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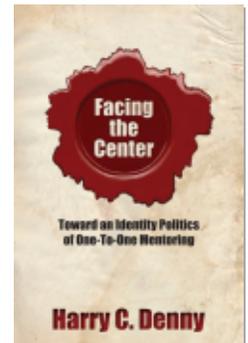## Facing the Center

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FACING CLASS IN THE WRITING CENTER

Scene 1: David comes out of one of New York City's working-class Latino communities. He is very soft-spoken and tremendously self-conscious about his literacy problems. David talks to Elena, an honors undergraduate student, about his experiences avoiding gang life in his neighborhood. He sees college as a vehicle for leaving parts of his home life, yet the world he faces at college often is just as daunting and discouraging as the one he seeks to avoid at home. A subway ride connects his two worlds, yet that train ride holds them simultaneously in tension with one another. David brings his difficulty with reading comprehension and writing issues to the writing center, and his ability to concentrate on school is undermined by needing to work full-time. Although he struggles with academic texts, David talks about his love of reading and writing. However, when sessions turn to his composition texts, Elena speaks about her frustration at the plodding progress they make. David and Elena take a month of conferences to convince him to revise ideas before "fixing" grammar. She wins David over only after his professor compliments his prose and also encourages him to reconsider his argument. Initially he takes that news as a devastating indictment of his ability as a writer.

Scene 2: Toward the end of semester, Dane, a senior English major, first-generation college student and Italian American, comes to my office to talk about his future and career. He is excited that I have encouraged him to pursue graduate study, and he has also begun to think about becoming a New York City teaching fellow. But he is carrying a huge debt load coming out of our private institution, and he is worried about getting a job and providing for his girlfriend. So he wants to know, what do I think about him taking the civil service exam to become a sanitation worker? Starting pay is $40-something thousand per year.

In the last chapter, I wrote about the face of race in writing center identity politics. As these scenarios suggest, the discussion here turns to economic class, but it's hard to imagine class cleaved from other

aspects of who we are since they are so intertwined with one another. In both cases, these young men work to negotiate a complicated set of social relations that predicate social mobility on education or specialized training, as Julie Lindquist (2002) would argue. My reaction to Dane indicates that not all routes to social mobility and economic security are viewed by people in positions of privilege equally, yet for him the ability to provide for his partner is more compelling than accruing the means to distinguish himself in other ways. Dane's relationship to meritocracy—to success and self-improvement—doesn't need to signify markers, at this point in his life at least, that differentiate himself from his working-class roots on Staten Island. Complicating matters even more, if someone like David pursues the promise of education and self-improvement, he faces a future that might distance himself from a strong ethnic community that provides a sense of belonging and attachment that may very likely be missing in any gentrified world he could inhabit. In sessions with his tutor, his use of language in college writing was framed in paradoxical terms: As David sought greater academic success, his vernacular was shameful to him; yet as his use of English in college classes grew better, he felt drawn away from his community back in Sunset Park, a working-class community of Latinos, whites, and Asian-Americans in Brooklyn.

In writing centers everywhere, tutors and clients like Dane and David are common, though how we acknowledge and contend with their existence, roles, and needs varies widely. First-generation students, academics, and administrators represent nearly three generations of formerly excluded people now gaining wide access to education. This shift was, in part, the product of post-World War II education policy, Great Society desegregation programs of the 1960s, and student protest movements of the early 1970s. Never before and nowhere else have so many had such great opportunity for education, even though financing for it has never been remotely equitable. Yet suspicion and doubt have been constant companions to this institutional democratization of teaching and learning. As access has grown, so too has the suspicion of these new faces: "Are they college material?" "Will they fit in?" Meanwhile, they themselves battle self-doubt and insecurity: "I'm an imposter;" "Maybe I'm not cut out for this life." Advocates of "maintaining" standards fear the prestige of college education will be soiled, its gatekeeping role to greater earning power and job security diminished and downgraded, slipping ever further into the horizon, like a

mirage, with undergraduate education no longer the de facto credential for most entry-level, middle-class employment in the U.S. With the relative value and caché of college education unclear, high school education, beyond college preparatory curricula, today offers little to leverage for, except minimal credentials for vocational training. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), today only advanced degrees correlate with generational class-changing earning power. Racial and economic stratification in American education is worse now than at any time during Jim Crow segregation (Kozol 2005).

It's no surprise, then, that students like Dane and David, products of class-coded education, doubt their abilities and promise or worse, to me, don't know what could be; if a person is never mentored or encouraged to aspire for any possibility, to embrace any dream, it shouldn't be surprising that the alternative, just getting by or sustaining oneself, becomes a life passion. Admittedly, this mindset is patronizing and says a great deal about my own criticism of and cynicism about people whose values, drive, and personal satisfaction come from other sources, not necessarily from the workplace. It also says just as much about my own lifetime of tussling with my parents who toiled at hourly-wage jobs, who left work at work, but never seemed happy or fulfilled by it, and who to this day wonder whether the academic labor I do is *really* work. To them, work was a means to an end, providing a decent home and food, yet I always got the sense they wanted something else, to do something more; but being poor and having kids and a mortgage superseded everything else. I wonder how many of my own students are at college to create the possibility for the life my parents have had, one not predicated on ever-escalating needs for consumption or happiness, but one centered on being fulfilled and content. At institutions like St. John's, where first-generation students dominate the undergraduate population, understanding the inherent contradictions and tensions of their pursuit of education is critical, but we also need to deeply consider our own belief systems and educational experiences and the ways they depart from and dovetail with those of our student populations, whether they have family histories with college education or not. My tutors work daily with students who don't know why they're in college and what they eventually want to do; that's not so remarkable or unusual for younger, less mature students. If anything, that lack of purpose can represent an exploratory stage en route to a sound, genuine, sustainable professional plan. Instead, these students have been more

