

1-1-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Karen Keaton (2008) "Review: Marginal Words, Marginal Works? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1695>

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*Review: Marginal Words, Marginal Works? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*

William J. Macauley, Jr. and Nicholas Mauriello, eds.  
(Hampton Press, 2007)

by Karen Keaton Jackson

I was intrigued by this book from the moment I read the title. Its subtitle attracts me even more. Often, many of our texts explore aspects of tutoring in the academy. Yet, this subtitle suggests we are educating the academy itself, “schooling” them about some of our issues and the various ways we go about addressing them.

As a young woman of color in the academy, being in the margins is an everyday part of my life. And, in many ways, I like it. Granted, being in the margins has its share of challenges, and trying to maneuver to the center in some instances is impossible. Yet, being in the margins gives me room to think outside of the box and consider innovative ways of resolving issues and making moves. Being in the margins means all of the rules are not quite set in stone (if they have been created at all), so there is room to create one’s own path to a given goal. *Marginal Words, Marginal Work? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers* reminds us of just that. While the various authors have differing strategies and opinions about how to move from the margins or even how far we should want to move away from the margins (if at all), one thing each chapter reveals to us is that we have options for finding the avenue that works for us, given our own objectives and institutional contexts. In the Foreword, Ben Rafoth notes that this collection has “brought into focus the ways

About the Author

*Karen Keaton Jackson is an assistant professor of English at North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina, where she teaches a variety of composition courses and directs the Writing Studio and University Writing Program. Her research interests include literacy, race, and identity, and how they intertwine in the urban writing classroom. Her recent publications include a book collection she co-edited entitled Closing the Gap: English Teachers Address the Tension Between Teacher Preparation and Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools and “The Compositionist as ‘Other’: A Critical Self-Reflection of an Instructor of Color in an Urban Service-Learning Classroom” in the edited collection Social Change in Diverse Teaching Contexts: Touchy Subjects and Routine Practices. She also is on the executive board for the Southeastern Writing Center Association and the International Writing Center Association.*

we can work collaboratively with our campus communities . . . to bring about necessary changes in teaching and learning” (x). The advantage of each chapter is that none is written in a prescriptive manner or in a tone that would suggest this is the way to organize or conceive your own writing center. Rather, as opposed to sharing only stories of woe and hopelessness (a practice Melissa Nicolas asks us to avoid in Chapter One), these chapters give us hope that we truly can make a difference on our own campuses, if we stay committed and open ourselves to considering creative ways of doing so. That being said, the questions that recur for readers during each chapter is “How marginal (or not) do I want to be at my own institution?” and “Might that strategy work for me?” These questions, of course, are never specifically answered in the text. But each chapter, as stated clearly by the editors in their opening “Invitation” piece, certainly challenges us to consider the issue of marginalization and weigh the costs and benefits of positioning ourselves in various ways through the strategies and practices in which we are willing to engage.

The first three chapters remind us to be empowered as a marginal group and to embrace the opportunities that come from being in this space. Melissa Nicolas acknowledges that in the past our spaces were thought of as *feminized* (not *feminist*) and therefore marginal in the male-dominated academy. While we cannot change the past, we can change the future by altering the view we have of ourselves and the stories we create in the future. In the second chapter, Carol Severino and Megan Knight describe the fellows program they created in order to help change perceptions of their writing center. They admit that the more traditional outreach efforts used in the past failed, leading them to create their fellows program as an innovative way to publicize the work done in the writing center by modeling it in actual classrooms; this also serves as a way for them to break down the myths of what the writing center is and is not. Paula Gillespie, Bradley Hughes, and Harvey Kail note the value in listening to the marginalized voices themselves as they analyze the information they received by surveying their peer tutor alumni. So often the marginalized are talked *about* or talked *to* rather than spoken *with*. From this chapter, we are reminded to focus not only on the outcomes of our student writers, but also the positive results of the tutors.

In addition to the thought-provoking content of this collection, a great feature is the effective organization of the chapters. In many instances, just as one chapter raises valuable questions, the subsequent chapter(s) explores those concerns either directly or indirectly. Such is the case with Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Often, many non-marginalized people tend to fall back on or impose their limited knowledge about a group (in this case, writing centers) when they do not know much, rather than take the time to really learn about a marginal space. This disturbing

trend is what prompted Muriel Harris' chapter, in which she describes how those in her writing center created faculty workshops and other creative ways of letting colleagues know of the services and true purposes of her center. Then, Kate Chanock's chapter continues to explore how we can be heard by describing the practices she used in her Australian writing center to bridge structural and social gaps in her institution.

This notion of putting our efforts toward bridging gaps ultimately highlights that the responsibility is on us to show professors and the larger campus community our philosophies and techniques so they understand what we do. Yet, with the unequal power dynamics that are in play in so many of our contexts—we are the less-regarded workers who provide lower-level services—one then wonders if our voices really will be heard at all. The situation is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak's question "Does the Subaltern Speak?" because the implied follow up question is "Will the mainstream listen?" Just as those concerns surface in Chanock's chapter, Cogie, Janke, Kramer, and Simpson discuss in Chapter Seven that collaborating is not as easy as we would like for it to be. In short, they explore the risks and difficulties of collaborating and then go on to address how their goal is to ensure that a true exchange of ideas is taking place.

By Chapter Eight, the essays move into more specific discussions about the identities writing centers want to create for themselves. The idea of identity is never clear cut; for, as Spelman College president and race psychologist Beverly Tatum tells us in *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race*, identity is an ongoing process of creating one's own images in addition to internalizing others' perceptions (19). Specifically, she cites Erik Erikson, who theorized that "identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation . . ." (qtd. in Tatum 19). While Tatum and Erikson were speaking of individual identity, the same is true for writing centers as we continue to solidify a place for ourselves in the academy.

In her chapter, Crystal Bickford shares how tutors can be at the forefront of inviting collaboration with faculty members and goes on to note that she prefers writing centers be seen as central to the school rather than marginal because then we can then affect the curricula and bring about change. Her thoughts made me pause and think about how I would want to identify my own Writing Studio: Do I want to be more mainstream or more marginal? What are the advantages of each identity? I began to wonder if we lose our edge, in a sense, when going the mainstream route. