Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

Published by Utah State University Press
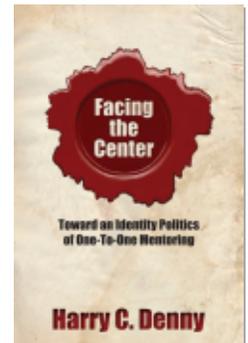
➡ For additional information about this book

https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1074

1

INTRODUCTION
Identity Politics, Face, and the Pedagogy of One-to-one Mentoring of Writing

I could tell a tale of swagger and pride, about a group of writing centers great in innumerable ways. The ones at St. John's University provide a glimpse into the pulse of college life in New York City. It's a world different from the sleepy casualness of typical college towns, and it's an environment unlike the crush of humanity at our public sister schools. On our Staten Island campus, the writing center is nestled on an oddly pastoral campus overlooking the city's harbor. The pace and energy are more subdued than its partner site across town, yet the tutors are just as bustling, from online conferences with students across the world to face-to-face sessions with classmates commuting from classes and jobs. In Queens, activity is as frenetic as Midtown on a business day: at one table, a first-year student debates a foreword she's creating for a classmate's book, while on a couch a tutor listens to a graduate student talk through the skeleton of a thesis's argument. In another part of the center, a small group of students workshops article reviews for an environmental studies course. These sorts of everyday exchanges are unremarkable and electric; they bear witness to the powerful, yet quotidian learning experiences in writing centers. Looking out across them, what strikes so many who happen upon the spaces is their look and buzz. They have a hum of academic life that's exhilarating on campuses torn between their commuter pasts and residential futures. Just as exciting as the *what's happening* in St. John's writing centers is the *who's there*. Where writing centers elsewhere struggle for staffs that mirror their academic communities, the clients and tutors at St. John's represent campus diversity, not just in terms of race, ethnicity and gender, but also with respect to discipline.

Just as easily, I could reflect on those very same writing centers and tell another tale of ongoing struggle to train the staff. It might be a cautionary story of what happens when the well-intentioned plans go wrong, or it might be a triumph about when some hopelessly lost or

naïve tutor has an epiphany that cross-pollinates, spurring on and bettering the wider crew. Such narratives have an archive in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, the monthly publication whose volumes provide a rich education in writing center thought and practice. I might share tutoring and tutor-training case studies that reinforce what we already know works well. The pages of *Landmark Essays*, research monographs, essays in *Writing Center Journal* and the postings on WCenter, the field's digital clearinghouse and support kiosk, well document the field's collective wisdom. Points of comparison for pay rates, staffing levels, and institution positioning can be found at the Writing Centers Research Project. Any of this work—what-to-do sorts of questions—operates on the assumption, on some level, that writing centers can just bank and replicate without regard to local context or culture or without deep thinking in collaboration with a staff and other stakeholders—faculty, students, and administrators. Granted, research in composition and writing center studies offers crucial guidance, benchmarks and best practices, none of them of much utility outside the everyday realities of our sites and experiences, whether they are emergent, established or senior. The writers of *The Everyday Writing Center* are the most recent to address and reinforce those sorts of insights (Geller et al. 2007).

I want to tell another tale, a set of tales in fact, rooted in a phenomenon that cuts across writing centers, that resists easy answers and offers up tough questions, that invites problem-posing and believing and doubting. Typically when the issue of "face" is addressed, people pose it is as a sort of rhetorical sort of problem: "How do we put the best face forward?" "What's the best face to put on this issue?" "Let's face the facts." "Putting a face on…" This book posits face as a starting point for inquiry, asking us to think about it in multiple ways, and pushing us to bracket quick recipes for resolution. *Facing the Center* is about process and politics and their implications for learning and teaching, particularly in the context of one-to-one collaborations. At its core, face is about identity and raises questions about who we are, and how we come to know and present identity, as a phenomenon that's unified, coherent, and captured in a singular essence, or as something more multi-faceted and dynamic. While on one level, I want us to think about face vis-à-vis writing centers; I also want us to be aware of margins and center, to think of the ways of privileging, to explore the dynamics of ordinary caste. Put simply, as much as I hope for us to grapple with the identities that circulate through writing centers and tutoring,

I also want us to think about the transparency of identity, where bodies and affects seem to exist and perform *beyond* or *post* identity, where they seem the "same" or "other." Facing the center requires an awareness that the identities at the center signify just as richly as those at the margin. In the move to foreground identity, I commit to the principle that the center, like the margin, has a face and needs interrogation and mapping. In an ever-globalizing world where corporate America and colleges and universities race to embrace and champion diversity, it remains illusive because Others often don't seem present, but a face and a center are nonetheless generative.[1]

St. John's students embody that very diversity most colleges strive for and their viewbooks often trumpet. Intercultural contact, learning, and teaching are part of the ether on campus, augmented no doubt by being situated at the crossroads of New York City. In that very characteristic face that's uncommon in other places around the country, St. John's students are also very typical. They think of college as the route to vocation and job security, undergraduate learning as a conduit to graduate training, professional curricula as entrée and apprenticeship in specialized discourse communities. What drives students is quite similar from campus to campus whether they live in Jamaica, Queens; Bensonhurst, Brooklyn; or in Madison, Amherst, or Eugene. But attending to diversity isn't axiomatic to urban colleges; the relative homogeneity of higher education beyond city centers begs for just as much consideration, not just to prepare students for life in a global village, but also to help students contest the hegemonic as arbitrary and provisional. As I've moved around the U.S. and visited a wide range of writing centers and the professionals who staff them, I've been struck by the need to account for not so much the pragmatics of what we do, but the bodies and the politics that accompany them in writing centers.

Wherever I've gone in the U.S., I've seen writing centers staffed with people in generally privileged positions working with clients who were more often than not first-generation, working-class, or non-traditional students, as likely to be people of color as white. I've seen writing center directors situated as Others by virtue of institutional position or

---

1.   My capitalization of the term "Other," reflects a conventional usage in sociology, cultural studies, and the wider humanities and social sciences. It is a cover term for the wider group of marginalized people, those who are variously understood as outside the mainstream, and Other represents an identity around which people mobilize into formal social and identity movements as well as loosely-organized networks of mutual recognition and support.

academic rank more marginal than the student demographic they were ostensibly reaching out to. I would discover administrators making do in writing centers, thwarted from pursuing passions in some other field, biding their time and marginally, minimally investing in their unit's programming and development. From coast to coast, I've seen elite universities create writing centers to, as Nancy Grimm (1999) argues, absolve themselves of any further responsibility to "at-risk" students, typically coded as Others, or of any sense of social obligation to the communities in which they were situated. More often than not, in writing center after writing center, in hushed whispers or flustered outbursts, conversations would edge toward the Others in their midst, from the vulgar, "Why does this school let them in if they can't handle it?" to the more subtle discourses grounded in static notions of argumentation or academic or standard English. Veiled at every turn—whether the object of concern was a center's staffing, its clients, administration, mission, philosophy, structure or processes—were bodies in the center, bodies with identities, bodies with faces, politics and implications. With rare exception, nobody was talking about them, a collective denial no doubt rooted more in inability than refusal.[2] This ambivalence about facing the center suggests a discomfort with complexity, with attention to the intersection of meta-forces and local influences at play in writing centers.

