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From Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Exile

by Nancy Welch

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In her essay “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” Andrea Lunsford offers a much-needed critique of the traditional “garret” and “storehouse” models for writing center instruction, and she argues for a collaborative model in which students work together in groups to discuss, question, write, and revise. In contrast to the storehouse and garret models that reinscribe rigidly authoritarian or naively libertarian beliefs about language use, this collaborative model dramatizes the “triangulation” or “dialogism” that theorists such as Donald Davidson, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Ann Berthoff place at the heart of composing: as students seek to join in a conversation that precedes and takes place around them, as they seek to understand, complicate, and communicate their perceptions with and through others. In the collaborative writing center, Lunsford writes, students learn how knowledge and reality are “mediated by or constructed through language in social use . . . the product of collaboration” (4). Through collaboration, Kenneth Bruffee writes, students come to internalize those social conversations; they develop “reflective thought” and learn to play “silently, in imagination, the parts of all the participants in the conversation” as they write and reflect (5).

While these aims of collaborative learning are ones I enthusiastically support, I find myself resisting jumping on the “collaboration bandwagon” (Lunsford 4) if by collaboration we mean only and always peer-group writing and response or conversation with another person. Peer groups *can* produce discussion, negotiation,

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and revision as members question a student's assumptions and complicate his or her initial meanings with their responses. Peer groups can show how our texts are socially constituted and, in turn, how our texts can constitute and transform a society. For many students, this learning is necessary and dramatic. But my work in the writing center at a large public university has also introduced me to students who arrive at the center already aware, sometimes painfully so, that their meanings are contested and that their words are populated with competing, contradictory voices. These students come to the center from the public realms of the classroom, family, workplace, campus and civic organizations, courtrooms, and military. They carry into the center the conversations and arguments of those realms, already internalized, already being silently played in imagination. Even alone, these students write with and against a cacophony of voices, collaborating not with another person but with the Otherness of their words.

In this essay, I'll focus on one such student, Margie, who sought to write about her experience with workplace sexual harassment but who also struggled as she wrote with competing off-stage voices.¹ Those voices—from the conversations in her classrooms, former workplace, a campus women's group, newspapers, and the televised Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings—insisted she'd "asked for" this treatment or misinterpreted what was "all in good fun." They told her she had "a duty to other women" to share this experience, or they claimed that through writing she was "just out for attention." Through Margie's story of writing in the thick of this social debate, I think we can enlarge our understanding of collaboration to include writing and reading with and against one's many internalized voices.² It's with this understanding of collaboration that I'll explore the writing center as providing critical distance from, rather than immersion in, those social conversations--as a space of critical exile for students and teachers alike.³

This idea of critical exile comes from Julia Kristeva and her assertion that writing arises as much from a sense of exile as from a sense of participating in social conversation. In "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," Kristeva writes,

How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense if not by

becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of exile. (298)

For Kristeva, "exile" doesn't mean retreat into a silent tower room or banishment or alienation. She's not hearkening back to the days of the solitary and misunderstood poet in the garret. Instead, "some kind of exile" means the creation of a space in which we can reflect on and intervene in the languages, conventions, and belief systems that constitute our texts, our sense of self, our notions of what is "common sense." The writer as exile, Kristeva writes, seeks to form, scrutinize, and remake meaning "ceaselessly ... through geographic and discursive transformations" (298). Through this process, the writer not only questions received knowledge and social norms but transforms them. Exile or the role of the stranger, Kristeva stresses, is not an escape; it's a means for one to write and act in the world rather than be written and acted upon.

Here and elsewhere, Kristeva helps me to think of the writing center where I work as, potentially, just this kind of critical exile. That center is located on the boundaries of the university where it is vulnerable to the yearly rounds of budget cuts but where it is also freed from the constraints of a predetermined curriculum and the normative force of grades. The fundamental assumption of the center is that writers on this overcrowded campus with its two-hundred-seat lecture halls benefit from time and space for writing and reflection. In a typical session, the student will "talk on paper" about a self-selected topic or use an activity such as Peter Elbow's loop writing to envision and revise a topic from varying perspectives. Then, with the teacher taking the role of "dialogizing agent" (cf. Gillam on Bakhtin and writing lab ecology), the student reads and responds to her writing, paraphrasing what she hears her text saying and pointing to contradictions, complications, and questions for further writing. At the end of a meeting, the student and teacher will write about the meeting's events and plan for the next.

