uh . . . Am I going to be the only *guy* tutoring in the Writing Center?”

I offer a “Probably” followed by a quick “but”: “But we’ve had male tutors in the past; we just happen not to have any right now.” True enough. But. When we *have* had male tutors, they have been in the extreme minority—one, at most two or (during really wild times) three, out of a staff of approximately twelve.

One woman asks Martin if he has “a problem with that,” to which he dutifully replies, “No.” Another student then asks why this is and whether our situation is typical. This is not the discussion I had planned. (They so rarely are, aren’t they?)

I am apt to forget (until I am reminded, until I am on a listserv for scientists, until a student asks a question about the male-female ratio/n in the writing center) the extent to which I am engaged in work that is historically feminized. Even once I am reminded, I have to think hard, over and over again, about what this means.

The feminization of composition studies—and particularly of composition teaching (of which writing centers are obviously one manifestation)—remains an issue that has been subjected to a fair amount of analysis. In *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Susan Miller (1991) distinguishes between a gendered division of the labor of composition and a sexual division of that labor. Miller argues that a gendered reading highlights the degree to which these activities express social power relations rather than mere (or exclusively) biological distinctions. In a chapter entitled “The Sad Women in the Basement,” Miller nods to Freudian psychoanalysis to consider the “matrix of functions” (136) working to feminize the composition instructor:

[O]ne figure of a composition teacher is overloaded with symbolic as well as actual functions. These functions include the dual (or even triple)

roles that are washed together in these teachers: the nurse who cares for and tempts her young charge toward “adult” uses of language that will not “count” because they are, for now, engaged in only with hired help; the “mother” (tongue) that is an ideal/idol and can humiliate, regulate, and suppress the child’s desires; and finally the disciplinarian, now not a father figure but a sadomasochistic Barbarella version of either maid or mother. (137)

Miller herself notes the irony of this fledgling professional field of study invoking the scientific model of paradigms in a desperate attempt to legitimize work that is otherwise feminized in every major aspect of its analysis: socially, culturally, economically. She writes,

The juxtaposition of these terms [*process paradigm*] does not, I would argue, unconsciously preserve androgyny and thereby give equal privileges to two terms of a pair that is symbolically female and male, yin and yang. Instead, the choice of this seemingly contradictory pair in a new description of composition teaching and theory contains two equal preservations of the historical (traditional, hegemonic) situation of composition. *Process* practices extend and preserve literary subjectivity, while their explanation in a *paradigm* theory extends and preserves the anxiety about status that has always been associated with English studies, both in regard to the perfection of elitist texts and as a professional concern about identity in relation to older, “harder” disciplines. (140)³

In the end, we are left with a topsy-turvy rendering of scientized sites like *clinics* and *laboratories* full of *women* doing the *laboring*.

Labor. Perhaps first and foremost the word assumes the connotation of “man’s work” (as in *hard labor*), calls up images of men bent over building materials or microscopes. But it is of course multi-accented, carrying with it Marxist notions of a laboring underclass of proletariat workers and notions of re/production (specifically *female* reproduction). In particular, it could lead us to consider the ways that women’s work—the cleaning up of the grammar, the kiss-the-red-ink-and-make-it-better—is defined within a framework that is structured by men (the clinic, the lab) and that frees men to do the “real work”: engage with interesting ideas, mentor the “smart” students, do their own writing.

I want to commandeer this discussion of labs and clinics, wrest it away from the associations under which it has been laboring. Let it *breathe-breathe-breathe*.

LAMAZE, LABOR, AND THE TAYLORIZATION
OF THE WRITING CENTER

Nearly a decade ago, Donna Haraway referred to Richard Gordon's use of the term "homework economy" to describe

. . . a restructuring of work that broadly has the characteristics formerly ascribed to female jobs, jobs literally done only by women. Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (1991, 166)

More recently, in a *Harper's* article entitled "Maid to Order: The Politics of Other Women's Work," Barbera Ehrenreich considers the implications of the growing middle-class reliance on household services. Ehrenreich observes, "[I]n a society in which 40 percent of the wealth is owned by 1 percent of households while the bottom 20 percent reports negative assets, the degradation of others is readily purchased" (2000, 59). I thought of Ehrenreich last night as I knelt bent over shelves in our new (a relative term, to be sure) house, scoring and sponging and scouring shelf paper from the insides of drawers and closets and cabinets, to ready them for the painter (whom we've hired) and for the "tile guy" (whom we've also hired). I wondered, while I was working, whether there wasn't also someone/anyone whom we could hire to do what I was doing: the dirty work. "We can afford it, can't we?" I wondered aloud to my husband.

I was happy to get back to writing this morning, in my air-conditioned office, where all the light switches work and where there's no damp, musty smell of a closed-up house mixed with cannabis and

cat piss. It wasn't so hard to scoooot my chair in and start to *typ-typ-type* here in the Ivory Tower.

"[T]he cleaning lady," according to Ehrenreich, is positioned (quite literally) "as *dea ex machina*, restoring tranquillity as well as order to the home. Marriage counselors recommend her as an alternative to squabbling, as do many within the cleaning industry itself" (62). If in the 1960s and 1970s housecleaning was primarily a question of gender—wives were expected to clean inside the home and husbands were expected to work outside of it—Ehrenreich argues that now "the politics of housework is becoming a politics not only of gender but of race and class—and these are subjects that . . . most Americans generally prefer to avoid" (63).

Academic cleaning services, like writing centers, house their share of the politics of race, gender, and class. Like the general American public, our institutions also prefer to avoid these discussions (unless, of course, the discussions *celebrate* the *diversity* of our institutions of higher learning). Even those of us who work in writing centers, those of us who are quick to assign blame to our institutions for their failures, are loath to turn a critical eye on ourselves and on the role our own writing centers might play in further entrenching a have/have-not economy of the university.⁴

The proliferation of cleaning services has resulted in what Ehrenreich calls an "intense Taylorization" that "makes the work . . . factorylike," more (for the purposes of our later discussion) efficient (66).⁵ She describes, for example, the strict order in which rooms in homes were to be cleaned: "Deviation was subject to rebuke, as I found when I was caught moving my arm from right to left while wiping Windex over a French door" (66). Pedagogical requirements can lend a factory-like air to the writing center sessions of even the most well-meaning tutor, as she works with the eighteenth paper from the same Info Systems class or anticipates the fanatical grammatical critique of a professor with whom she herself has struggled. Though I try to shield the tutors from rebuke (other than those they visit upon themselves, over which I have little control), they know that they are likely to be perceived as deviating from the norm by their mere presence.

Several years ago, two tutors reluctantly pointed an irate faculty member in the direction of my office. When I greeted him with a how-are-you, he replied that he was very upset, thank you, as he had sent an ESL student to the writing center to work on a draft and her paper, when it was returned to him, was still *dirty*, filled with inappropriate usage and grammatical mistakes. I explained to him how we work with ESL students and reminded him (as he surely already knew, given his area of expertise) that acquiring a second language is a slow, developmental process. I then suggested that, had the tutor simply *corrected* all the mistakes, this same professor would likely be in my office blessing me out because the tutor had done *too much work* for the student. He admitted that this was probably true.

The tutors, for their part, have difficulty maintaining the strict boundary that constitutes a student's *own* work when students so frequently arrive with papers filled with the *professor's* comments, with ideas about the paper the *professor* wanted to see written, with evidence that the *professor* feels justified in having little regard for these same boundaries. Just last week, a student arrived, introducing her dilemma using an impressive array of expletives, with an outline penned by her professor on the back of her draft. The professor introduced the outline to the student by stating simply, "These are your ideas." They were, of course, not the student's ideas.

In the conclusion to her essay, Ehrenreich issues a "moral challenge . . . to make work visible again: not only the scrubbing and vacuuming but all the hoeing, stacking, hammering, drilling, bending, and lifting that goes into creating and maintaining a livable habitat" (70). The scrubbing and hoeing and tending that went on in the aforementioned session was admirable. Kristen, the tutor, took a student who came in sullen—with the attitude that she was "transferring anyway"—and painstakingly, methodically, figured out where the professor had gone wrong. The session began by focusing on the professor's repeated remarks that the paper, as it stood, employed "circular reasoning." The student didn't understand what that meant. Kristen suspected that the professor's outline might suggest a way to sequence the argument more logically. Upon studying the outline, however, Kristen realized that the teacher had misunderstood

the student's point and had created an outline that in fact misrepresented the student's argument. The student seemed to want to try to work off of the outline, even though she neither agreed with it nor understood it. So Kristen had a new task: she suggested that they put the professor's outline aside and just do their own outline. They did. The session was punctuated by moments where Kristen instructed the student not only on writing, but also on intellectual integrity. "Sometimes you have to go with what the teacher wants," Kristen said at one point, "But this isn't going to be *her* paper. Sometimes you just need to disregard what a prof says."

