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Book Review

Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace. By Travis Webster. Utah State University Press, 2021.

—Reviewed by Duane Theobald

Representation matters a great deal throughout the higher education landscape. In marginalized spaces of academia, such as writing centers, this notion matters all the more. Thanks to works like Caswell, Grutsch-McKinney, and Jackson’s *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, writing center administrators can point to texts that uphold long-told stories and experiences about the work done in our little pockets of space on our campuses. Travis Webster’s book *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace* extends and builds upon foundational writing center texts by providing not just another glimpse into the everyday lives of writing center administrators but highlighting perspectives and experiences that have not been featured as prominently as they should be in our field.

In 143 tightly-crafted pages, Webster carefully presents the reader with honest, thoughtful conversations featuring interviews with 20 writing center administrators (ten who are male identifying and gay, nine who are female identifying and lesbian or queer, and one who is transgender/female-to-male and opposite-sex oriented). Opening with an emotional recall to the tragedy at Orlando’s gay club *Pulse* in 2016, Webster presents his own reactions and struggles after the horrific event and the call from one of his writing center staffers “to write the staff and the broader community, saying [he] was the person to do so, referring to [his] out gay director identity” (4). The notion of queer identity and what it means within writing center administrative roles serves as the

framework for this text, an area of writing center studies that Webster notes has not been addressed in depth. Labor in writing center spaces varies from administrator to administrator but, as this text notes, what labor looks like for a queer writing center administrator can prove quite different. As Webster notes throughout the book, the labor is unquestionably necessary and worthwhile; however, it is not always noticed and carefully considered. With the questioning of “higher education’s long-term sustainability...[and] eventual collapse per our lack of critical, proactive, and progressive orientation to work and workers,” the purpose behind this text proves necessary and worthwhile as well (Webster 17).

After a thoughtful introduction, Webster begins unpacking queer identity and writing center administrative roles in Chapter 2, “Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Capital.” His breakdown of how he defines “origins” and “capital” are particularly significant, as they serve as a strong framework for what follows. For this book’s purposes, Webster defines capital as “resources gained, lost, rendered, transacted, traded, and heralded in an institutional economy, whether embodied, material, or metaphorical, as related to one’s social and economic standing” (29). As he discusses origins and capital, Webster remarks on the ever-ready nature of queer participants for writing center administrative labor, “the labor of meeting people where they are,[...]working to understand how to build sites that do things in the world,[...]and] working to combat oppressors and oppression” (34). This connection is made all the clearer as the author presents the stories of participants Madeline, Brian, Mike, Matt, John, and Ryan throughout the chapter.

The discussion of what it means to be Black and queer in writing center administrative spaces proves particularly powerful, with Webster remarking that “all the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) anti-racist reading groups [...] and all the justice-based and radical writing center research [...] and brave space discussions[...] in the world can’t quite make up for a recruitment and retention issue of raced bodies” (43). This disconnect could be, in part, because of the caution that Black, queer writing center administrators like Brian and James must espouse when having, for example, “hard conversations (about safe sex)” and doing so in a much more direct and honest way, as “queer directors tend to look out for, protect, stand up for, and even ‘save’ queer and nonqueer tutors” (Webster 45). This kind of labor comes about not just

because of their institutional and social capital but because of their origins. These experiences and nuances are not discussed within traditional lore about writing center labor and work; however, Webster's assertion seems to be that this work and labor, like that of Brian and James, is occurring and needs to be captured as tangible, necessary, and worthy of attention by the larger writing center and higher education communities.

Chapter 3, "Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Activism," focuses on how queer writing center directors "labor on behalf of their sites, their tutors, and their students"—in part via activism (Webster 53). There has been a good deal done in the writing center community to address social justice (see many CFPs from previous conferences and journals), and the emergence of position statements on certain topics, such as the singular they, have become much more prevalent. However, as Webster acutely points out, "it's glaringly noticeable when the efforts in the field do not account for the realities of how our work intersects with macro- and microactivisms" (55). Among the notable experiences from participants that speak to activism, Tim's decision to place condoms in the writing center because of the lack of a health center or sexual-health resources on his campus is both admirable and telling. While all directors and administrators labor on behalf of their students and campus community, some labor and work serve a more multifaceted purpose.

Queer writing center administrators, because of their social and institutional capital & origins, often see the need for and provide a space in which certain needs can be filled. Due to his identity and position, Tim fills a need that is negligently left unfilled by his campus' administration. Additionally, this chapter addresses how queer writing center administrators respond to challenging national events, such as the women's marches that followed the 2016 election of Donald Trump (as discussed by participant Katherine) and the Tyler Clementi suicide. What all of the administrators featured in this chapter speak to, in terms of their positions and the need to advocate for themselves and their students, is remarkable. As mentioned previously, much of the labor exerted by the study's participants does not quite align with "historical conventions of our labor" (Webster 57). This, to me, demonstrates the valued place that Webster's work will have in our field moving forward.

Webster's fourth chapter, "Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Tension," addresses some of the more insidious aspects to working as a queer writing center administrator. Focusing on moments of implicit and explicit tensions and bullying that occur for these administrators, Webster sheds light on the treatment this community endures and ask important questions, largely boiling down to how "a queer worker documents[s] administrative survival, at worst, and at best awkward or tense interactions" (112). Two such stories of strife and difficulty come from participants Tim and Mike. When speaking to tension and bullying for queer writing center administrators, however, Webster does something that is striking and important when addressing the nonqueer readers who encounter his text. He states,

If you're reading this book, I don't think you're the quintessential oppressor [...]Most of us are good people, and that's not the point. Such claims are dangerous. In moving toward antiracism, these sentiments absolve white people of complicity in inherently racist systems[...]I feel certain you wouldn't call your colleagues a *fag*, and that you wouldn't assume queer men sleep with their students[...]However, there's danger in deeming yourself distant from queer damage. (Webster 93)

What Webster states here will likely hit hard yet true with many nonqueer readers, and it should. While the writing center profession is not where it needs to be yet as a discipline, regarding support and advocacy for our queer colleagues, the field should, as Webster states at the end of Chapter 3, work towards being "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recognizing and encouraging Nina West" (86).

Webster has produced a valuable piece of writing center scholarship that will serve as a first step toward further excavating the labor and experiences of queer writing center administrators. However, lest you see the title and think this book may be solely for those that are queer, Webster quickly dismisses this notion early in the text: "This book is about queer people and queer work, but stories like these speak to us all in the discipline, regardless of our orientations" (5). Given the ever-changing nature of not just writing centers but higher education as a whole, teach this text in your tutor training courses. Assign this in your writing center reading groups. Representation is evident and voices are amplified through texts like Webster's, but the conversation can only

continue if writing center administrators make it a point to engage with this text and have their staff do so as well.

Contributor Bio

Duane Theobald is the Program Manager for the Center for Economic Education & Financial Literacy (CEEFL) at the University of West Georgia. He holds a BA and an MA in English (with a concentration in Film Studies)--both from UWG. Prior to his work in the CEEFL, Mr. Theobald spent a decade working, presenting, and publishing in the writing center world. He remains an advocate for and researcher in this field. Mr. Theobald is a past Georgia state representative for the Southeastern Writing Center Association and a Past President for the Georgia Tutoring Association. His scholarly interests include writing center studies, film studies, American literature, and post-secondary pedagogy.