striking for their intensely focused learning and career plans as early undergraduates. On closer examination, pragmatism guides these students' orientation toward college. Their thinking represents less of a concern for intellectual development or personal satisfaction and more of a drive for vocational training that will ensure a stable income. Still that voice in my head whispers, wondering how many aspiring pharmacists harbor dreams of being philosophers, how many accountants wish to create poetry, how many biologists ache to be graphic artists. Connie, my secretary at our Staten Island campus, ever the realist and foil to my mischief-making, shakes her head when she catches me inviting students to indulge their dream majors or to experiment with classes that don't have an immediate impact on their careers, often saying later, "How many artists does the world need? How's this kid going to pay her student loans?"

Too often, being working class in the academy is neither a romantic Hollywood moment nor a source of gut-busting laughter. There's little nostalgia for *Working Girl*, *Billy Elliot*, or even *Roseanne*. More frequently, people who share my economic roots are propelled by institutional dynamics toward shame and regret. Everyday teaching and learning encourages people to shed this skin and adorn themselves in the trappings, affect and rhetoric of another world, one that assures material security even if psychic damage lingers unresolved. To better understand these dynamics, this chapter first focuses on the wider theoretical roots of the identity politics of class in writing centers, ways of understanding that are circulated widely in composition and English studies as well as in the broader humanities and social sciences. With that shared discourse in mind, I then focus on the ways writing centers and composition classrooms can play into the practices that paper over the performative difference of economic background in students' rhetorical and linguistic choices. In tension with these unreflective practices that normalize middle-class ways of expression, I wrap up this chapter by exploring occasions where students can be empowered to foreground or subvert their class positioning through writing center practice, pedagogical insights that have tremendous relevance in wider learning contexts.

THEORIZING CLASS AND THE WRITING CENTER

This book makes the assumption that many readers may not understand that they themselves possess multiple identities, ways of knowing

that require naming and exploring, and that complicate their received meanings in relation to those self-constructed, let alone even contested expressions of Others. The collective identities and communities that form in relation to economic realities—those related to how much we make but also how we consume culture and signify ourselves in relation to those patterns—signify, to me, our class positions. Just as we never step outside or get beyond race, class is, quite simply, ubiquitous. To understand what it might mean to cover, oppose or subvert the practices of class-based identities in the writing centers, it's necessary to have a common grounding in the historical roots of cultural studies and post-modern criticism, contemporary intellectual movements that take class identity as central fronts for understanding the operation of society and communities. Patrick Brantlinger (1990) frames the historical roots of academic interest in class in a conventional way with it emerging in Britain and becoming intertwined in similar intellectual currents in the U.S. For the Americans, a humanities crisis grew in the late 1960s as students came to see coursework increasingly irrelevant to their own experiences and needs, and professors came to view the humanities as intellectually dead. From the left, there was a desire to challenge the rising corporatization of and industrial ties in the academy. To what degree, leftists pondered, had the missions of colleges and universities shifted to mainly servicing the labor, research, and development needs of government and corporations? As colleges democratized access, broadened their curricula and exploded canon, Brantlinger notes, conservatives mounted a challenge as well, questioning the intellectual rigor and sophistication of college education as its face and curricula changed.

But there were deeper divisions beyond 1960s radicalism and transformation that presaged the arrival of cultural studies and postmodern criticism. Coming out of World War II, intellectuals reflected on its lessons and began to understand the power of culture but also the threat to humanity that its manipulation posed. The Holocaust was a case study in mass culture and its potential to steer wide swaths of populations to inhumane ends. Though the world promised, "Never again," the Cold War, McCarthyism, the nuclear arms race, assaults on the environment and one regional military conflict after another signaled continued humanitarian threats, if not the potential for repeated genocide, even species annihilation. Beyond these global threats, critics also began to realize that the promise of capitalism was giving way to a reality of entrenched class positions and conflict, reflected as much in