That epiphany—that identity politics are real and uncharted in writing centers—first struck me years ago when I began working in writing centers during graduate school. Sadly, the pattern has held up over the years as I moved from one academic post to another. Early on in my career, I stumbled into a community in writing centers, complete with informal networks of colleagues, regional conferences, special interest groups, and national organizations. This world has unparalleled collegiality in the academy; mutual support and mentoring is never more than a telephone call, email posting, or conference cocktail drink away. But it's a community not without problems, both ones it names and analyzes and ones that go unexamined and neglected. Some bemoan writing centers' standing in academe and strive to elevate them by

---

2.   Among the exceptions are the important dialogue on anti-racism that Victor Villanueva (2003, 2006) and Frankie Condon (2007) have fostered as well as the ongoing special interest group work Moira Ozias, Beth Godbee and others have been conducting at national and regional conferences in composition and writing center studies.

privileging scholarship (be it critical, empirical or qualitative), championing quality service to students, or fostering socially-conscious outreach. Others are critical of the execution of writing centers and question staffing by people not rooted in the field's professional literature, by individuals whose primary focus isn't administering their units, or by folks who don't (or can't) command sufficient support from their institutions. Just as composition studies claims a good deal of victimhood by being positioned (or positioning itself) as a step-child in larger English Studies and literary scholarship, writing center academics can follow a similar path, viewing the field as further subsidiary, narrowly restricted to the pragmatics of day-to-day (or session-to-session) execution of practice. But that's a tired reading of our position that makes us passive objects of our fates, instead of active leaders working toward other directions, other possibilities. To riff on Richard Miller's 2005 work, writing center studies, like wider English Studies, risks going the way of the Classics if we don't play an active role in making our field and the humanities relevant and vital to a post-industrial academy. Part of that work requires asking a different, perhaps difficult, set of questions about who and what we represent as a discipline. Interrogating our identity and its operation involves addressing more than the structural exclusion of certain voices and the institutional privileging or normalizing of others. The causal roots and solutions to those issues are simultaneously internal to writing centers and external to the macrodynamics of higher education, particularly with respect to access and social and cultural honoring of the humanities as a profession.

For the wider writing center community, the absence of experiences and voices of Others has been conspicuous, but also jarring. It isn't as though people of color, working-class folks and non-native speakers of English aren't often part of the conversations or considered in debates; more often than not, these groups are the objects of inquiry. Even more curious, participants themselves seem unaware of their own constructed identities, privileged or Other, center or marginal. Talks, presentations, and keynotes index Others as objects for whom practical and instrumental learning applies, not figures for whom learning is necessarily transactional and collaborative ("we" can learn from "them," "they" from "us.").

As conferences and meetings blurred from one to another, I became aware of a collective dissonance between writing center personnel and the people with whom they worked. It was as if no material connections

existed between populations: "they" turn to "us" to become better "writers" as if "we" hadn't ourselves, regardless of circumstances, ever journeyed (or continue to journey) toward claiming "writer" as part of our ensemble of identities. Or further, "we" assume "they" don't have literacies perfectly rich and productive or have rhetorical traditions and cultures of expression that are impossible to bridge or mesh. Or better, "we" act on the flawed assumption or sense of being that "we" have authentic selves or essences that aren't themselves subject to a politics of status or history of caste. Simply, too many risk the delusion that their bodies are not marked or over-determined by identities. Under-represented, at best, or invisible, at worst, have been the professionals and clients at high schools, two-year colleges, and historically Black or Hispanic-serving colleges and universities, all of which are institutional sites which, if included, reached out to, heard and listened to, promise to radically re-imagine what the "community" of writing centers has to offer, assuming they have the capacity to index, name, and reflect on identities themselves. Still, my privileged colleagues—white, middle-class, straight, American—would ponder why "they" (the Others) weren't more present, more a part of "us," though we rarely embraced them or reflected on our own complicity in silencing and failing to listen to them.

These tensions and challenges aren't unique to writing centers, and they are also not endemic to them. This book will argue, instead, writing centers are sites *par excellence* where these issues are worked through in ways that wider composition studies and teaching across the disciplines can learn from. Writing centers make local, material and individual all the larger forces at play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions. Digging deep into these dynamics and reimaging our theories and practices based on such labor isn't the exclusive province of writing centers; the wider academy must also take up this work and consider ways to follow the lead of writing centers or to clear new ground unique to individual institutional or program/disciplinary contexts. To face the center isn't just about knowing the who and appreciating the complexity of identities, both marginal and privileged; it's also about the politics of our process, *how* we face and to what impact. That journey, for me and this text, begins with recounting my own discovery and coming to terms with identity and activism. I write about the influence of identity movements, both historical ones and those I've been involved with, on me and on my later work as a

professional in writing centers. Among the lessons that I'll share is the importance of attending to identity politics and the tangible effects of political, economic, social, and cultural forces at play in and often confounding education wherever it's practiced.

MAPPING SELF, MAPPING IDENTITY

All this discussion of identity suggests I somehow possess a keen sensitivity and intuitiveness about the complexity and practices of subject positions and their performance. It begs the question of the roots to my own (ongoing) self-awareness of identity as well as motives for the circumspection. My own discovery of identity and its politics began when I was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, where a community of interdisciplinary scholars taught me critical, social, and cultural theory. This learning under the auspices of an American Studies department happened just as I was exploring and calling into question my sense of self and its possibilities. These professors taught me about the history of class struggle, the origins of patriarchy, and the foundations of critical race studies, and the early debates around what would be called queer theory. As wars on political correctness waged throughout academe, about what some thought was a dubious pedagogy of empowerment and critical voice sweeping many classrooms, I was unwittingly having my consciousness raised. A new language and ways of thinking were turning me into a new kind of activist, not one who touted placards or bumper stickers, not one who would march on offices, but one who would discover everyday teaching and learning moments led to change every bit as important and sustainable as the more dramatic forms of protest in the streets or speeches from podiums. During those undergraduate years, I was discovering my own identity as a working-class person, as a queer, as someone who never viewed the world without being attuned to the lenses that constituted my ability to see. I would not have a self-awareness of this intellectual growth and change in me until much, much later in life when I moved from advocating for change in often abstract terms, removed from local tangibility. In writing centers, I would finally learn that consciousness-raising, advocating self-empowerment and fostering critical awareness of social, cultural, economic, and political forces on institutions, communities and individuals, might reap rewards in ways material and beyond. I came to realize identity wasn't merely about self-discovery; I also began to understand its rhetorical dimensions, that how identity was invoked

(its presentation) mattered and that, when well-executed, could make social change happen, maybe not monumental change, but local shifts or micro-successes, that might culminate in a tipping point.