Through these activities, the writing center asks both students and teachers to view writing as a means to examine, as well as participate in, that "living conversation" that Bakhtin says forms our writing and our lives (280). The writing center as critical exile offers time, space, and (yes) quiet that enables a student like Margie to become

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a stranger to and collaborator with her writing. Moreover, as I hope to highlight in the following narrative about my work with Margie, such a center challenges teachers to become strangers to, rather than representatives of, the social conversations and conventions students are struggling to locate themselves within.

Margie is a junior education major. She is divorced, has three children, and until a year ago, she was a nursing assistant at a Catholic church-run hospital. One month after she filed a sexual harassment complaint against a co-worker, she was fired. The grounds given for the firing: inability to work well with others and carry out orders from authorities. When she comes to the writing center in early January, her case is pending before the state Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and is pushing her increasingly into public discussions on the issue of sexual harassment. There are meetings with EEOC officials, with lawyers, and with a committee of the state legislature that is reviewing EEOC policies. In addition, she's been invited to participate in a panel discussion on sexual harassment during the university's annual Women's Week in March. "So I've got all this writing to do," she tells me at the start of our first meeting in the center. "And I'm really excited but overwhelmed too. I need what I say to be perfect so all these people can't criticize me."

Even before she has written a word, Margie imagines readers who will question, and possibly attack, her meanings. Her fears of being criticized are apparent in her first day's writing, prompted by my request that she "talk on paper" about the work she'd like to do in the center this semester:

I can't believe I have gone through everything I have gone through if you would have talked to me a little more than a year ago I can't believe this happened to me if I would have been told the horribleness I was going to go through I wouldn't have believed it. . . . I thought I had a male friend that I could talk to and feel safe when I was with him. . . . All of a sudden I found myself being harassed about my chest size in the hall. . . . Why was he talking about my chest size? Doesn't he know I have a brain and personality? He never showed any interest in my physical condition before. . . . He told a male patient he liked how my stethoscope was hanging around my neck. He told a female patient that he liked the color of my blouse. . . . I told

him to stop but he seemed to think when I said stop that I wanted more. . . I reported him a few days later but to no avail. His supervisor gave him employee of the month. . . .

For the first page and a half of this writing, Margie refers to “this,” “it,” and “the horribleness” of what she’s “gone through,” but she doesn’t name and define the situation. She doesn’t say, “I was sexually harassed.” In fact, it’s not until the end of our third meeting that I’m able to piece together Margie’s story of losing her job, spending weeks in silent frustration, then filing a claim and entering into the public debates on workplace sexual harassment. With phrases like “I wouldn’t have believed it,” I hear her suggesting the presence of imagined readers—and an actual one, me—who may not believe her story either, who may contest or ignore it as her co-worker and supervisor did. This sense of readers leads her to write around this experience. She creates, with sentences fused together, a kind of protective wall against the consequences she knows can come from asserting, “I was sexually harassed.” When she does move into writing about the first night of harassment, her narrative takes on a fitful tone, marked by gaps, silences, and phrases that collapse whole scenes into a few words: “all of a sudden,” “a few days later,” “to no avail.”

At the same time, Margie also imagines readers who may be helped by hearing her story—those who will attend the Women’s Week panel, for instance. With this sense of audience, she expresses frustration with what she has written. “This is just babbling,” she says after reading aloud her first-day’s writing. “It’s nothing. It’s what I’m thinking. It’s how I feel. But it’s of no use to anyone.” Margie wants her writing to be “of use” to others. About her goals for the semester, she writes, “I need to get the feelings conveyed to help others know I know how much this hurts” and “I need to work out the emotions, make them helpful, so I can do something positive.”

Instead of viewing writing as the translation of some interior, stable essence, Margie sees writing as the means to “work out” emotions and perceptions so they can be communicated and make a difference to others. Writing for Margie is very much situated in a social arena, and from that arena Margie brings to the writing center the competing voices of suspicious and sympathetic listeners, of

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the state legislature committee and Women's Week audience, of her former coworker and supervisor. The shifts between past and present tense in her first-day's writing also point to two positions from which Margie views and voices her story: immersed within and standing at a distance from this experience. Thus, it's the presence of many social voices, not an absence, that creates the noisy, confusing "babble" Margie hears when she reads her text.

In an essay on collaborative tutoring and learning, Bruffee argues that students in the writing center "can experience and practice the kinds of conversation that academics most value" (7). The conversation between student and tutor, he writes, should be similar "to the way we would like them eventually to write" (7). My first meetings with Margie, however, challenge me to reconsider the kinds of conversation we value in academia and to resist becoming yet another voice, another demand, in that confusing babble Margie hears as she writes and reads. My initial impulse is to ask clarifying questions: "Tell me what you mean by 'all of a sudden'" or "Can you write about what happened during those few days before you reported your co-worker?" I'm confused and shut out by her writing. In my mind I've already constructed a template of what she should eventually write for her Women's Week panel, and I'm disturbed by the gap between that "Ideal Text" (to borrow Brannon and Knoblauch's term) and the actual text she reads to me.

