

Review of *Storying Writing Center Labor for Anti-Capitalist Futures*

Xuan Jiang

Giaimo, Genie, and Daniel Lawson. (2024). *Storying Writing Center Labor for Anti-Capitalist Futures*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2024.2401>

Keywords: [invisible work](#), [metalabor](#), [emotional labor](#), [anti-capitalist](#)

Doi: [10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.21.25](https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.21.25)

After reading *Storying Writing Center Labor for Anti-Capitalist Futures*, an open-access book about writing centers (WCs), I believe it deserves open read, review, and publicity. The 274-page-long book can be a quick read, but not an easy read, because it hurts you, moves you, connects you, and enacts you. So, you want to reread and share this book with others.

There are three Acts, interrelated but distinct sections, in the unique structure of this book. Genie N. Giaimo and Daniel Lawson write Act I and III as well as edit Act II. Act I profoundly dissects several writing-center-specific problems by rooting out political and economic factors as a macro-view frame. Act II allows WC practitioners—directors, tutors, faculty, and other administrators—to share their stories, at various levels and in diverse dimensions, referred as story authors hereafter. Act III calls for action to take on “an anti-capitalist framework” for WC labor so that WC laborers are “interpellated and thus create more solidarity among various intersectionalities of identity” (20).

The book displays a complicated landscape of WC studies, within, across, and beyond writing center space. To advance the knowledge of writing center labor studies, it introduces some thought-provoking concepts, such as emotional labor and metalabor. *Metalabor* is “work: it exacts a toll on the worker; it is expected of the worker, but in and of itself it is not *valued*” (207). The authors value emotional labor as much as metalabor, and several sections of the book propels call for action through converging multiple voices and keeping those voices un-altered. Along with the term *invisible work*, this book gives a conceptual model to dissect the scope and relations of these three work-related concepts (see the figure below). *Invisible work* is “the uncompensated, gendered, and thus unvalued work of the domestic sphere... and translates into the

Dr. Xuan Jiang is the Assistant Director of the Center for Excellence in Writing at Florida International University. Her research interests, reflected in her 30+ publications, include writing tutors’ professional development, writing tutors’ well-being and morale at workplace, the effect of writing groups on graduate students’ writing and themselves as writers, feminist leadership, feminist ethic of care, critical mentorship, issues and strategies in academic writing, transnationalism and translanguaging in TESOL, writing pedagogy, and writing tutoring, second-generation and 1.5-generation students’ academic performance and the factors behind. As the teacher, trainer, and mentor of peer tutors, she has collaborated with her students on conference presentations, manuscript writing and publications. Among 10+ collaborative publications, Dr. Jiang was the co-author of the article, titled “Feminist Intersectionality: Two Writing Center Staff Renegotiating Identities in the Early 2020s”, published in *Peitho* Fall 2024.

work sphere of writing centers” (207).

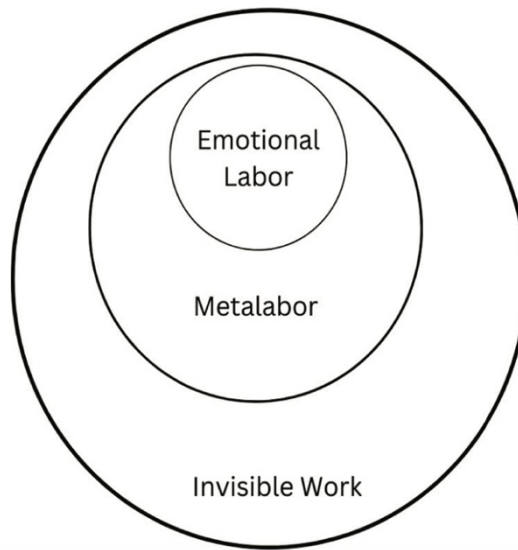


Fig. Relationship between invisible work, metalabor, and emotional labor

Gaiimo and Lawson build upon existing literature to introduce and articulate these three concepts in WC field in Act I. Agreeing with Morrison and Nanton (2019), Gaiimo and Lawson call for the writing studies and WC fields to make the profession more “deeply welcoming rather than rhetorically welcoming” (19). In Act II, the book authors have done so by inviting and compiling 34 lived stories from authors who work or affiliated with WCs in the U.S. Act II, as a collection, displays many distinct aspects of the lives of WC folks and transgresses the boundary of professional and personal dimensions. These stories, categorized into six themes, are 3-page short stories but their impact on readers like me is long-lasting. I feel my emotions—anger, sadness, joy, and pride—in reading along with these real-life, real-time stories which contextualize, visualize, problematize and strategize WC labor. Because of how those stories make me feel and connect me as a WC fellow, I remember many of them and strongly recommend the book to readers who see themselves connected with WCs or at large with higher education.

Among the 34 story writers, six are anonymous, three pseudonymous, and 25 use real names. Over a quarter of scholars pragmatically chose to share their stories without being identified. Rhetorically, such a decision shows their approach to compromise with real-time threats in their profession. WC scholarship welcomes these lived accounts to strive for a field of justice and inclusion; these WC laborers balance their righteous will to contribute to this communal goal with their individual concerns.

Many of the story authors, as I infer, might have never shared or written such type of stories at such a deeply personal level. Those lived stories provide images and scenarios in readers’ minds and rhythmize readers’ heartbeat with power and connections. The chapters in Act II are catalysts of “deliberate, intentional action” to produce transformation (Wright 17). While typical academic books which provide “nutrition” to your cognition, this book also provides “discomfort” to your emotion. It makes you cry and laugh with tears and ponder!