Needless to say, Kristen was distressed after the session. I tried, as I often do, to offer both the sinister and the benign interpretations of the professor's outline. She may have had, I suggested, five students lined up outside her door waiting to see her. Kristen acknowledged that possibility, but she concluded our meeting with the following thought: "You know what really bothers me? Making that outline is more than just making that outline, you know? There's something behind that." Yeah. I know.

I can see why the writing center becomes the hard-labor camp of the academy. What would happen if we were to seize that designation, admit that the writing center is indeed a place where actual labor (*gasp!*) takes place, look our colleagues in the eyes and say, yes, we work with our hands. We take texts and we turn them around and over and upside down; we cut them into their bits and pieces; we tug at them, tutor to student, student to tutor, back and forth, to and fro, tug-tug-tug. We ball up ideas and we pitch them, sometimes to each other, sometimes away—*three points!*—into the trash. (Omygodcanwedothat?!)

Setting metaphors in motion appeals to me. It gets me thinking less about the structural entities themselves as foundational—the lab, the clinic, the center—and more about the fundamental moments being played out *in* them, shifting the terms of the discussion "by leaping out of a 'mechanics of solids' and into a discussion of *fluidity*" (Davis 2000, 166, quoting Irigaray). Davis again offers a framework for loosening these metaphors when she observes, "Fluids are leaky; they do not stay put; they cannot be fixed in an appropriation" (166).

There's no escaping fluids and leaks in discussions of labor—childbirth and labor, that is. Breasts leak; water breaks. A pregnant woman's body exceeds its own boundaries (so much so that complete strangers often think nothing of reaching out to touch a protruding belly). Yet the only metaphor that comes close to approaching the labor-and-delivery model of writing center work—the midwife metaphor—presents a sanitized, romanticized version of the goings-on. This metaphor is routinely championed for its gentleness, its sensitivity, its attention to process. In her article “Giving Birth to Voice: The Professional Writing Tutor as Midwife,” Donna Rabuck frames the difference this way:

In contrast to doctors within the medical hierarchy who tend to view birth as a product, an isolated event that results in a child, midwives view birth as a normal, healthy process not dependent on heavy intervention or extreme mechanical manipulation. While most doctors see pregnant women for brief periods of time and rely on scientific information to chart their progress, midwives tend to devote more time to talking with pregnant women, asking and answering questions that have to do with mental as well as physical health, finding out what their clients need to know, and providing information in language they can understand. (1995, 113)

When Rabuck extends this glorious role of the midwife to the tutoring context, I object, as I read, to every single assumption she makes: the idea that sessions (or births) proceed gently and smoothly (113); the positioning of the midwife/tutor as a “translator [of] expectations” (114); the Cassandra-like persecution complex of the eternally marginalized and misunderstood (117). Enough.

Where is the noise?!

While I have no doubt that there are genuine benefits to having a midwife attend to a woman's pregnancy and childbirth and while I certainly agree that pregnancy and childbirth are natural-enough phenomena (for some women), I wonder why we insist on framing it as a zen-like experience, and I certainly wonder why that zen-like characterization is the one that gets foisted upon the midwife tutor. Are we afraid that no one will do it if we talk about the real deal? The

bloody plug, the protruding veins, the vomiting, the potential complications. The screams of pain; the tears of joy (or, sometimes, the wails of sorrow). Do we think people won't be willing to take that risk?

Where is the noise?!

In an article chronicling the evolution of sound and cinematography, Walter Murch, writing in *The New York Times*, has this to say about the primacy of sound during fetal development:

[F]our and a half months after we are conceived, we are already beginning to hear. It is the first of our senses to be switched on, and for the next four and a half months sound reigns as a solitary Queen of the Senses. The close and liquid world of the womb makes sight and smell impossible, taste and touch a dim and generalized hint of what is to come. Instead, we luxuriate in a continuous bath of sounds: the song of our mother's voice, the swash of her breathing, the piping of her intestines, the timpani of her heart. (2000, 1)

And then, I would add, when it all comes so abruptly to a halt, the first thing a healthy baby does is let out a great, big *holler!*

I went to visit a friend in the hospital after she had just given birth (with the help of a midwife) to her second child, a baby boy. We talked, as you might expect, about the labor and delivery, and she summed it up, with great intensity, this way: "It was sooooo painful, but it was sooooo worth it."