This nexus of the politics of identity with an attention to its audience impact, what might be termed its dynamics of face, would reassert itself over and over again. At St. John's and the other schools where I've taught, the face of the writing centers was often their most striking element. These spaces provided complex nodal points where students, tutors, staff, faculty, and administrators alike met wider institutional, and consequently larger, social, cultural, economic and political forces. How well this or that writing center works with all those that circulate through it isn't merely an index of how on task or effective we are with the fundamentals of teaching, mentoring and learning. The efficacy of the contemporary writing center is also predicated on the degree to which it problem-poses the everyday in relation to the meta-currents circulating about it. What has made me most proud of St. John's, then, isn't just the instrumentality of what we do; rather, our successes and failures also happen in relation to the faces this unit represents and empowers as well as the degree to which we reflect upon the politics and material consequences imbedded in them. Still I wonder, in the midst of all this diversity, what is not being interrogated. I think of Royster's (1996) caution about the politics of silence, of what goes unsaid, or Condon's (2007) call to question the structural, institutional, and individual roots of oppression and the ways our pedagogies reinforce and make them visible.

Identity is ubiquitous to the everyday life of writing centers. For them, struggles with face involve a complicated juggling of identities in relation to perceived audiences. A consultant calls me aside and shares an experience with racism that peers would dismiss as hypersensitivity. Other tutors tell me of students' sexual advances, and another group speaks about gendered differences in students' and consultants' approaches to tutoring. Colleagues and students alike confide embarrassment at people's reactions to their accented English. In a tutoring pedagogy course, a student comes out to me after reading some of my earlier work. I comfort students, native and non-native English speakers, stung by feedback from professors who banish them to the writing center or insult their literacy ("You can't write!"), students who easily figure out that the common denominator in such comments is their identity position as Other. The politics of those moments have

everything to do with who people are and how they perform and present their identities. Very little scholarship from writing center or composition studies, beyond literacy narratives made famous by Mike Rose (2005), Richard Rodriquez (1983), Victor Villanueva (1993), Min Zhan Lu (1994), bell hooks (1994), and others, offers guidance when the politics of identity cuts through both the process and product of writing and mentoring writers. This book will not offer a comprehensive catalog of recipes for handling those and other still unanticipated eruptions of identity politics in writing center conferences. Instead, this book will unpack those moments, working to theorize what makes them possible as well as their implications.

When I experience identity politics in the writing center, I make sense of those moments and their implications from other chapters of my life, where the gnawing lessons of oppression in the U.S. came to me through experience, conversation and study. These experiences and their implications usually exceed the pragmatics of action–of prescriptions for what to do when; rather, identity movements and the politics that they taught me testified to the importance and centrality of struggles over meaning and their consequences for citizenship, learning and teaching. Identity movements, composition studies and writing centers are inexorably tied to one another by history and necessity, but weaving them together hasn't been charted before. These lessons push conventional debates in the field toward a critical study of the politics of identity and facing the center. At the same time, one's own experience is just that: one's own experience. Those very lenses that provide us with subject positions and vantages from which to view the world are limiting and flawed to the extent that they are taken as totalizing, not as starting points and spaces for questions and reflection, especially from the perspective of someone else.

THE LIMITS OF "STREET" ACTIVISM

My discovery of and involvement with identity movements centered on civil rights work in Colorado and HIV/AIDS activism in Philadelphia. The lessons learned as an organizer and protester would frustrate me ultimately, but they would enable me to imagine writing center work in ways that could contribute to change in local, sustainable ways. The Colorado experience revolved around Amendment 2, a referendum that banned civil rights on the basis of sexual identity, and my work with the Equal Protection Campaign (EPOC), the grassroots group

challenging the initiative and its main supporter, Colorado for Family Values. My role in EPOC was as a participant in a steering committee charged with reaching out to communities of color and soliciting their organizations' involvement and support opposing Amendment 2. As we moved from groups like the NAACP to La Raza and spoke to one community leader after another, we discovered division, tension and suspicion directed toward the gay community. Mobilizing against the referendum required us to reach beyond self-interest and to understand the measure in a wider context of historical assaults on civil rights in Colorado and beyond, moves the community not only wasn't prepared to make, but hadn't even conceived of doing. I discovered the organized gay community had done little to combat earlier civil rights challenges, from anti-immigrant sentiment to English-only legislation and anti-affirmative action lawsuits. With a political climate already rife with hostility toward Others, I learned that many on the left and in the civil rights movement thought implicitly, "Where were you people when…?" My committee didn't have answers, and we represented a community who hadn't expressed outrage when Spanish-speaking Latinos were stigmatized, when people of color in general were marginalized and viewed with suspicion, when poor people's humanity was called into question. In the wake of decades-long rollbacks of already weakly supported Great Society programs once meant to foster empowerment and social justice, I discovered little energy among people who might otherwise be natural allies to challenge what turned out to be a popularity contest about homosexuality and gay rights, especially when queer people had been largely silent in earlier campaigns just as offensive and hurtful to the symbolic and material status of other marginal people in Colorado. Amendment 2 succeeded and my community failed because we couldn't see or combat the seeds of social and cultural intolerance sown years earlier.

Leaders representing the African American and Latino communities were conflicted, and understandably so. They were smart and politically astute and recognized the threat of anti-gay legislation, but they also saw the handwriting on the wall. Amendment 2 was going to pass (and it did), and it was going to pass in part because it was framed as a popularity contest about queer people (who weren't popular), but also a vote on civil rights (which weren't either). Civil rights were being cast as having overreached, having begun to threaten on some level the privilege held by whites, men, and the middle-class. Conventional

civil rights activists were reluctant to leverage their tenuous successes for another set of claimants, especially when many of those claimants possessed financial and political resources that would have been helpful earlier, in other battles. Even more, considering the oppression that sexual minorities experienced on a host of fronts (employment, healthcare, housing, etc.), the face of the movement was disproportionately privileged and used the mantra of civil rights as a platform for wider social acceptance and legitimacy, not as a remedy for past wrongs. Long-time civil rights activists, particularly those active from the 1950s to early 1970s, were also justifiably offended at the prospect of white, middle-class gay men and lesbians evoking the language and imagery of the wider movement without having struggled or having been participants themselves. These latter-day gay civil rights activists were relatively young, held no ties to the New Left activism, and didn't reach out, honor, or coalesce with those who spoke from experiences that complicated sexual identity and whose identity intersected with forms of oppression that possessed different roots and histories. That inability for the gay community to see its struggles as tied to those of others (and theirs to its) was confounded by the reality of a community conflicted about itself. How did it understand identity? What was its history and relationship to other forms of identity? What were the connections between individual and community when it came to identity?