the diminishing rate and possibility for mobility and shifting between them as by cultural practices that alternately papered over or exploited them. In Britain, this critical awareness gets the greatest attention with Raymond Williams's 1983 interrogation of the meaning of culture and his expansion of it. Conversations began to shift from purely "high culture" artifacts and their significance—"the best of what's been thought and said"—to popular culture, examining how people made use of everyday texts to produce a shared, collective experience. In the humanities, this inaugurated an ongoing tension between champions of "great books" or *belle-lettres* and promoters of pop culture texts like film, contemporary music, and other unconventional "archival" material. Aside from attention to mass-consumed items and the impact of mass media, scholarship also appropriated anthropological and sociological methods of studying the exotic Other in remote developing countries and turned these methods inward, usually to working-class communities in industrial contexts, or to the self. Beyond Williams (1983), Richard Hoggart (1998) and Paul Willis (1981) produced powerful texts not only about working-class life and literacy, but also about the policing of them from beyond, by institutions working to maintain the status quo. To join the middle class and reap the economic, cultural and social privilege that goes along with that, Hoggart and Willis both suggest, working-class people are required to surrender their affiliation in all senses, symbolic and performative, to move "forward." Richard Rodriguez famously identified with Hoggart's concept of the "scholarship boy" in his memoir, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Such figures, as they achieve academic success, find themselves alienated, not quite embraced by those for whom intellectual life is "natural," but isolated, seen as separated from a community of practice whose aims and mission are increasingly at odds with what comes "natural" for the scholarship boy. As Julie Lindquist (2002) points out, people who might be named as working class likely don't understand themselves in those terms and probably wouldn't have a language that would capture the experience. By and large, people tend to identify with the default category of middle class, even if they possess no rational or visible connections to the signifier.

This attention to class and culture resuscitated a historical interest in the question of why fundamental economic shifts hadn't happened or driven wider change. Social and cultural critics wondered, in the face of growing class difference, of mobility becoming less—not more—likely

for wide swaths of people, why they didn't mobilize for change? The consensus answer, like racism, is institutional and systemic. Louis Althusser (1971) argued that institutions operate to maintain a stable society and serve to hector people into subject positions, identities, in other words, that possess individual and collective ways of being. These positions and their social, cultural, economic and political values come to signify to themselves and others in hegemonic ways that maintain rather than challenge social order. Althusser pointed out that ideology was functioning smoothly when a cop or other institutional figure could call out, "Hey you!" and the right target would turn, performing their interpolation into their subject position. People, in other words, come to accept their positions as a natural course of events. Failure to improve one's lot in life signifies individual failure, never any broader institutional or social deficiency. Althusser believed institutions— schools, churches, the media, family, politics, etc.—worked mainly to discipline people and coax them to behave and believe in ways that seemed coherent and natural, even against their own material interests. His student, Michel Foucault (1977), produced later scholarship that advanced a deeper understanding of institutions and disciplinarity. He argued that institutions, from psychiatric facilities to schools, strove to generate information on individuals that they could then parlay as esoteric and generative of insight and expertise. The ability of disciplines to translate and interpret knowledge into truths about their subjects trumpeted their arrival and status as *real* sciences. These "soft" sciences, human and social, became linked to their "harder" cousins, proffering if not empirical truth, knowledge that they agreed was valid and reliable. Just as important, the knowledge they produced served wider social interests by developing, executing, and naturalizing mechanisms whereby people came to accept technologies of domination and subordination, the automatic functioning of power. People, under their influence, come to perform in expected ways, the product of institutions naturalizing their socialization through surveillance, knowing they'll be caught and corrected if they act outside of socially accepted roles.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1991; 1992) takes Althusser's (1971) insights in another important direction, arguing that institutions and collective identity operate by complex hierarchies of capital, the combination or system of which he calls habitus. Complicating conventional notions of economic class as the primary means by which society is stratified, he explores how status involves much more than income

or what other forms and amounts of property and assets they possess. How people make money and use it for consumption, and to what ends are just as important for insight. Bourdieu believes we actually struggle over wider sets of capital, many of which are directly related to how much economic capital we accrue, but some of which operate outside their influence, with hierarchies independent of monetary worth. He takes as examples the artist, craftsperson, teacher, and banker. An artist might have a great deal of cultural capital, but lack economic and political capital. A craftsperson, similar to the artist, might have a good deal of practical education capital and because of the person's trade, have significant earning power, but they might lack social standing. Likewise, a teacher might have middle-class standing because of her/his education, secure employment and earning power, but she/he might lack elite standing culturally, socially or politically; whereas the banker has tremendous capital across all fronts. In this sense, people might be economically middle class, but culturally working class. They might be politically and economically elite, but have little cultural value. To Bourdieu, fields—in their broadest terms, the economic, the social, the cultural, and the political—operate on the accumulation of power and status conferred through the capital that individuals and groups possess. Capital has complex sets of rules and protocol that themselves are context specific and expressed through symbolic capital that operates through language and the meaning attached to objects. Like chips players gather in a poker game, capital's worth comes with its sheer amount and the contexts in which we develop it. Everywhere from marginalized to dominant communities, capital operates to distinguish and stratify participants, but its transfer to other fields is always subject to their rules. Street cred doesn't signify beyond the street, gold coast or country club etiquette doesn't work outside its manicured lanes, and esoteric academic capital rarely passes muster outside its ivory towers.