KEEP OUT OF THIS HOUSE: ILL-LITERACY,
A COMMUNICABLE DISEASE⁶

It became a running joke in class last semester that our discussions of tutoring always ended with my admission that the job is "impossible." Frankly, I think it is. Tutors are placed, on a daily basis, in impossible positions. Despite this, students flock to the tutoring class and then to the Writing Center because that im/possibility is the challenge, is the passion. First-generation tutors beget second-generation tutors by convincing a roommate or a fellow major or a compadre from some other common campus organization to take the class, give it a try. Tutoring is *sooooo* painful. But it's *sooooo* worth it. In fact, we might even say it's *infectious*.

Of course, we lament, however, that it is not. If tutoring were infectious, we might argue, writing center work would have revolutionized the teaching of writing by now, sixteen years after Stephen North (1984) first articulated the discontent of so many writing center staff in this regard. If tutoring were infectious, we wouldn't still see "Go to the writing center!" penned at the end of an essay. Writing centers wouldn't still be tied to remediation, both physically (in many cases) and psychologically (in most cases). We wouldn't still be running on soft money, in soft positions, in soft spaces. Unless we were quarantined.

I admit that I sometimes feel that the tutors and I have been quarantined. Judging from the litany of complaints in the literature and on the writing center listserv about people's basement spaces, about their tangential relationships to university life and resources, I would say that others might agree. So how about a self-imposed quarantine? An admission to our university communities that we too, like our students, are infected?

Referring to the type of writing usually taught in composition classrooms, Davis quotes Avital Ronnell who calls the work "hygienic writing" and the "self-cleaning text" (2000, 99). Ronnell writes, "Each thinking text, to the extent that it develops strategies of protection against outside interference or parasitism, is run by an immunological drive" (99). Students strive to produce antibacterial texts, impervious to the germ of an idea that might be subject to critique. Their writing is driven by the anticipation of problems. Yet their allegedly germ-free texts result in resistant strains of commentary, and even such sanitized texts as our students routinely produce are deemed *unwashed*. This is how a colleague winds up at my door with questions about an ESL student's paper. This is how a student winds up in the writing center with the outline of a paper that she can't begin to write. This is how "we [academics/philosophers of language] are called into the vocations of cleanup crew for the sanitation department of the philosophical enterprise." Still, "even the most effective cleanup crew isn't perfect. Even after a text has been sanitized, the most suspicious of snoots will detect a lingering odor. Interestingly enough, the cleanup crew itself, which necessarily, as Ronnell notes,

'retains traces of [the] filth' it is hired to purify, becomes infected and so is *infectious*" (Davis 100).

The notion that we are infected, that our students have somehow infected us and infect each other, will no doubt strike some as odd, as irresponsible, perhaps even as sheer blasphemy.⁷ Absolutely. But don't we all sometimes . . . come on . . . admit it . . . feel dis/eased? What about at lunch, at a table full of colleagues, when we're listening for the umpteenth time to one or another's diatribe on the *Decline of Standards*, on the *Death of Literacy*? Or at a committee meeting on (water) Retention? (Administrative) Bloat? On OutComes-(urp)-Assessment? Don't we all feel just a little . . . *sick*?

Such ill-health is not surprising given that our universities—that *we*—may be more interested in the cleanly *appearance* of student texts than in the genuine condition of the texts and the ideas they re/present. Returning to Ehrenreich's "Maid to Order," we learn that Taylorized, efficiency-driven operations are, ironically, "not very sanitary" (2000, 67). Ehrenreich, for her part, concludes, "The point is not so much to clean as to appear to have cleaned, not to sanitize but to create a kind of stage setting for family life" (67). The point is, perhaps, at least as Kristen's student initially understood it, not to straighten out the logic in your own argument but to mis/represent the argument the professor has erroneously assigned to you.

A self-imposed quarantine, then, might mean that we would have to admit that we, like our students, are neither clean nor particularly sanitary. And, worse yet, that there is no such thing, really, as a quarantine since we would still have to be worried, as Davis notes, about the *llleaksss*. About the noise seeping through the cracks, around the door jam, down the hall. About the students who would continue to arrive at our doors hoping to "get clean," looking for, as Michael Blitz and Mark Hurlbert have written, "a weekly 'fix'—a jolt of correctives to their works" (2000, 88).