When doctoral study drew me to Philadelphia, I found myself writing a dissertation about those very dynamics and unexplored questions around Amendment 2 and re-discovering activism around AIDS that I had participated in and studied years before back in Iowa. In the mid-1980s, I came of age as a young gay man in a world dominated by HIV. Those early years of that health crisis were the stuff of folklore: breathless new media coverage, vertiginous public policy debates, communities reeling. It was a time where sex and sexuality seemed toxic, where illness circulated as much as a metaphor of morality as an index of immunological complexity. Since so much of the past thirty years of AIDS in America has been constructed as an issue owned by its urban centers, Iowa might seem like an odd incubator for activism—AIDS, queer or otherwise. As the threat of AIDS was emerging, economic recession decimated family farms and laid waste to unionized manufacturing and meatpacking jobs.[3] These dawning days of the

---

3.   For more background on the 1980s farm crisis, read Harl's *Farm Debt Crisis of the 1980s* (1990), Dudley's *Debt & Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (2000),

Rust Belt created a political bouillabaisse imbued with radicalism; suspicion of industry, government, and change; populism and provincialism. Prairie Fire coexisted with a resurgence of Klan organizing, violent union clashes commingled with stoic acquiescence to economic reality. Very few people actually lived Iowa's storied farm culture, but the struggle to survive in a world of ever-shifting socio-economic rules generated, for some, a strong working-class identity that cut across blue-collar vocations and bound many together. Losing a multi-generation family farm operation was no less bitter than watching a centuries-old meatpacking plant clang its rusty gates shut one last time, its rancid smell now only a romantic memory of legions who had passed before. That was the world I grew up in.

When AIDS hit my college town, Iowa City, it swept through the gay male community. One after another, my role models seroconverted, many dying in those early years and still others going on to live and teach the rest how to cope with dignity and agency. With the town's summer stock and literary connections to New York City and Chicago, Iowa City was an urban outpost experiencing AIDS, only on a smaller scale. People living with AIDS came back to reconnect and hospice with families, and parents and siblings who were, by day, farm-hands or factory workers and suddenly became ad hoc caregivers and community educators. Early on, the queer community mobilized around the crisis with formal and ad hoc social networks to support, advocate, research, and educate, even as the national media framed AIDS as urban/racialized and gay/sexualized.[4] In Rock Hudson, Ryan White, Freddie Mercury, Africa, and Magic Johnson, the media discovered and re-discovered the crisis (Denny 1997a, 1997b). Coverage would intone a sympathetic yet patronizing desire to put a "human face on AIDS," but implying earlier faces of AIDS had been somehow less than human.

At the time, I was little more than a spectator on the sidelines as friends tried to mimic protests by local "chapters" of ACT UP!, the New York City-originated grassroots activist group that launched dramatic, media-savvy actions against governmental and pharmaceutical responses to HIV through the late-1980s and early 1990s. When I

Gray-Davidson's *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto* (1996), and Fitchen's *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America* (1991).

4.   For more on the social and cultural history of AIDS, see Patton (1985, 1990, 1998, 2002), and Epstein (1998).

got to Philly I was burned out from Amendment 2 and wanted to do a different sort of activism. Being in a city with a large organized gay community, I thought I could finally put my study—I'd even done a Master's thesis on media representation of people with AIDS—into some sort of action. I turned to ACT UP!. By this time, the group's agenda had moved beyond pushing local, state and federal governments, as well as the pharmaceutical industry, to be more responsive to the broader populations dealing with the epidemic. ACT UP! was advocating for better healthcare access and more progressive policy toward risk reduction, more specifically trying to get the federal government to fund or at least not sanction local efforts to reach injecting drug users. The group and other allied, non-governmental agencies had launched education campaigns directed at helping I.V. drug users reduce their risk for HIV and other illnesses by cleaning "works" or exchanging contaminated needles for safe ones. Although the guerilla education was reducing infection rates, the Clinton administration wouldn't fund such projects because it feared conservative backlash for being soft on drug enforcement. Instead, it continued the War-on-Drugs, "Just Say No!" policies of abstinence and policing drug use begun under the earlier Reagan and Bush administrations; this face of AIDS, unlike other more mainstream ones, didn't have caché with the wider public and couldn't draw upon a reservoir of compassion or empathy. People without access to healthcare or addicted to injecting drugs still drew scorn, making inattention or harassment more politically expedient than changing attitudes and policy.

From my earlier experiences with civil rights activism to this work on AIDS, I learned a good deal about the limits and possibilities of contemporary identity movements and their implications for making change. One important lesson involved honoring historical intersections of social, cultural, economic, and political forces in the context where the need for action arises. For AIDS, it meant understanding that the illness was never just about a virus or set of opportunistic infections; rather, to riff on Susan Sontag's (1990, 1989) famous line, AIDS was always already a metaphor, a culmination of social and cultural values about sexuality, race, gender, class, nationality, healthcare, and more. What confounded government and industry was the realization that activists wouldn't ignore those currents (e.g., that there was a long-established history of pathologizing sexual minorities and people of color and of refusing to recognize the complexity of people's relational

structures), and would force policy makers, scientists and the public alike to own and contend with their own biases and the implications of repeating history. AIDS activism also learned that it had to coalesce: gay men had to work with lesbians, Latinos with African Americans, people of color with middle-class queers, and wealthy with poor. (Of course, the jury is still out on whether that bridge-building continued once cocktail therapies made AIDS an issue of chronic illness management—for some.) Around civil rights for sexual minorities, that very astute awareness of the historical context was largely lost. As Patton (1995) wrote, gay activists simply sought to extend liberal tradition around civil rights—material and unjust discrimination warranting governmental policy to protect a minority group—without understanding that the political ground had shifted with the rise of the conservative movement, organized with special concern for blunting and rolling back what it viewed as the excesses of the left.