For instance, Muriel Harris, the leading founder of Purdue's WC and its OWL (Chapter 6), articulates the uniqueness of WC labor as that "there is the multiple aspects of administering a writing center that instructors...do not have to deal with" (52). Vincent Belkin (pseudonym) says in Chapter 30 "emotional labor is perhaps the most difficult and most ignored side of directing a writing center" in the sense that writing center directors "tend to know our students better than the average professor does...this IS emotional labor that often goes unaccounted for and rarely gets discussed" (163). This also applies to tutors who know their student writers more, hence they experience more emotional labor. Emotional labor permeates feminist theories and gendered practices because the other side of it is love – labor of love. Such labor of love is reflected in not only how WCs operate but the field's publications, such as Rebbeca Hallman Martini's story (Chapter 9) about the founding of the *The Peer Review*. As the newest and amiable journal in the WC field, *The Peer Review* has been fighting for writer's voices and agency in the politicalized publishing field, as they value writers' intellectual labor, not simply conforming the field's publication rules.

Thinking of writing center administrators (WCAs) and tutors as predominantly female, Candis Bond in Chapter 37 warns readers that "WCAs may give more than they take, but this need not always be synonymous with exploitation" (137). The exploitation, seen in individuals, is an ecological system through critical analysis between the WC and its laborers, and, at large, English and institutional colleagues. That is seen from Chapter 16, written by an anonymous author who executed strategic thinking and action for their WC even when their career was under great jeopardy. The exploitation happens to Lucy (pseudonym), the only chapter author with liminal relation to her WC. As a WC affiliated faculty member, Lucy, in good faith, works to "build a community around writing center best practices but fails" (219), because the director ignores her expertise and contribution.

I position my intersectional identity—a transnational BIPOC female WCA—in reading the book and drafting this book review. Just as Giaimo and Lawson acknowledge "our BIPOC colleagues are doubly or even triply 'taxed'" in their WCs when performing "invisible work" (17), BIPOC story tellers in Act II would experience doubly or even triply emotional labor when sharing their stories, no matter how overt or covert those relate to their identities. And because "not only is the labor itself devalued, but so is the BIPOC WCA's selfhood" (19), BIPOC colleagues engage in double-faceted metalabor for the WC and themselves through negotiating, advocating, coalition building, and other work to "make working possible, feasible, and/or sustainable" (32). Hence, it is not hard to understand that although their outcry in the stories is real, multiple BIPOC chapter authors choose to be anonymous or pseudonymous, as they have learned from realities and have rational concern about repercussions. Their agentic decision echoes with Giaimo's hope that "these stories—counterstories, testimony, testifying, and narrativizing—raise consciousness and lead us to develop more protective behaviors, even as we advocate for change" (43). I believe stories have such power to accomplish such a mission; they can reach readers' "hearts and souls". BIPOC WC colleagues want to be brave and need to be safe with their hyper vulnerable lived stories and intersectional identities. For instance, Silk Jade, pseudonym, showed her double tax as a BIPOC experiencing metalabor and emotional labor, in years of communicating stakeholders to hold them accountable for the "mistake" in her job category. Silk Jade mapped her

journey of exile from her home culture and denial from her working institution. Although aiming to get rid of her liminal professional situation, Silk Jade also sees herself as an exile “in the hope of landing a position that will allow for some form of advancement” (209).

Besides my connection with Silk Jade, I feel my WC story resembles Daniel Lawson’s “serendipity,” defined as “when you go looking for one thing and you find something much, much more valuable” (43). My translingual abundance enriching my pedagogy encourages multilingual students to identify and utilize their own abundance; conferencing with students and tutors also helps me advance my research and teaching. While my job description is vague and job category is ambiguous, I am able to research any topics I like and explore out-of-WC opportunities. In this sense, liminal and marginal status has its flexibility and freedom. Furthermore, another layer of my identity—transnational—connects to the term “grand narratives” in Chapter 16. The anonymous author starts with a grand narrative about working in higher education and acknowledges the power of grand narratives. For transnational scholars residing in U.S. higher education, the “grand narratives” interweave an American dream—U.S. higher education is worldwide famous for its innovation, impact, and meritocracy.

Although Giaimo and Lawson hope more BIPOC colleagues would contribute to the book, I see each story, no matter written by BIPOC or not, contributing to the diversity and inclusion of the book. The book embraces writers in the process of “quiet quitting” (230) or during the practice of “pleasure activism” (228). Furthermore, no matter who the authors are through various social identifiers, they share something untold or unwritten—loss and trauma, denials and exclusions, resilience and perseverance, because those are super personal, greatly vulnerable, and thus highly protected and hidden. The professional experience and life trajectory of these writers, including but not limited to motherhood and daughterhood, contribute the real-time nature to this book and connect themselves to the real-life of the broader academic community. I salute Giaimo and Lawson, because of not only their logical structure of the book, and innovative and communal way to motivate WC laborers to write something “untraditional” and unconventional, but also their transparency and repositioning themselves as readers and writers. For instance, the book concludes, “WCs are very good at supporting students... but they are less prepared to support themselves” (235). In a similar vein, writing centers might be very good at supporting students of color, but they are less prepared to support their BIPOC staff. Such a book empowers WC folks with communality and transparency and informs potential newcomers to the profession.

In summary, I think this book reflects WCs’ self-positionality—intimate and emotional in the ocean of knowledge and cognition of academia. Believably, this book may not be quoted or cited heavily, according to some scholarly matrix, but it will not sit with dust thanks to people like you, dear reader. It will have some wear and tear from you and other readers whom you share. In this sense, reading this book activates or renews “community membership” of WCs and helps build a larger community of WC workers and supporters.