Post-anythings (-modernism, -structuralism, -disciplinarity) leave the integrity of the subject in crisis. They take an entity that we assumed to be a w/hole, a unit, a self-contained, intact being and they

expose the cracks in its foundation(alism). Labs-and-clinics/science-and-medicine in the late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century meet with the disintegration and re-configuration of the body. Baboon hearts have given way to heart-lung transplants to skin grafts and cloning. In the face of such mind-boggling developments, it stands to reason that we are forced to find new ways of conceptualizing the w/hOLE, of thinking about the fragmentation of the self. Post-anythings teach me that closing the door may create a boundary of a sort, may provide a defense mechanism against future complaints (“Well, we closed the door!”) but that doing so offers a false measure of security, and a costly one at that, involving a loss of potential(ities). The boundary is permeable, with the noise, as I know from my own approaches to the Writing Center, still traveling up and down the hall. The closed door signals an unwillingness to engage, a refusal to ask *What is it I hear that others fail to hear?* How is it that these tones remain undifferentiated for PC (of the Prologue), that he can be so completely dismissive of them, characterizing them as “such a racket” and wishing for a little “peace and quiet”? Why am I suddenly transported out of my office and into another hallway, the hallway of our family home, a thousand miles and twenty years away, where we walked on eggshells and tiptoes during my grandfather’s nap time, so as not to provoke his “[deep] disappoint[ment]” and paternalistic diatribes on “appropriate[ness]”(PC)?

THE CENTER CAN/NOT (w)HOL(E)D

Here is a kind of question, let us still call it historical, whose conception, formation, gestation, and labor we are only catching a glimpse of today. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing—but also with a glance toward those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity. (Derrida 1978, 293)

In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense—a “final” irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the “West’s” escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the “Western,” humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history . . . The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (Haraway 1991, 150-151)

In “Structure, Sign and Play,” Jacques Derrida offers “two interpretations of interpretation,” two ways of imagining the mythology of the myth, the history of the history: “The one seeks to decipher . . . a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign. . . . The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, [beyond the dream] of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play” (292). As author, I see my own book in both of Derrida’s interpretations: as a project now working against the certainty of the w/whole, the centeredness of the (writing) center, yet as a project beginning seven years ago with dissertation research and a drive to uncover the historical *origins* of writing centers, their “true” practice, in colleges and universities. In my sessions with Todd, in my work with tutors, in my classroom encounters with students, in my research and writing, I did not find, I do not find, what I expected and expect to find. What I continue to find, however, is always much more play-full than I ever anticipated.

A search for the birth of the writing lab/clinic/center would take us back, but to where? To the admission of the *unwashed* to prestigious universities like Harvard in the late nineteenth century (Miller 1991; Berlin 1987)? To the conferencing method of the 1880s (Lerner)? To

self-sponsored writing groups (Gere 1987)? To open admissions? To the start of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal* (1978 and 1980, respectively)? Yes. Yes. Yes. To all of them. Our search should take us back to these places and more and more and more and more: To the “numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by an historical eye” (Foucault 1995, 145). This is how we can begin to tell the histories of the histories of our writing centers, to become writing center genealogists, in the Foucauldian sense of the term.

By the time I began my path of composition teaching and research, *writing center* was the naturalized term for this place where tutors and writers sat and worked on pieces of writing. Indeed, this is the reason I have selected it as the default term even when talking about published pieces on labs and clinics. With the notable exception of the Purdue Writing Lab (and the attendant *Writing Lab Newsletter*, both of which are overseen by Muriel Harris), the terms *lab* and *clinic* are used specifically to invoke a *past* moment in the histories of our writing centers. Our regional organizations, our national organization, our refereed journal, our listserv—all make specific references to the *centeredness* of our undertaking. This is not, however, to say that the idea of a *center* occupies uncontested space. Quite the contrary.

While no one is seriously trying to rescue the lab/clinic titles (at least not in print), the center terminology is championed periodically for its appropriateness in describing how we might want to be viewed by our institutions. Carino, for example, offers a definition of *center* that “evokes the communal aspect of the center as a microculture in which camaraderie replaces the competitive atmosphere of the classroom” (1992, 38). Another sense of the term, he adds, offers us “a bold and audacious metaphor aspiring to powerful definitions as in ‘the center of a circle, of revolution, of centripetal attraction; and connected uses’” (38). He does warn, however, that this sense “carries the dangers of assimilation as well as the potential for empowerment as it further imbricates writing centers in university culture, *defining them beyond the nurturing communities they often see themselves as*” (38, emphasis added).