Bourdieu (1991) and Foucault (1972, 1977, 1978) represent important influences on postmodern and critical cultural studies trends in composition studies. Bourdieu's (1991) relevance to writing centers, in particular, comes in the awareness that people's use of symbolic capital signifies their membership and status in communities of practice. People never step outside of them and co-exist in multiple communities, each having their own literacies that can complement, confound or challenge one another. It's not a question of being deficient or lacking generally across fields, but one of recognizing that people

need to *possess* and *use* symbolic capital according to its protocol, one that's always fluid and ready for change. The pedagogical challenge for tutors and students alike is to teach and learn the iterative and arbitrary nature of discourse communities, especially within the academy and its sub-specialties. But just as important is the need for awareness that understanding of one's own already existing capital, forms of literacy with which one has facility, can be leveraged or parlayed for others, and that's not to suggest we should surrender one for the other. Instead, having insight on one protocol (if not multiple versions) demystifies and facilitates learning and teaching others; transfer of learning becomes transactional, not linear. Foucault's (1977, 1978) work underscores how this dynamic—of learning, decoding, and performing symbolic and cultural capital—lends itself to binary modes of operation, ways of using capital that are simultaneously normalized (accepted) and pathologized (rejected). He posits that the two positions are codependent upon and reinforce one another. This mutually-constituting discursive practice has a daunting implication for those who hope to breach hierarchies and status regimes in discourse communities: In the instance when Other threatens same, when abnormal challenges normal, the privileged position works to reassert itself by shifting the rules of the game, rendering fields endlessly elastic and seemingly always under crisis, in need of policing and surveillance, lest standards and prestige fall. I'm not suggesting anyone abdicate working toward change or social justice, especially in our work to make the academy and writing centers more democratic, equitable spaces; rather, I'm advocating attention to the "reality" that institutions that we participate in are committed to and structured for manufacturing difference and policing it, just as we who mentor must work to counter and mitigate it.

It might be easy to look askance at the role colleges and universities play in normalizing the symbolic and cultural capital operative in their disciplines, working to exclude people who don't play according to their arbitrary rules, but that very logic is at play in every community or collective. Julie Lindquist (2002), in her ethnographic study of a working-class bar, discovers a rich dynamic wherein people perform their identity, gaining street cred by acting and arguing rhetorically *within* the community, not by naming or using the vocabulary imposed from *without*. A similar sort of ethos is struggled over in the academy, in writing centers specifically, when students and tutors alike must contend not just with disciplinary identities but the communities of practice that

go along with them. They must also come to negotiate faces and performativity, although they often have little understanding of who they are, or of the implications of that knowledge, especially when those identities are marginal. Donna LeCourt (2006) conceptualizes this dynamic as a question of rendering class identities invisible. Working-class students come to view this self, she says, so readily disposable, so easy to bracket, that they likely have no ability to name or even recognize core traits, both cultural and physical, that distinguish them, ironically enough, quite legibly to everyone. LeCourt posits that colleges and universities play upon notions of class mobility and meritocracy, a social contract for improvement, yet they also offer themselves as institutions that transcend class even as their educational policies often reinforce and police difference. "Class difference," she notes, "through the maintenance of exclusionary discursive practices, reflects an identity that cannot even be discussed within academic discourse lest the institution's claim to classlessness be undercut" (LeCourt 2006,161). In this sense, then, facing the center is to mark the middle-class identity practices that are never interrogated and to help students and tutors alike come to name, even develop, a critical relationship to the ways we marginalize working-class experiences, even when we seek, justifiably, to transform them. As LeCourt herself acknowledges:

> The desire for economic security is literally quite real: Those without financial means are discounted, vilified, and held up to ridicule in our society. To be without money in our society is to be oppressed in the most structural of ways that literally put the body at risk: homelessness, unemployment, poverty, violence. (2006, 5)

She and I both share a profound commitment to empowering students, helping them achieve whatever level of material and symbolic security they seek (as we ourselves have done), yet we both value attention to the cumulative damage of lifetimes spent denigrating one's cultural roots as well as the need to discover and reclaim working-class identities. Part of that work involves creating spaces and opportunities for students and ourselves to explore and investigate, learning to know them as communities with rich cultural and rhetorical heritage.

Still another site for labor involves creating wider audiences for the insight this discussion of class and cultural studies provides. Tutors, writing center professionals, and teachers across the disciplines need to know not just their own identities as "classed individuals," people

who carry with them numerous practices and socio-cultural assumptions about the economic positions we occupy. As leaders and mentors, we also must dig deeper into what makes these identities possible and sustained over time. We all need to understand the dynamics at play to curiously mask them, transform them, or imagine class doesn't exist. Instead, as actors in our spheres of influence, we see others with economic subject positions different from our own; we mark them through a range of personages, more often as "at risk," "remedial," or "first generation," than as "elite," "advanced," or "traditional." We get to those discourses through institutional practices that trace individuals, normalizing and naturalizing certain ways of doing and conferring and inscribing the capital they use in everyday life. The potential for activism and transformation through pedagogy exists in helping students and clients become aware of both the practices of domination (assimilating to the mainstream currents) and the possibilities for opposition and resistance, as the next sections will pose.