Beyond the importance of historical context, AIDS and civil rights activism taught me the importance of face. Its dynamics and politics possessed symbolic meanings whose process and product were as critical as the more material agenda items over which the identity movements struggled (if not moreso). With HIV and AIDS, the shift of "AIDS victim" to "person living with AIDS" no longer connoted a passive relationship with illness (an inevitable drift to death) that totalized one's being and instead meant AIDS was irreducible to any other aspect of a person's matrix of identities. The way that AIDS was signified made it easier to distance or externalize illness. The face of AIDS appeared as a threat from the distant margins: an emaciated figure inevitably sunken into a bleached out hospital ward bed; or the harrowed expression of a villager in some rustic African village. No less problematic was a face of AIDS that was everywhere all the time, a ubiquitous boogieman without any referent. Like the red menace of the 1920s or the Cold War, threat was everywhere and nowhere. Around civil rights, when the face of sexual minorities signified wealthy white queers or extravagant pride marchers, it was difficult to make oppression register with the general public, but when the images ranged from mutilated victims of bashing to decorated and disabled veterans of military service, the community received greater empathy and had its citizenship and patriotism underscored. When the gays who were seen and embraced in the media became figures the majority could relate to (however problematically), suddenly the face of unease and ugliness was shifted onto vociferous

anti-gay activists like Fred Phelps and his Westboro (Kansas) Baptist Church clan.[5]

One final lesson that identity movements have taught me: the need to recognize the false choices of assimilation and separation that so many movements and individuals who are attached/aligned with them must negotiate. For the accommodationist position, dissident movements confront pressure to adopt the social and cultural practices of the majority while generally bracketing their own forms for home or other private venues. Gay people, in this position, are fine so long as they don't threaten or challenge normalized heterosexual institutions like marriage and family, and people of color accommodate themselves by evacuating self-consciousness of their own racial identities and accepting the hegemony of whiteness as the universal/"unmarked" subject position from which to operate. Counterpoised to assimilation, a separatist position maintains autonomy over its ideology, expression and space, excluding the majority but also claiming agency over its own self-exile, as it were. In this view, working-class identity and heritage might be a subject position which someone embraces and builds an epistemology around, and femininity offers a lens (in contrast to patriarchy) where social relations might possess radically different possibilities for collaboration, community, and pathos.

Still, the choice, even the desirability, to assimilate or resist presupposes that movements, or individuals independent from them, operate in contexts (social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, etc.) in which they have agency to pick and choose. What does someone do when the way they perform their identity, consciously, intentionally, or not, makes assimilating moot? What about the contexts where performance of resistant or minority identity can draw violent reaction in a multitude of forms? Activists or people with dissident identities often find themselves torn between "selling out" (accommodating the dominant forces or opposition) and being separatist/radical (rejecting the status quo or establishment). The history of African-American protest rhetoric teaches that such polarity isn't terribly useful or productive. In his 1981 work, "Transcending coercion: The communicative strategies

---

5.   Phelps has gained wide national media attention for leading protests at the funeral for murdered University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard and most recently at memorials for military personnel who have died in the Iraq war. These protests and deaths, Phelps and his church argue, are the consequence for society's tolerance of sexual diversity.

of black slaves on antebellum plantations," Cal Logue argues for sub-
version as a third possibility most immediately evident in such rheto-
ric, not a dialectic occupying a middle-ground position between reform
and radicalism, but another way that signals a certain rhetorical manip-
ulation and cageyness in relation to dominant discourses and practices.
In this sense, colonial-era slave narratives or post-Civil War rhetoric
that might otherwise appear as oddly genial or lacking in justifiable
anger or outrage may be re-read as simultaneously revealing African
Americans' strategic study, insight, and coded transfer of knowledge
to wider audiences. Such subversive rhetoric also worked to challenge
governmental and institutional support of slavery or later highlighted
the paradoxes and incongruence of racist practices with national val-
ues of equality and citizenship. Queer theory parallels this innovative
rhetoric by providing a critical and interpretive method of reading
against the grain of texts—bodies, cultural texts, and mass media arti-
facts—for imbedded meaning(s) that fly beneath the radar of dominant
consumption. A "queering" of the everyday contests any concepts of
"normal" or their oppositions as mutually constituting and negotiates
safe spaces or contact zones that enable material existence and dampen
possibility for discursive or physical violence. From cultural studies,
Stuart Hall (1993) offers yet another parallel set of possibilities in his
theory on dominant, oppositional, and negotiated modes of interpre-
tation. The dominant position accepts the sender's (or more broadly)
intended meaning, while the oppositional rejects the preferred mean-
ing, opting for a local, individual position. The negotiated position
samples from dominant, but adapts it to particular needs and utility.
Across these three visions of subversive possibility isn't a position of
moderation or reasoned, pragmatic middle-ground; instead, they rec-
ognize the power (and the intractability or the sway) of institutions and
systems, poach from their rhetorical needs and expectations, and offer
a means of change and challenge in contexts where power is tenuous or
where the material implications of backlash can be dramatic, horrific,
or at minimum daunting.

   In writing centers, these very pressures of identity—and their atten-
dant politics—are ever-present. A day doesn't go by that somebody
doesn't contend with the dilemma of assimilating, going with the flow,
or challenging the well-worn path. Often the context involves envision-
ing alternatives to hackneyed arguments or unimaginative approaches
to writing tasks. But just as frequently, students, tutors, administrators

and faculty must confront who they are, whether the identity in question is one from the margins or whether the context forces awareness of one's privilege or position at the center. In those moments, we are forced to contemplate whether to mentor someone to accommodate, to accept often arbitrary "standard" or dominant positions, or to advocate someone to resist, fight back, or challenge them. Again the either/or proposition that movements and activists have faced. Like them, these possibilities are fraught with complications. Almost daily I experience galling moments of homophobia or heterosexism, both overt (epithets hurled at the strangest moments or whispers as my partner and I stroll somewhere among people unaccustomed to folks like us) and more subtle (co-workers gendering me as a gay person, or people assuming I'm straight because my partner has a sex-neutral name). Class bias circulates just as powerfully, from the "tax" first-generation students pay after college (their loans) and the pay differential that that creates for wealthier graduates, to the disproportionate ease middle- and upper-class folks have in accumulating capital (housing, savings for economic security, mobility, etc.) and leveraging it for even greater social, cultural, and economic position. At the same time, my inherent privilege as a white, educated man enables me to benefit from far greater lifetime earnings than most women (and men) and people of color, especially those who remain as working class. Still, the everyday oppression and privilege that circulate in my life is unlike the forms that people of color in the U.S. face. Hearing "faggot" is just as poisonous to an individual or collective psyche as racial or ethnic slurs; of course, these terms have profoundly different histories whose rhetorical impact doesn't just terrorize, but also indexes power and the dynamics of oppression.