In that same issue of *The Writing Center Journal*, Richard Leahy publishes an article that considers specifically and only the notion of the center for writing centers, focusing on two of the word's forms—*centeredness* and *centrism*—the former having more positive connotations for Leahy than the latter. Leahy offers a personal definition of centeredness that revolves around “a sense of purpose and community, of knowing ‘who you are’” (1992, 43), a sense he deems especially important as writing centers grow larger and take on additional cross-curricular responsibilities. Much of Leahy's article takes up the potential threats to community in the writing center, drawn from his own personal experience: specifically, a staff that gets too large or becomes too professional and the tenure-track status of the director (which drew him away from the center for committee work and for a sabbatical, resulting in a team of tutors not selected by him). As he traces these problems, Leahy refers repeatedly to things that “[work] against community” (44), to the need for a “feeling of family and teamwork” (45), to community as “purpose” as “mission” (46). Community, community, community. Hold on a minute there . . . You're *b-b-b-r-r-e-a-k-i-n-g u p!*

I don't necessarily disagree that the items Leahy singles out can present challenges, even problems, if we want to call them that. A large staff, a professionalized staff, committee work, a sabbatical—all have resulted at one time or another in critical unease in my writing center as well. So I'm not sure why I reacted so strongly to Leahy's continual reassertion of a writing center community.⁸ In truth, it may be because, after seven years of directing a writing center, I have grown tired of re-creating community in the writing center year after year after year (and it's only been seven!), most often to see my offspring become unfaithful to me. And I've begun to ask myself if maybe, quite possibly, *I* am the problem. Not for the reasons Leahy cites, though, as I said, I am guilty of all of the things he mentions. I am a problem for other reasons: for trying to “organize” the beginning of the year gathering, for “setting up” the holiday party, for ensuring that there's always food around (which the tutors of course appreciate). For imagining that these efforts might *create* a sense of community rather than *emerge from* one.

For hosting a holiday party to which no one came, even though they promised. They promised.

Leahy's *community* takes on the cloak of ontology, as though saying it makes it so: "Having completed all the requirements for a degree in community, I now confer upon you—*ta-daaaah*—a degree in community." But it's not so.

Davis considers the underpinnings of feminist pedagogies designed to foster a sense of community among participants.⁹ She writes,

Feminist pedagogy itself, Nancy Schniedewind suggests, is about encouraging the "feminist values of community, communication, equality, and mutual nurturance" (171). Schniedewind even suggests that such an atmosphere might be promoted, in part, by building "festive procedures" into the run of the course. "Festive procedures," she says, "are community builders. Refreshments during breaks of long classes, a potluck dinner on occasion, and the integration of poetry and songs into the course, all catalyze energy and build solidarity" (172). (Davis 2000, 214)

Critiquing this position, Davis argues that "the pedagogue in such a course performs the role of the social lubricant, the instigator of 'participatory decision-making' and 'cooperative goal-structuring' (173-74)" (Davis 214).

When students resist our attempts to create a community in the writing center, we should ask ourselves what to make of their repeated and systematic denials. I've decided that the fact that former tutors keep me updated on personal and professional milestones, stop in for lunch when they're passing through town, or arrange for us to meet in New York for dinner and a museum or two does *not* mean that there was some communal writing center experience for which they are nostalgic. It does not necessarily mean that I created a writing center community from which they benefitted. I've finally decided that such a community is not mine to create; it is not mine to sustain.

Lil Brannon and Stephen North comment on this problem in a recent issue of *The Writing Center Journal*, acknowledging that "[o]ne of the strengths of the writing center is also a clear weakness" (2000,

11). They write, “The writing center is able to stay exciting and fresh because yearly it is always remaking itself. Yet the problems of remaking are many” (11).