ERASING AND MUTING MARGINALIZED CLASS

In so many ways, what we're pressured to do in writing centers is to cleanse working-class students of their identities, to enable them to start reading and sounding like right-proper middle-class folks. If, as Susan Miller (1991) argues in the "Feminization of Composition," the role of teaching college writing is to potty train novice writers in the demands of college-level writing, then Lynn Bloom's (1996) characterization of first-year writing as an occasion for washing off the remnants of lower-class living is on target. Those first-generation students are a dirty lot: messy backgrounds, filthy ideas, sloppy organization, and soiled prose. It's a miracle more writing studies teachers or writing center tutors don't morph into Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest*, breaking out Comet in moments of exasperation and scrub, scrub, scrub, screaming in ecstasy, "Christina!!! Clean up this essay!" Setting aside all the Freudian implications of this widespread, albeit odd compulsion and obsession with the unclean, there's a paradox here operating through the movements to simultaneously erase and re-inscribe class-coded uses of language. As hyper-attuned as academics are to working-class rhetoric and vernacular, of outsiders in the midst, they also seek to eliminate it, telling students to adopt, without question, academic discourse practices that propose to be neutral. These default positions are anything but; by positing academic discourse as anything but *that*, the discourses that working-class

students use, their language practices and community instantly signify as exterior, opposed to but also constituting academic language. As I said before, I'm not necessarily opposed to a common ground vernacular, even if it possesses a profoundly flawed historical lineage, complete with exclusionary and elitist politics, so long as we go forth understanding and teaching students to know its position as arbitrary, fluid, and subject to constant change. As any linguistic historian of English will confirm, the language is elastic and evolving, so for anyone to posit any common use of it as static is foolish; to teach any group of students, especially those who speak and write from marginalized positions, that in order to be successful they must surrender whatever Englishes they possess for some transitory "standard" version is wrong and unethical.

Writing centers and composition studies have a complicated relationship to the imperative to cover working-class identity. For people who espouse pedagogies ranging from expressivism to social construction, mentoring fosters voice, agency, and critical understanding of discourse communities and institutional practices. Across the continuum of expressive writing practice, I often see undergraduate projects in my writing center where students are being encouraged to express themselves and develop confidence and purpose with writing, to boldly share narratives they're burning to tell the world (without regard, I might add, to the extent of these enterprises' sheer narcissism or to whether the world is equipped and prepared to receive them). Another current compels students down a road of discovery of individual, collective, disciplinary, and/or institutional consciousness. At its core, this sort of curriculum is a vertiginous quest to deconstruct personal narratives and ideological interpolation even as students are pushed to assemble coherent arguments naming their marginality or privilege. This enterprise translates into a practice of proselytizing students toward hyper-consciousness of their fragmented identities, the shibboleth of which is their ease at naming them. For both of these curricula, disciplinary genres and conventions about prose (or shared approaches to inquiry, rhetoric and arrangement) are less compelling than an abiding faith in the impact of getting students writing, becoming confident self-reflective writers, and going forth engaged and purposeful. However, the academy persists in its mixed messages: It celebrates authentic voice and strong sense of mission, values that would seem to embrace a wide swath of vernaculars; yet the academy clings to static notions of rhetoric and presentation that can confound novice writers.

Bloom (1996) further unpacks these implicit middle-class values that college composition champions and that many writing centers often are complicit in enforcing. She names self-reliance, decorum, moderation, thrift, efficiency, orderliness, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking as hallmarks of middle-class sensibility that must be cultivated in "unwashed" students. Self-reliance centers on inculcating people with a sense that writing is a solitary enterprise even when many projects involve collaboration and workshopping (659). Decorum references the manners that middle-class writers ought to display like, as Freedman describes, respect, deference and appropriate formality (660, Cited in Bloom, 340-42). Respectability is the assumption that students should not display attitudes that transgress mainstream beliefs, whether radical leftist or conservative ideas (659). The goal is to always be polite. Connected with not offending any audience's sensibilities is the importance placed on moderation, to appreciate a reasonable range of perspectives on any given topic (661-662). Thrift and efficiency connect with both labor—working quickly—and financial mindsets—saving for a rainy day. They are also relevant to prose—eliminating excess and keeping it short and simple (662-663). Cleanliness indexes surface error, producing writing free of offenses to standard English, from spelling and punctuation to vocabulary and style (664-665). Composition also teaches the virtue of punctuality— getting work done on time and in sequence—and it services students for later writing in disciplines, planting seeds that will germinate later. ("You'll appreciate this experience when you're in that writing-intensive course in a couple years.") Finally, Bloom argues that teaching to critical thinking illustrates the independence and moderation that are cultivated in the other values. I would deduce from her argument that effective student writers who perform a middle-class ethos show great facility moving between intellectual positions of believing what they're taught and imagining possibilities for doubting, within reason.

Taking up Bloom's register of middle-class comp values makes me feel a little bit slimy. I like to imagine myself as being above stooping to such pedagogical bias, of being thoroughly implicated in teaching students to cover working-class identity and to foreground a purely middle-class mindset. It makes me think: "I'd never do that. My tutors would never encourage *that* kind of thinking about writing." But then again, I realize, of course, we all do it, all the time. Students come to us under pressure to "fix" their papers, to clean them of the filth of