At the same time, the very topic of sexual harassment and Margie's apparent nervousness move me to become a stranger to my usual questions and to that Ideal Text. As Margie pauses in her reading, eyes me, then stumbles over a phrase before continuing, I have the disquieting sense that my interrogatives may sound like (and be) interrogation and that my voice may echo, even intensify, the competing voices Margie is already nearly silenced by. My questions may indeed assist her in speedily writing a perfect, conventionally correct story that no one can criticize, but (I continually remind myself) it's also convention and an insistence on the appearance of perfection that make sexual harassment and the silencing of it possible in the first place.

As critical exile, the writing center can take Margie and me to the margins of those conventions and ideas of perfection insisted upon

in other realms, including the academic. From the margins I can resist the voice that says, “Good writing defines its terms” or “Your job is to help this student write a perfect text no one can criticize.” From the margins, Margie can also resist the pressure of perfection and explore instead what Kristeva calls the socio-symbolic contract: examining the codes that create and control conversations about sexual harassment, searching for a different discourse that is “closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract” (“Women’s Time” 200).

To start such a search, Margie uses the loop-writing steps that Peter Elbow describes in books such as *Writing with Power*. With the discursive transformations of loop writing, Margie moves into naming, exploring, and questioning the socio-symbolic contract that forms her experience and others’ responses to it. Through this writing, she also displaces that template text I had formed and encourages me to listen to her emerging text instead. During our next two meetings Margie writes:

To approach someone about my story. I feel there is a risk. I’m going to get told all of this is my fault. The person won’t believe me. I must have done something to start this. . . . The time the personnel director sent me a note to come to her office. She wanted to talk to me. When I went to her office I noticed the nameplate—Personnel Director—and I noticed the plush office and plush office furniture. . . . She told me to be quiet about everything. . . . I was frightened. . . . The door is blocked by three people—a nun, a priest, and a nurse. . . . I just want to talk about my feelings. They don’t know what to do with my feelings. . . . Dear Carol. . . . You may not want to listen to me. You may not want to hear me again. But you will have to listen to me if the laws change. You will have to change your policies. . . .

The loop writing begins with “First Thoughts,” and Margie’s first thoughts center on the part of the social contract that says women ask for harassment: “I’m going to get told all of this is my fault,” “I must have done something to start this.” The next loop-writing steps—describing a scene, then writing a short narrative—lead Margie to consider the power structures she faced when she reported the harassment: the power and prestige of the office and the title of Personnel Director; the authority figures of nun, priest, and nurse

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all blocking the office door while the personnel director counseled Margie to remain silent. With the next step of varying the form, Margie writes a letter to that personnel director, and in that letter she violates the socio-symbolic contract through addressing this authority by her first name and through writing in sentences that are terse, emphatic, and unapologetic: “[You] will have to listen to me,” “You will have to change your policies.”

With this step of writing a letter to the personnel director, Margie looks up from her writing and tells me, “I’m getting over this feeling of fear now,” and her phrasing—“am getting”—strikes me as important. The writing center and Margie’s work in it are not an easy escape from the social arena that has frightened and silenced her. This writing in exile provides instead a process through which Margie can continually resist fear, raid silence, and compose arenas in which she can speak with emphasis, without apology.

In our twice-a-week meetings from January to March, Margie enacts visibly and dramatically an understanding of composing as a process of both collaborating with and being a stranger to one’s own words. She writes, reads silently, glosses her writing in the margins, writes, reads aloud to me, glosses, writes again. As she writes, her lips move and sometimes she whispers her words aloud or mutters directives to herself: “Just write it, don’t stop, what comes next!” I resist asking questions beyond, “What stands out for you?” or “What do you think?”, though this restraint asks me to exile myself from the kind of writing teacher I always thought was the right kind—one who asks a lot of questions. Margie is asking the questions herself, out of her own sense of dialogue with her writing and her own emerging ideas about what her Women’s Week presentation should look like. As she reads over her loop writing, for instance, she marks the section describing the meeting with the personnel director and writes in the margins, “I want to discuss this more because many women are frightened to approach their employers.” She doesn’t say, “This is babbling. This is nothing.” She’s beginning to read and listen to her writing.