Such quotidian experiences might spur someone to battle, but the energy and commitment required to engage such ongoing direct action is just not sustainable, another lesson that any seasoned or weary activist will share. To resist fighting every fight or putting out each fire that pops up prompts those who face oppression to adopt coping strategies that might appear as assimilationist or separatist. But as I've suggested above, those positions are packed with dense dynamics and histories in and of themselves. Kenji Yoshino (2007), in *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Civil Rights*, complicates these positions and offers a framework to explore identity politics, particularly in the context of writing centers. Yoshino revisits Erving Goffman's (1971, 1974) scholarship about face

and blends it with memoir, queer theory, and critical legal studies, to share his own journey to make sense of his own conflicted experiences with marginality as a gay, Japanese-American man. He argues gay people, people of color and women often share experiences of self-loathing marked by attempts at conversion, passing, and covering. I would add to Yoshino's analysis any form of oppression for which (mutually constituting) positions of dominance and marginality can be articulated. Conversion involves physical morphing of one identity into another. In Yoshino's case, it involved him literally refusing his nascent homosexuality and instead attempting to live as a straight man. (That conversion obviously didn't take.) The social (and cultural) pressure for people to change class positions is another example of that conversation to which Yoshino speaks. Passing, he explains, involves minimal self-acceptance of one's identity, but making it publicly invisible (or better, illegible for the majority). For Yoshino, passing involved accepting his gay identity, but actively crafting a public persona that prevented anyone from knowing he was different. A biracial or multiethnic person might pass as white and reap the privileges associated with the majority identity. A woman might pass as a man (or vice versa) for a variety of reasons and risks. A queer person might be understood as straight to everyone, and a working-class person might signify another class position. In Yoshino's case, besides bracketing his sexuality, he also refused his ethnic heritage so thoroughly that he was unable, ironically enough, to pass as native in Japan, even though he was just a generation removed. Covering, then, signifies identity in ways that conform to majoritarian expectations: African Americans, in this mindset, may act black, but not too black; women must remain within a range of feminine (though never overtly feminist) codes; and queers may be visible but not threatening. While one might accept "being" a sexual minority, a person of color, or a woman, one may still resist "doing" it, or performing one's identity in ways that challenge the norms of the majority. In Yoshino's case, covering led to the undoing of at least one relationship when he refused to be as queer as his partner demanded (to express affection publicly, to refuse to disclose their relationship, etc.).

The taxonomy that he uses helps complicate the assimilation/separation binary and underscores the case for writing center activism to be read through a lens of subversion. Conversion, passing, and covering are all assimilationist positions that don't challenge the hegemony or rhetorical naturalness of dominant identity formations. To sublimate

an identity in favor of another, to render it as illegible to the dominant as well as to those who share the identity, and to mute it in ways that don't challenge the dominant all smack of approaches that are generally conciliatory and internally conflicted, if not out-and-out antipathetic, toward a marginal subject position. One might wonder about someone who attempts to or might surrender, hide, or tone down her or his ethnic or racial, class, gender, sexual, or national identities for the majority position, but the material benefits and privileges offer plausible reasons that shouldn't need to be inventoried. Still, the typical counter-position to assimilation is to advocate an embrace of resistance, or, in the context of writing centers, composition classrooms and writing-intensive courses, to advocate writers embrace their "authentic" voices of home (or to mentor a multiplicity of authentic voices tied to equally diverse discourse communities).

Yoshino's book made me think about how his ideas drew out intersections between identity movements, teaching, composition classrooms and writing centers. Each of these spaces can be quite diverse. Like our wider society, the students being mentored, the tutors and teachers coaching them, and the directors leading those units face the very dynamics that Yoshino writes about. The pressure to convert, pass or cover reveals itself in any number of the identities that these individuals must face in the academy. Celebrated narratives in writing studies—from Rodriguez (1983) to Anzaldúa (2007) and Rose (2005) to hooks (1989)—open up this conversation about the politics of difference and identity for self-awareness, learning and literacies. When I invoke signs like "teacher" or "writer," they possess their own performative and rhetorical demands, but they also intersect with the other subjectivities that make up who I am. The implication of this fluid identity is vertiginous: what role do my other identities play in my identity as a professor, or in what ways do the institutional or rhetorical constraints impact on *how* I perform my identity as a professor? When tutors mentor student writing, they help hone a writer's identity and simultaneously shape themselves as writers *and* consultants. Again, what roles do their other identities factor into the situation? To complicate matters more, mentoring and teaching frequently happen in rhetorical and disciplinary contexts that themselves have conventions and "communities" in their own right that constitute ostensible identities that composition studies has more widely named as "discourse communities." These, then, in turn fold back on, resist, and impact on all the other

identities that float around or can be invoked by someone. Like the three-dimensional models of complicated compounds I've seen while wondering lost in some science building, our identities, their relations with one another, and the nebulous whole they create are complicated, integrated, fluid and unstable. That "reality" makes teaching and learning confounding and electric.

MAKING CHANGE: RE-IMAGINING ACTIVISM IN THE WRITING CENTER

Driving up Twelfth Street, the Center City Philadelphia confluence of bohemia and colonial aura gives way to another world of single room occupancy (SRO) apartment buildings, vacant lots filled with outlaw dumping, and lonely row homes, many left oddly freestanding in the wake of demolished neighbors. In those blocks surrounding Temple University, working-class folks, mainly African American, cleave out existences, not in some abject sensibility, but with a nobility and pride found anywhere. Going south from Center City, one travels through still more working-class white, Latino and African American neighborhoods with considerably less decay, but under just as much economic stress, ever more pronounced as the city's manufacturing, industrial, and military workforces recede into an increasingly distant past. It was within this context that I began to connect the dots of the multifaceted dynamic of social justice in postmodern America. My professors at Iowa and in graduate school had given me theories to understand my own experiences, to put them into a language, and to have greater agency over how they might signify to me or other audiences. In spite of unlearning a good amount of my provincial mindset, I was still narrow. The shame, anger and hurt that I felt, never quite measuring up because of my sexuality and my working-class background, rarely extended outward. My consciousness raising was narcissistic; it was always about me, about my feeling and my sense of connection. Philly taught me about the need for commonwealth, about reckoning with the after effects of segregation and the politics of difference. The individualism that left me compulsively narcissistic, I would learn, also intersected with a wider cultural ethos of individualizing issues, absolving structures, institutions and society from at least minimal complicity or complacency in them. I also learned that undoing the material consequences of division and difference wasn't just a matter of integration, cultural relativity, and equitable distribution (and redistribution) of resources.

Drawn from neighborhoods like Olney, Spring Garden, K&A, or South Philly, Temple students arrived on campus, often the first in their families to attend college, hoping to leverage this experience toward the American meritocratic dream: to do better than their parents before them. In first-year writing or a core humanities course, students would hit a wall. Modes of learning that involved digesting and regurgitating information suddenly weren't useful in contexts where professors required innovative thinking and nuanced argumentation. Students would find themselves having to express themselves under rhetorical and linguistic constraints that their earlier educational experiences hadn't prepared them for and that their professors presumed their knowledge of. Thrust from their comfort zone where they were prepared to tell instructors what they wanted to know, students found themselves in situations with enough room to wallow and held to standards that stifled.

I would see these students again and again in writing centers and classrooms at different institutions where I'd later go on to teach in New York City. The face or identities they brought to campuses butted against the nebulous culture of academic life. Like anyone from the margins, these students could look around and perceive whole ways of being and doing that ran counter to their own. They quickly learned that a premium was placed on those practices. Writing centers became central spaces where I witnessed the struggle to traverse many different worlds. In writing centers, I came to see everyday oppression, natural and exercised without effort: wealthy (white) graduate students from elite undergraduate institutions stunned at the low "quality" of urban students, faculty complaining about illiterate immigrants, instructors responding in offensive and abusive ways on papers, students parroting hate speech as effortless stock rhetoric, and tutors complaining about the hygiene of clients. Writing centers also witness magical, rich moments: consultants mentoring faculty about responding to student writing in productive ways; students sharing life stories that leave tutors in tears, laughter, anger; students bounding in with news of improved grades; tutors learning as much about a student's home language and culture as his mentoring shares about academic forms of argumentation.