poor mechanics and style, having been told to stop writing like they speak, that their affect isn't appropriate for academic discourse. We never tell them, "Eh, don't worry about that. Your professor will get past all *that.*" In meeting students on their terrain, where they perceive their needs, we're compliant, never challenging students' expectations or their professors' edicts. We aim to please and go along, compliant, ignorant to the implications of what such work has for language or students' rights to negotiate their own understanding of English, adapting it to other communities or literacies. The writing centers that I've help direct more often than not struggled with the stigma that results from our willingness, ill-conceived or not, to fix students lack of proficiency with academic writing. As a consequence, these writing centers have drifted toward being or have become sites mainly for remediation, places where damaged or flawed writers go to get taken care of, where they learn to cover. Professors often play into stigma, referring only "deficient" students and telling others, "You don't really need that place." Yet in needing help, using it too much, students can still mark themselves as flawed and suspect in problematic ways, especially if their writing makes too much progress or development after working with a tutor. "Surely," colleagues have told me or their students, "this can't be original work. They've worked too closely with a tutor." In this complicated calculus, students ought to progress, get better, but not so much that they lose too much of their marginality. They ought to perform well, just not *too* well. Writing centers don't do enough to advocate and educate faculty in the range of literacies students have access to and their potential for transforming teaching and learning in the disciplines. Writing centers, as we will see in the final chapter of this book, concern themselves with covering well, being dutiful servants of institutional needs, training and retraining toward membership in academic discourse communities, often not advertising the wide range of students they work with, the full menu of possibilities beyond lower-order concerns we can address, and the recursive and iterative process through which that work proceeds.

Nancy Grimm (1999) reminds us that helping students acquire the markers of the cultural dominance—to talk the talk, to walk the walk, to cover—isn't necessarily a bad or flawed function of what writing centers do. Helping students learn and perform the codes of cultural dominance, the routines of discourse communities, isn't problematic. It can even be necessary when, once students are in college, refusing to do so

has real material consequences such as doing poorly in a course, dropping grade averages, hurting chances for advanced study, or diminishing potential earning power. I opened the chapter with David and his struggles with college writing. Much of the frustration he encountered with his tutor (as I remember from debriefing conversations with her) was the realization that he lacked the codes to "sound right," to express himself in rhetorical and linguistic ways that enabled him to fit in; instead, at every juncture he was confronted with the knowledge, by way of grades and teacher comments and self-suspicion, that he was an outsider through and through. David's tutor was a thoroughly middle-class white woman who had transferred to my school from an elite liberal arts college. She performed the very all-American college affect that David sought to mirror. Watching them from my office was a curious ethnographic experience: From afar Eliza and David looked like an ad for Abercrombie and Fitch, Eliza more casual and effortless than David, whose performance of the college boy persona felt forced, too self-conscious, at times. It was in this sense that he represented a failure to negotiate the complex rules of class: that to assimilate or cover requires a profound internalization and performance; and that success is almost always fleeting. I eventually lost contact with David. I moved on to another institution, so I never knew whether he ever learned to cover. But when I think of those moments spent watching him, the power and hegemony of meritocracy scare me: How much damage is done, I wonder, to Davids out there in colleges and universities everywhere, who think they're just not working hard enough, that they're lacking as individuals, deficient somehow. Those people, I fear, walk away from higher education, not because they find viable alternatives for vocational and professional training, but because they can no longer bear the continued assault on their sense of character and ability.

Such violence goes on and accumulates its effects in an environment where it's not contested and challenged. The first step toward pushing back at that reality and creating a different space involves the sort of advocacy that consultants can do in writing centers on an everyday basis: affirming the familiar, scaffolding students' academic arguments with rhetoric and experience from outside where appropriate, and bridging their cultural capital to the context and constraints of writing assignments. Even outside the context of one-to-one sessions, activism can involve raising consciousness among faculty at large about the experiences of student writers and helping instructors come to know

the learning needs and baggage students and faculty themselves bring
to learning to write (and writing to learn). I suspect teachers mean well
(just as novice tutors do) when they admonish writers who use class-
coded language to "stop writing like you speak" (as if the voice in either
context is neutral and absent of deeply political and ideological refer-
ents). Knowing the impact of those words on their audience is half the
battle, but a fuller sensitivity can arise from faculty reflecting on their
own journeys to academic discourse, however distant, however coded.
The next steps, beyond acting as confederates who shepherd learners
from one discourse to another, involve making people aware of the
legitimacy and possibility of opposing and subverting the codes and
practices of domination.

TOWARD FOREGROUNDING AND SUBVERTING THE FACE OF CLASS

At the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies in New York
City, students pursue education in a rather innovative way that doesn't
implicitly require them to surrender their working-class identities.[13]
The Van Arsdale Center works with people in the trades, usually non-
traditional or returning adult students, and it combines undergraduate
degrees with apprenticeships toward journeymen licenses. The pro-
gram doesn't view students as transitioning from blue collar or trade
work; instead, the center embraces the labor and work in which some-
one can take pride and build a consciousness, placing a premium on
studying "work, workers and the 'working-class presence'- social, cul-
tural, and institutional in an historical and a contemporary context"
(http://www.esc.edu/labor). What's striking to me about this sort of pro-
gram is the oppositional possibilities that it opens up, that literacy and
language needn't be understood in relation to conventional academic
pursuits or through fetishizing undergraduate or graduate education as
a pathway for collective social and economic improvement. Instead this
center values workers by using academic learning as a means for being
better practitioners of trades as well as citizens more broadly. This work
going on at the Van Arsdale Center and in different ways at schools like
St. John's represents powerful potential for opposition that lurks in stu-
dents' and tutors' identities, if only we could cultivate and enable them
to express them. LeCourt (2006) takes up Tom Fox's 1990 research