Interestingly, it was North who, along with Kenneth Bruffee, ushered in the concept of a writing center community. I am pinpointing 1984 as a pivotal year in writing center history in this respect, with the publication in quick succession of both Bruffee’s “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” and North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center.” Though the tones of the two pieces differ dramatically, both authors articulate a model of writing center practice that depends (if only implicitly) upon community and speculate on that model’s implication for the university at large. Bruffee begins his piece by chronicling the shift he has seen in his own writing center since moving from faculty tutors to peer tutors, a movement that “made learning a two-way street, since students’ work tended to improve when they got help from peer tutors and tutors learned from the students they helped and from the activity of tutoring itself” (1984, 4). In this regard, according to Bruffee, peer tutoring “did not seem to change what people learned but, rather, the social context in which they learned it” (4). Bruffee relies on this idea of *social context* throughout the essay, linking it to conversation, to “a writers’ community of readers and other writers” (8) and to, on more than one occasion, “a community of knowledgeable peers” (8). Peers work together in a given community, Bruffee explains, to experience learning as “an activity in which people work collaboratively to create knowledge among themselves by socially justifying belief” (12).

There would seem to be little doubt that the social nature of writing centers changed when they became staffed primarily by peers rather than by faculty. Savvy writing center directors have highlighted this change, both in philosophical terms (as Bruffee’s article demonstrates) and in physical terms, describing the character of their writing centers (couches, plants, and coffee pots are *de rigueur*) in terms that differentiate the centers from the sterile classroom experiences of most college students. Community would flow naturally from these new, more social settings, the literature would have us believe, and the nature of the writing centers, where small groups of people often

work together quite closely for several years, seems well suited to community formation. Certainly most writing centers hope to present faces that appear welcoming to outsiders (like us?) and to students who may feel left out of the general university community. To turn the tables on the university quarantine and self-impose it instead.

From North's initial (1984) line, "[t]his is an essay that began out of frustration," readers must be prepared for an argument from North that is much more strident than Bruffee's in its insistence that there is an *us* in this community (though North never uses this word) pitted against a *them*. While conflict is largely absent in Bruffee's piece—Bruffee never even alludes to, for example, what must have been considerable difficulties in gaining faculty support for peers to replace faculty tutors—conflict is actually a galvanizing force in North's piece. "Idea of a Writing Center" is replete with examples of the ways in which goals of the writing center staff often fly in the face of institutional goals (as those goals are represented by faculty, by administrators, even by the students themselves). North offers a decidedly Woolfian interpretation of the value of the writing center, one emphasizing the necessity of room and time and teachable moments. "Idea" has been canonized, then, not only for what it says about the *methods* of writing center staff (although North himself has reconsidered some aspects of this philosophy [in North 1994]) but also for what it suggests about the writing center's community of professionalized practitioners.

By the time Bruffee and North published these pieces, a discernible movement was afoot in writing centers: regional associations had begun to organize, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal* were establishing solid circulations. Previously isolated writing center staff members could plug into a growing national network of common successes and travails. The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), *The Writing Center Journal*, *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, the *Wcenter* listserv—all share the same basic presumption of members of many communities or organizations: that people with common concerns benefit from sharing those experiences with their peers. I have certainly been the beneficiary of the

good will of my writing center colleagues, and I hope that I have bestowed good will on my peers in turn. Nevertheless, I have been puzzled over the years by the continual reassertion of community in those regional and national writing center forums as I have learned that we can agree on virtually *no* characteristics that could identify us as a community—not a name, not status for directors, not status of staff, not practice. The list goes on. In fact, IWCA efforts at developing an accrediting arm have been thwarted (and rightly so, I believe) in part by our inability to articulate fundamental agreed-upon tenets of administration and practices such as those I've listed above (among others). In light of our agreement to disagree on virtually every aspect of our operations (short of the fact that we do all provide some sort of tutoring in writing), shouldn't we be wondering, What is this thing we're calling a writing center *community*?

Perhaps I stand accused right now in some readers' minds of being exceedingly unfaithful to my origins—to those members of the writing center community who have welcomed me over the years. Heretic. It makes me nervous, but I press on because I feel like I want to *p-u-s-h!* (Breathe-breathe-breathe.)

Davis helps me think differently about community when she writes, "The 'essence' of community/communication in a posthumanist world is the exposition of finitude and *not a bond*, which is always already *bondage*, always already at work silencing the difference of our finitude—the very thing that makes community possible" (2000, 193). Like Bruffee, like Leahy, like even North, Davis is concerned with what members of a community *share*, but that thing-that-is-what's-shared, according to Davis, "is the exposition of finite being, the exposure of an in-common (but unsharable) mortality and singularity that are not communicable but that are irrepressibly exposed/shared" (192).

I read these quotes for the first time as I tallied up the final grades for my tutoring and writing course, and I panicked: Have I prepared the tutors to have a moment like this with another person? And if I haven't, what *have* I done? But if I *have*, what have I done?! How much easier to teach them to outline a draft, to identify and refine a thesis statement, to correct errant commas.