Whether a situation presents "non-traditional" students coming to terms with academic demands or a dynamic offers a glimpse at more abstract forces at play, the writing center is a place to make a more immediate, different impact than conventional activism. The writing

center and the actors in play within it put into practice what Antonio Gramsci (1971) would call organic intellectualism–a form of mentoring that's rooted in a learner's everyday needs. To commingle a pedagogy of empowerment with community building and consciousness raising was a praxis not entirely different from conventional activism. I remember Annisa, a graduate student and aspiring New York City high school teacher who was confounded by the essay component of the state's certification test. By reassuring her and demystifying the prompt and learning goals (not teaching her a template, but mentoring her to plan and organize her thoughts), we worked together to displace her anxiety and tapped into her sardonic, but playful way of thinking. We imagined her having a conversation with her readers, leading them toward her criticisms by poking fun and teasing. As her voice and affect began to shine through, her confidence grew, and she eventually re-took her exams, passing with a wide margin. I also remember Camille, another graduate student and one of my first consultants. Doubt and weak self-confidence dogged her. In her I noticed a "natural" affinity to establish rapport and dig in with a student; students connected with her because she was "real" and lacked pretense. From her tutoring and classroom instruction experiences along with a good deal of prodding from my colleagues, she took a chance to go on for more advanced graduate study. She met every challenge, but invariably approached each with a wistful insecurity that I recognized in myself as well. I don't mention these instances to trumpet my own glory; instead, they signal the difference a person can make, change that's lasting, change that's slow, change that doesn't necessarily announce itself. Moreover, in the writing centers where I've worked, community happens in ways that can't be anticipated, not so much in the cliquey adolescent sort of manner, but more in the spirit of tutors coming together for mutual support of one another and students alike.

Of course, students of all stripes use writing centers, and they persist in a variety of contexts with wide-ranging institutional support and positioning. All students find themselves learning the cultural capital to be effective participants in academic life, but the distances that some must traverse can be quite different. In an academy where the discursive practices of the middle class dominate, the "standards" aren't so alien when the language and ways of knowing and doing are so proximate to people's existing cultural capital. For students whose cultural capital doesn't neighbor the mainstream, they encounter a learning

situation fraught with complexity: Do they surrender their code for another alien one? Do they resist and face the material and symbolic consequences of not fitting in? Do they negotiate some sort of middle ground? How might they subvert all these confining possibilities? In answering these questions, the phenomenon of face or identity literally comes to the front in the writing center. Like identity movements, people in education and those in writing centers specifically must negotiate a common ground of self and Other, of audience and rhetorical purpose. It is both a product and process that is inextricably political.

That very negotiation is the heart of this book. Following on Yoshino's and my own earlier work, it will present theories of specific aspects of identity dominant in writing centers in the U.S., map the dynamics that produce faces that range from assimilationist to separatist, and posit possibilities for subverting or queering them. *Facing the Center* focuses on identities and politics most central in our national context, faces whose politics have the greatest material consequences, even though they are not exhaustive to the possibilities.[6] Chapter 2 takes up the charge Victor Villanueva (2003, 2006) has made (and Frankie Condon (2007) has extended to writing centers) to place the dynamics of race at the center of discussion and analysis. Working from a scenario where a client challenges a tutor's authority on the basis of her race, the chapter points out people of color cannot convert their racial identities to the majority–they cannot *become* the white majority (and I doubt most would choose to become white if they could). People with privileged racial identities, far from operating from positions of unmarked bodies, signify themselves in ways that require naming and owning. Negotiating racial identity and structural racism forces the question of passing, covering, or subverting. An assimilationist approach forces Others to reify dominant society's skepticism and to perpetuate the presumption of white ethos. To be anti-assimilationist, on the flipside, is to force a never-ending campaign of teaching, at best, or contesting people's prejudices, both of which take time away from other lines of collaboration. While activists and Others in writing centers cannot wish away this work, they must also affirm the need to account for how

---

6.   As someone with a differently-abled sister, I personally understand this gap in the book's coverage. Just as no one element of identity can be foundational or a linchpin to "true" epistemology, no amount of cataloging would capture every face that a writing center encounters. Instead, I stand by my initial call to place identity at the center, inviting indexing of its manifestations however, wherever possible.

race signifies people before they have a chance to signify themselves, and that process proceeds with the cumulative history of race relations in the United States. Subversion would involve confronting structural racism by creating spaces and occasions to self-reflect and question assumptions about race and its consequences for interaction.

Chapter 3 explores the face of class in the writing center. I question: How does class become legible in a writing center? Are there class-coded ways of presenting face, or of trying to compensate for it? What makes somebody signify her or his class position? In cultural and composition studies, there is a long history of accounting for the ways in which one's class position impacts literacy as well as teaching and learning (For more, see Rose 2005, Harris 1997, Shor 1992, Rodriguez 1983, hooks 1989 and 1994, Shaughnessy 1997, Williams 1983, and Willis 1981), but writing center scholarship has remained largely silent on the subject and its dynamics for tutoring. The contemporary emergence of most writing centers dovetails with the influx of first-generation college students, who often arrive on campuses with differential academic capital. This mismatch often positions writing centers as remedial sites that "fix" problematic students, and they in turn quickly learn how institutions view them as deficient. In addition, students come to view the codes with which they speak and write as part of a larger set of hurdles to overcome in order to lift themselves into the middle class and its economic security. Their working-class identities are viewed as suspect or as a handicap to the meritocractic dream of generational improvement. Students (and working-class faculty and staff, for that matter) often experience a process of coming to be ashamed of their upbringing or community roots (LeCourt 2006). Working-class people also learn that education isn't supposed to broaden one's mind or make them better citizens (uses of education that are natural to upper classes); rather, education takes on an overriding vocational or utilitarian thrust, uses that further encode class status. Complicating matters, it is often not entirely clear just how conscious working-class students, tutors and professionals are of their roots since most people in the U.S. identify as middle class, even if that claim is tenable or arguable. Unlike race and ethnicity, our society places a premium on class conversion, and lacking that, many face lifelong processes of passing, covering, and even using subversion. Rarely do we see occasions where one's working-class identity is celebrated as either a code or set of experiences valued widely in the academy or writing center. Instead, it is usually viewed as a burden to overcome.