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13.   The Van Arsdale Center is part of SUNY's Empire State College system.

on his writing classes to signal a key point that despite the supposedly
class-neutral environment of colleges, working-class students implicitly
seek economic mobility, but *not* social mobility (162). These students
often don't want to surrender their community identities, to break
from neighborhoods and wider social networks to which they have
intense ties and loyalty. Such pride and connection, even if not named
or understood in class (or racial) terms, is powerful, and it begs for
mechanisms that make them visible. In an institutional context that's
purported to transcend class, marking it, wherever, however possible,
is a profoundly oppositional act. They are, in essence, fundamentally
resistant, working to resist being assimilated, even as they work toward
a "cover" identity that provides for the material success they seek.

   At St. John's, where forty percent of our admitted students must be
in "very high need" of financial aid (at or below the federal poverty
level), the economic mobility that college education promises, illusory
or not, has the potential to transform individual lives and communi-
ties. I suspect we have legions of students who constantly juggle that
affinity for home and neighborhood with the potential for a life and
world somewhere beyond what their parents might have had, though
they likely don't have a language for such experiences. Dane, the for-
mer tutor of mine I wrote about in the beginning of this chapter, is
an example of someone seeking economic mobility, but not seeking
to leave his community behind. He went on to become a New York
City police officer, stationed the last I heard in the Flatbush section of
Brooklyn. Dane was on the path to a secure job and stable life that he
sought, and he wasn't trying to become someone he was uncomfort-
able being. When I now look back on those conversations focused on
talking him into applying to graduate school, my vision was for him
to become the sort of English teacher and professor who could reach
students in ways profoundly different from some of my colleagues, as
a role model who shared students' own cultural capital. What I hadn't
thought about was that very experience of going to graduate school, of
moving further away from neighborhood and community, would have
fostered a greater sense of loss and estrangement. I would have been
pushing Dane to assimilate to another world to which he held, at least
at that time, no affinity.

   In everyday tutoring, sessions could be spent raising conscious-
ness, getting working-class students and tutors alike to foreground
their experiences in every instance, or proselytizing about the virtue

of owning or reclaiming one's identity. As Lindquist (2002) points out, that sort of activity is precisely the sort of naming and action that people don't do; rather, they perform in their everyday practices and community interaction. Ordinary interactions in writing centers involve establishing and building rapport with clients, coming to understand and empathize with one another, negotiating expectations, and setting an agenda. In the last chapter on race, I wrote about subversion involving an awareness of one's environment, a sort of street savvy applied to spaces of domination. Subversion also involves performing in ways that are consistent with the mainstream, in ways that disguise challenges or knowledge being shared among confederates. In working with students and helping them eliminate those tell-tale traits of working-class practice that Bloom (1996) alludes to, tutors lead students toward communities of practices, but they do it, especially when the tutors themselves are working-class, by parlaying shared experiences to new contexts, rhetorical occasions, and academic genres. I imagine someone saying, "Hey, I've been there. I know what you're going through." Even for students who don't share a common ground in terms of class, reflecting on and invoking their own experiences with marginality can mitigate the gulf just as much as making a discursive space for identity to be spoken about and problem-posed. The trick to pulling off that sort of conversation is honoring experience without the student coming to feel objectified or patronized.

In a recent graduate course on research methods, I mentored one of my students and former tutors in the very subversive ways that I'm advocating. Peter was struggling to come up with a topic for a semester-long project, and I had long ago read him as a working-class guy from suburban Long Island (his language and affect signified him), though I didn't think he had any self-awareness as such. The more I just talked with him, the more I learned, the more he told. He's the son of one of our campus public safety officers, himself a retired NYPD cop. While his dad and family had achieved sufficient economic mobility, they had left the old neighborhood in Queens, but had recreated it out on the island. In my relatively short life in New York City, I've come to know that police officers and firefighters alike joined the white flight in the 1970s and 1980s as suburban development and mortgage practices accelerated a temporary expatriation from the city (that trend has now reversed). The impact of this migration of newly economically secure but culturally working-class folks on the island was an oddly explicit

segregation of the island along the route of the main expressway and northern and southern coastal shorelines. Working-class white folks populated communities and villages along the middle of the island, just far enough from the axis formed by Long Island Expressway so as to not hear its hum, but not too close to tony villages with water views. African Americans, by and large, were restricted to communities nearest the highway and closest to JFK airport's take-off and landing routes. These settlement patterns translated into Peter growing up with a Long Island sense of privilege (much of Queens and Brooklyn are signified as threatening urban blight, albeit thinly racially-charged in its encoding) but unaware that where and how he lived still signified him as working-class, dramatically different in self-presentation and style from peers who had grown up and attended wealthier school districts further out on the island or in elite communities near the coasts.