So Davis urges us to believe in community but . . . “[r]esist imagining this community as ‘communion,’ as fusion, as the kind of melting together exemplified by *Star Trek*’s Vulcan mind-meld. Communion names the final culmination of sharing, the *end* of sharing—it is a desire for closure, for finality . . . [W]hat community shares is not the ‘annulment of sharing;’ what it shares is *sharing* itself” (194).



A conversation overheard by a tutor in the residence hall lounge:

Student 1: I went to the Writing Center with my paper today.

Student 2: What was that like?

Student 1: Well, we just kinda talked. [Long pause.] I think it helped.



Haraway’s remark about illegitimate offspring helps me make sense of one set of competing narratives (the one that locates the original im/pulse for writing centers in administrative concerns about the appropriateness of student bodies, doing battle with the one that writes the writing center as somehow managing to exceed that original im/pulse, to morph into something . . . Other). Davis’s definition of community—“what it shares is *sharing* itself”—also quiets some of the noise in my own head (not, mind you, that this is always desirable, but sometimes it is necessary). Taken together, Haraway’s and Davis’s points illustrate the appeal of community to a set of (writing center) workers whose specific charge (literacy education) appears central to institutional work but whose presence is often quite marginal. This central/marginal debate is a longstanding one in writing center literature. Offered as evidence of centrality might be a writing center’s cross-curricular impact, the built-in budget, the director’s permanent status. Just as often, a writing center’s rescued furnishings, its basement location, its soft money and frequent turnover may be taken as proof of its marginality. Ultimately,

I'll admit, marginality is more romantic—it's more "radical"—even as it, like community, results in a familiar writing center paradox: the center's anti-disciplinary appeal is precisely its difficulty; its fluidity directly challenges its sustainability; its anti-foundationalism flies in the face of the static nature of *the margin* and *the center*.

Rather than adhering to the marginal mindset that writing center staff are "underdogs" (a mindset perceived by Harris and Kinkead 8), "renegades, outsiders, boundary dwellers, subversive" (K. Davis 8), rather than assuming that writing centers arise *from* the margins, exist *on* the margins, and are populated *by* the marginal, we might instead view writing center staff and students as *bastardizing* the work of the institution. That is, we might say that they are not a threat from *without* but are rather a threat from *within*. We might seize the designation of institutional illegitimacy as a way of explaining our lack of faithfulness to our origins. (*Their fathers, after all, are inessential.*) Haraway offers the example of the regenerative potential of the salamander that loses a limb (1991, 181). Though the salamander can grow another one, we can't be sure, really, what that limb is going to look like. It certainly won't be a perfect replica of the old one. And it could even turn out to be **Monstrous**.

Such a monstrosity exceeds expectations for the "normal" and that excess, for those of us who work in writing centers, is potentially a way in/out/around the central/marginal/community quagmire we've been stuck in for too long. The question of whether our practices are central to the work of our universities is closely aligned with the degree to which those practices adhere to institutional expectations. The degree of our marginality, in contrast, corresponds to the extent to which we fail to adhere to those expectations (and to the extent to which our institutions fail us). What PC witnessed in our writing center that October evening were not practices that in any way appeared central to him, though they were certainly central to us. This, he (and others) may view as a failure on our part. The centrality of the practices he encountered—the laughter, the food, the lack of a well-defined hierarchy—may indeed contribute to the writing center's marginality. If so, then our institutions are certainly failing us.



Not long ago, I requested PC's permission to use his original memo in this book. I appeared in his office and told him that I wasn't sure whether he knew that I had been working on a book and that the book was in fact entitled *Noise from the Writing Center*. A flash of recognition crossed his face as he laughed, a bit embarrassed. I thanked him for this great gift, this wonderful research direction. He graciously granted permission for use of the memo, though not before re-reading it, along with my response to it. In the end, he said that he still agreed with his memo's original premise, and he asked me what I thought about mine. I said I still agreed with my memo, too. We laughed and sat talking about our summer research projects for the better part of an hour.

I have a hard time, after a meeting like this one with PC, four years down the road, believing still that this project is doomed. I am inclined to believe instead that our writing centers grow out of institutions that continually outgrow themselves. And we have to hope for some monstrosities along the way. Maybe even tweak the helix a bit here and there to ensure them.