Following this discussion of class, I revisit my earlier work on sexuality in the writing center in Chapter 4. Writing centers are often positioned as feminist spaces because their pedagogy is conventionally collaborative, non-competitive, and egalitarian (Lutes 2002; Woolbright 2003; Welch 1999). They are also spaces where gender and sexual politics are present throughout conference interaction and diffused throughout wider dynamics. From the ways in which sexual identities are normalized to the gendered assumptions that are invoked, performances are never natural or neutral, and they make the pragmatics of conferences and everyday life in writing centers rich and complex. Here, conforming to, rejecting or subverting conventions of gender or sexuality are cliché to academic culture and anathema in certain circumstances.

The needs and issues attendant to non-native English writers are frequent objects of discussion in writing centers, particularly where international and immigrant students have increasing campus presence. In Chapter 5, I focus on the face nationality creates for writing centers. For international and immigrant students, there is an intense desire to pass as "real" Americans – not to appear as an outsider in the midst of conventional students. For many international students, the desire to blend in can be aided by economic privilege, whereas for many immigrant students, the tug of home community complicates the desire to assimilate. Each group must contend with face, but the stakes are differential. Frequently, interaction is predicated on banking American English codes and practices, implying that they are static and non-responsive to negotiated use (that Americans are incapable of hearing accent or dialect). Similar to its historical positioning, writing centers have reacted to the presence of the ESL writers as "problems" to "fix."

The book closes by returning to the writing center and exploring the face and identity politics the units and the professionals within them must negotiate. For this chapter, I revisit how writing centers themselves assume a sort of sub-institutional identity that has its own politics. Just as actors who come into writing centers must negotiate the politics of face, the sites themselves contend with a complex dynamic that reflects their own unique historical positions. Some centers are positioned within academic units, as marginalized appendages to composition or literature departments or as vaunted centers for teaching and learning. Still other centers are located within wider student support service units, subject to academic corporatist pressures and whims. Depending on their positioning, centers assume accommodationist

relationships to their "parent" units, or they can be sites of resistance to or subversion of the larger institution. These centers become advocates (or activists) for change in academic culture, often local and organic. Viewed from a different angle, writing centers can be peer-centered, staffed with advanced undergraduates, or they can be virtual apprenticeship shops, locations where graduate students learn valuable teaching lessons to apply as conventional classroom teachers. Directorship and staffing differs across institutions: professional guidance can range from research and teaching faculty, to full-time administrators and graduate students. Credentials and performance expectations can vary from advanced degrees and minimal participation to terminal degrees and regimented time "booked" in the spaces. The "who" of writing centers, then, can speak volumes about how they are positioned and valued, but the calculus is by no means simple.

NOTES TOWARD A CRITICAL CITIZENSHIP

This book places a premium on viewing writing centers as sites for activism and social change. Positioned that way, I know the sentiment can have a certain messianic zeal. I've become a firm believer in micro-shifts culminating in slow revolutions. Earthquakes don't happen as the result of sudden ruptures; rather, the slippages of tectonic plates occur as the product of slow, virtually invisible, constantly building pressure. Social change just will not happen with the snap of fingers or the loudest of protest screams. To channel Malcolm Gladwell (2002) for a moment, tipping points happen at unexpected moments and can't be predicted, *per se*, but they build from *something*, from some spur. These kicks and nudges have to be understood in relation to and acting on wider, more abstract forces of the society, economics, and culture, each of them further poaching and reacting to one another. It's an amorphous whole that's hard to conceptualize and even more difficult to find a tangible outlet for. Where is racism located and owned? What's the home for class privilege or gender bias? From whom do I seek redress for heterosexism or ethnocentric teaching? Oppression is ubiquitous yet ethereal. To combat oppression is just as local and individual as it is global and collective.

In *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Lisa Duggan (2004) analyzes the contemporary impasse of progressive activism and argues the roots to its failures are dynamic. Part of the fault rests with what she argues is a widespread

acquiescence to neoliberal hegemony. This metanarrative goes beyond mere ideology and offers a totalizing worldview that's taken by society as the natural order of things, the way the world ought to be is never questioned or doubted. Under neoliberalism, corporate and government policies create the best possible conditions for global capitalism as well as for the concentration of wealth and resources. Transnational corporations are viewed as benevolent entities, and awareness of and outrage toward their tendencies to flout human rights, labor organizing, living wages, or progressive environmental policy are suppressed or minimized, all the easier when media outlets are subsidiaries of larger, nebulous organizations. Companies like ExxonMobil, General Electric and Nike transcend state and national boundaries and are driven to maximize profit for shareholders by any means possible. Consumers become complicit in neoliberalism by demanding cheap prices, broad choices, wide opportunity for consumption even as their real-time wages remain stagnant and dissipate and as they refuse to (or are unable to) question the conditions that give rise to them. To challenge neoliberalism is tantamount to waging "class warfare" or advocating economic nationalism by privileging the economic over other forms of division or identity.

Identity movements are themselves by-products of these post-industrial economic and social shifts. As middle-class ideals of domesticity yielded to pressures for a wider range of living and earning options for women and men alike, gender norms were re-imagined, and as racial and ethnic minorities butted against civic promises and uncivil reality, contradictions needed to be reconciled. Identity movements "protest. . . exclusions from national citizenship or civic participation, and against the hierarchies of family life" (Duggan 2004, 7). In their movement for social inclusion, Duggan adds, identity movements "fight for equality without any referent to the material conditions that impact upon it" (XVIII). Hence, the paradox Duggan maps: the very components of identity on which this book focuses—race, class, sex, and nationality—wouldn't have become the objects of identity movements without shifts in economic relations, yet the very complexity of identity under which neoliberalism masks itself in no small measure—the fragmentary subject of postmodernity—wouldn't be possible without individuals coalescing into movements that seek greater social and cultural inclusion, imagine and view society in distinct terms, and present possibilities that ironically challenge hegemony. Curiously, challenging

neoliberalism, Duggan argues, depends on fostering a pedagogy rooted in critical citizenship, one that embraces multiculturalism and the different terministic lenses it offers, but one that fosters a discriminating mindset toward macroeconomic forces. A progressive "revolution" has been staved off by a population unable to sustain criticism of the economy and identity movements not capable of coalescing as united front.

As the cliché goes, the revolution won't be televised, and it likely isn't going to ignite in the writing center or some other calculated site. Progressive teaching or mentoring doesn't embrace multiculturalism for the sake of doing so or raise consciousness just to expand possibilities. By helping anyone become aware of difference, the hegemonic status of the same, the standard, is challenged. It revives a notion of citizenship where active engagement supplants passive consent. That pedagogical context involves thinking, writing, talking; it begs for debating where agreement and conflict arise in productive, rich, and uncomfortable ways. Not every session will be an occasion to unpack identity politics, and not every staff meeting, tutor training or consulting course will focus on social justice and possibilities of action in writing centers. But identity and the politics of negotiation and face are always present and require inventory and mapping. I offer this text as a starting point, launching pad, or intervention in conversations yet to begin, in those that are ongoing, or in ones that have passed.