As this reading and glossing take place, I come to see my role in our relationship as encouraging multiple readings, multiple ways of becoming strangers to that socio-symbolic contract that would fix

and limit her meanings. This role isn't an easy one for me to stay in, though, because at the start of each meeting, Margie updates me on the many requests and demands for her to speak and write. She tells me about appointments at the EEOC and her testimony to the state legislature committee. She tells me about the support group she has formed with other women who have experienced workplace harassment. She tells me about a letter she wants to write to the editor of the local newspaper and the deposition she must prepare for. In the writing center, we work within a swirl of voices from all of these realms, and we write and talk with a sense of audience that is at times suffocating. To resist such suffocation—writing to match the norms of these many and conflicting audiences—Margie and I work at ways to read her emerging text and the discourse she sees as closer to the body and emotions of her experience.

One approach we take to such reading is the creation of a “found poem” in which Margie “pulls out” the sentences and phrases from her loop writing that stand out for her. By arranging those sentences and phrases into lines, like a poem, she’s able to see what’s at the heart of her writing for her and what ideas and stories she’s generated for her Women’s Week presentation.⁴ The list she creates contains some sentences copied directly from earlier writing: “You may not want to listen to me.” Other lines plan for her presentation, gloss previous writings, or echo her recent conversations with others about workplace harassment. She writes,

Scared to death
You may not want to listen to me
Give description of what happened—chronological and emotional
Issue of power, not issue of sex!!
Changing laws—making employers responsible. . . .
You will have to listen to me

Reading over the found poem, Margie says, “There’s a lot here, but it’s all related. It’s all about what I can see now and say. That I’ve gone from being silent to saying you have to listen. From feeling ‘scared to death’ to . . . having power, feeling powerful.”

The found poem has led Margie to another way of reading and collaborating with her writing: recognizing a pattern in her writing

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that structures her experience. When I ask Margie if she sees other “from-to” movements in these pages, she nods vigorously. “Yes,” she says. “All through it. From victim to survivor. And there’s another one after that: from survivor to doer, making positive change. That’s what I’m trying for now.”

When I suggest that she write in list form these “from-to” movements, the list she composes suggests she’s discovering not only a way to look at her experience but also to transform it:

from powerless to powerful
from victim to survivor
from survivor to positive changer
from helpless to helpful
from taker to giver
from loss to gain
from silence to noise

Other readers of Margie’s story have pointed out here that Margie’s list seems composed by the voices of her weekly support group and by the commentary that surrounded the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. Certainly the language of “victim to survivor,” for instance, participates in the discourse of recovery and of such programs as the Twelve-Step. But with the last item on her list, Margie emphasizes her ongoing active work to make these other voices her own. “Silence to noise” marks the beginning of what Bakhtin calls “retelling in one’s own words” (341); it marks Margie’s ongoing efforts to compose her experience rather than be composed by it. When she reads her list aloud and I ask her what makes this “from-to” structure possible, she points to the last item on her list: “It’s talking about it, writing about it, every woman finding a way to talk about what you’re not supposed to talk about. Silence to noise.”

It is now early March, and Margie writes in her learning log that she has found the means to shape and share her story through the theme of silence to noise. With that theme—with her moves into naming, defining, constructing, and reconstructing her experience—Margie has become, I believe, the kind of dissident Kristeva speaks of in her essay on exile. That dissident, Kristeva writes, is “the writer who experiments with the limits” in “a playful language” that allows her to

overturn, violate, and pluralize the law (“Dissident” 295). Through the discursive transformations of talking on paper, loop writing, poetry, and listing, Margie is able to see and subvert The Meaning authorities like the personnel director would impose on her story, and she’s able to imagine another reading of her story instead: silence to noise.

Margie has also pushed against and changed entirely my early notions of what her text ought to look like. When she says that she plans to draft her Women’s Week presentation over the weekend, I offer her only one suggestion—one that arises not from some Ideal Text I’ve constructed but from my listening to and collaborating with her writing over a dozen meetings: “Whenever you find yourself writing about ‘my experience’ or ‘what happened to me,’ stop and ask yourself: ‘Have I said just what the experience is?’”

Margie grins. “Sure, I get it,” she replies. “I still tend to avoid that. Yeah. The monster needs a description. I can do that. I know what the monster looks like.”