My knowledge of this economic and racial redlining of Long Island had only come from working with high school teachers throughout the island who spoke to vastly different experiences. In a tremendously wealthy district, instructors would tell me about the pressures they faced for their students to have high scores on SATs and AP exams, not just to ensure they got into "good" colleges (Ivy League or elite, selective small liberal arts colleges and universities), but also to maintain high property values. Their colleagues in less privileged districts spoke in the same ominous and earnest terms, except the codes had shifted. For students from working class schools, the anxiety was directed at students who "couldn't write," students who came from broken families with checkered histories, students who just needed the "right" templates to pass Regent's exams or do well enough on English Language Assessments to keep them from having to do summer school. With the distance and remove that I had as an outsider, I clearly could see that young people didn't automatically become less smart just because they lived on the wrong side of Route 25 or the Southern State Parkway. Obviously something was going on, something entirely consistent with what Jonathan Kozol (2002, 2005) has written about over and over again. Knowing Peter was the product of schooling on the "wrong side" of some highway on Long Island, I set him off reading Mike Rose's (2005) *Lives on the Boundary*, Jean Anyon's (1992) study of class-coded curriculum in New Jersey (not terribly dissimilar from the Island), and Kozol's *Savage Inequalities (1992)* and *Shame of a Nation (2005)*. Not surprisingly, Peter came back to me pissed off because I had asked him to

approach these texts thinking about whether he recognized his learning experiences anywhere in them, fully knowing he would. I had worked to raise his consciousness, but the outcome of the work was still in progress. Peter was becoming self-aware, yet I wasn't sure whether he would handle the implications of that knowledge. Rather than just passively accepting his place in the social order, Peter now stood at the precipice of Hall's (1993) divide between being oppositional and subversive; he wasn't sure whether to reject or negotiate some place of security with it, but he was resolute that something in his head had shifted.

PARTING THOUGHTS

I don't have many stories to share of tutors and clients coming together to challenge the system, to "stick it to the man" (often a professor) from a position of relative safety. As someone fully implicated in the very system I might like to see students rage against or at least buck, I'm no longer in a position to daily witness routine subversion. Walking through the writing center, I do often hear students whispering to one another insider knowledge about how to navigate the waters of this or that professor, colleagues of mine whose arbitrary rules and regulations for essays range from the esoteric to the convoluted. Just as often, in their persona as peers whose expertise isn't necessarily content-related but based in understanding the cultural rules and protocol of academe, they act as Bourdieu (1984) would imagine: Explaining how to gather up chips and when to spend them. Tutors channel Foucault (1977), showing peers where a disciplining gaze comes from and how to act from a position of not being seen, to dupe the enforcers of normalization and perform the culturally pathological without getting caught. They are informants in the best organic, socially sustainable sorts of ways. As "impartial" advocates, my tutors quickly come to know they can't take sides for or against their peers, but they do learn to speak in guarded ways and careful cues that dodge being directive, weave around evaluation, and parry toward effective assessment in ways that enable their peers to do better without compromising their principles.

More often than not, I parlay the lessons of class identity politics that arise in the writing center to my own classrooms and when I'm working with faculty who seek out consultations. Students like David and Dane are a dime a dozen at the institutions where I've taught over the years, but the ones who are rife for consciousness raising are few and far between, making the syllabi for my courses and the discussions that

crop up all the more strategic. I don't miss an opportunity to plant a seed or offer a question that challenges what superficially seems ordinary and customary. As powerful as those occasions are for my undergraduates who can find themselves questioning practices that had seemed natural, graduate students have also proven equally interpolated into unexamined class identities. On one occasion inviting a student to read Dalton Conley's (2001) *Honky* led him to finally reconcile with his own working-class roots and conflict with expression and being a part of the academy. In meetings with faculty across the disciplines, I speak, from time to time, about my own personal narrative as evidence of proximity to our students, and the gesture almost always results in colleagues having their own "coming out" confessions of working-class identity. Those talks inevitably lead to critical examination of assignments, syllabi, and pedagogy, discussions whose impact leads to small and large shifts for teachers and students alike. Such talk can also create a critical mass and confidence to push back at the unchallenged bias of privileged faculty, particularly when they seem insensitive or callused to the plight, needs, and assets working-class peers and colleagues bring to the academic and professional life.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm struck by the sheer diversity within our writing centers and our general stasis toward not engaging that diversity, however it appears and manifests itself. LeCourt (2006) confirms what wasn't surprising to me: Institutionally colleges and universities offer themselves up as domains that step beyond class. That professed blindness to differential experiences between students is an illusion that enables professors and administrators alike to carry on with the fiction that the playing field, if not equal, becomes so under our guidance, that we marshal the energy and forces to level everyone by the time they leave us as undergraduates. For those who refuse or can't be leveled, we think, "Well, they probably weren't meant for college anyway." The reality is, of course, quite different. The distance between margin and center, in economic terms, is wider and more fluid than ever. At colleges and universities nationwide, the middle class is quickly dissipating, receding back into the ranks of the working class, a move that I don't view as inherently tragic per se. It's an identity that requires reclaiming and celebration. Still, the material implications are nevertheless daunting: Fewer students have access to the loans and grants that enable enrollment at just the moment that employment opportunities that don't require college credentials become few and far

between. The days of factory line work and stable manufacturing jobs have been swept into the dust bin of history; what remains are service sector jobs, the possibilities of which are daunting when factoring in lifetime labor. (For more, see Barbara Ehrenreich's 2002 *Nickel & Dimed* or 2005 *Bait and Switch*.)