In her Women’s Week presentation, Margie directly and unapologetically describes that “monster” of workplace harassment, and with her presentation, she also moves from collaborating with the Otherness of her writing to collaborating with others who make up and attend the panel discussion. On the panel with her are a professor from the law college who introduces herself as an acquaintance of Anita Hill, a sociology professor whose research focuses on sexual harassment, and the university’s affirmative action officer. From my place in the audience, I notice these participants’ tailored suits and leather briefcases, but Margie, sitting among them, seems undaunted. Before the panel begins, she talks with the law professor. They laugh together over something Margie has said. In her presentation, Margie tells her story of being harassed, of her confusion and fear, and of the priest, nun, and nurse who stood guard at the personnel director’s door. Throughout her story, she traces her movement from silence to noise and calls on her listeners to join in by telling stories, naming names, changing laws, and making employers listen. She concludes,

Laws and attitudes have to change. Employers have to be made accountable ... And women have to say who hurt them this way. Naming the company and the perpetrator. Women cannot keep saying, “A well-known company or a well-established person. You would know him if I said his name.” At

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this moment, St. Theresa's still refuses to listen to me, but the laws are changing, and St. Theresa's will have to listen.

As Margie speaks, I hear some of the awkward phrasings and legalistic constructions such as "perpetrator," but when I glance about the room at the two dozen women gathered here, I see that they're leaning forward in their seats, some gripping and leaning over the empty chairs in front of them as if trying to get closer to Margie and her words. They nod and shake their heads right along with each story she tells and each point she stresses. Margie is "conveying the feelings," "working out the emotions," and making them "of use" to these women. At the end of her talk, an audience member who identifies herself as a nursing student says that she too has been harassed by a co-worker at another local hospital. When she reported the co-worker to the personnel office, his harassment of her intensified, making her frightened to walk alone in hallways or to her car in the parking lot. She asks Margie what she should do. Margie advises her to write. "You need to document this stuff," Margie tells her. "Have you done that yet? Sat down and written down when, where, dates, times, and everything you can remember and who else might have witnessed it? Writing it down is hard, but it's really important."

When I leave the meeting room, Margie, the nursing student, and the law professor are conferring together; they are transforming this room into a space of critical exile that will enable this student to begin the process of naming, questioning, and making noise.

Margie, who returned to the writing center with the aim now of considering her testimony for the state legislature committee, is one student among many who have moved me to become a stranger to the word "collaboration" and to consider the overlooked and vital collaboration that takes place as a student listens and speaks back to the competing, contradictory off-stage voices made present through writing. There is Lee, for instance, a Marine who desired to write about his Gulf War experiences in his composition class but who also feared interrogation of his Marine identity by his teacher and

other students. Lee viewed the writing center as a safe space for interrogation, for entering into exile from his very sense of self as he wrote, reflected on, and questioned his experiences in and beliefs about the Marines. There's also Marty, who came to the writing center to write science fiction without the constant challenges of his fiction-workshop teacher and peers who did not value this genre. Marty saw the center as a place where he could construct an argument for the value of science fiction, giving him voice in the workshop classroom. Through this reflection, he also came to question and rework some of the taken-for-granted conventions of his science-fiction writing.

For Margie, Lee, and Marty, the writing center is not an escape from the social realm, a silent and isolated garret room. It's also not a place where they are assisted by a teacher or tutor towards uncritically joining and reproducing the norms of a particular discourse community. In fact, I'd be casting myself in a false position if I claimed to represent the social conversations and conventions surrounding workplace harassment, Marine action in the Gulf, or the value of science fiction. Instead, the writing center as critical exile is a place where these students converse with, question, and rework the conflicting, often unsettling, always potentially creative other voices that populate their words. By tuning into this collaborative conversation between writers and their texts, writing-center teachers can also enter into exile, call into question their "common-sensical" teaching practices, and become more reflective and aware collaborators with students and with their writing.⁵

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NOTES

¹ This student's name and the person and place names that appear in her writing have been fictionalized.

² In a recent essay, Irene Clark raises the crucial question of what collaboration means (and what its dangers are) in "practical application." But her response—that collaboration in a writing center often means the tutor assisting the student in gaining membership to a particular discourse community (53)—still defines collaboration as conversation and writing with a second person. This definition doesn't include collaboration between a writer and her multi-linguaged text, and it doesn't include the kind of collaboration that takes place as the writer uses her position in one community to scrutinize and question the membership requirements of another.

³ Donald Murray also explores a writer's "other self" or "reader self" in a 1982 essay, but Murray's focus is on that other self as a monitor or technical problem-solver that "gives the self distance that is essential for craft" (142). For students like Margie, I believe, distance is required not for craft alone but for reflecting on and reworking the conventions and constraints of particular social arenas. Still, Murray's primary assertion in this essay—that teacher and student together must learn to listen to this other self—has been a guiding one for my work with Margie in the writing center.

⁴ I am indebted to Margrethe Ahlschwede for the idea of the found poem as a way to read and revise writing. See her essay, "No Breaks, No Time-outs, No Place to Hide: A Writing Lab Journal."

⁵ An abbreviated version of this essay was presented at the 1993 CCCC in San Diego.

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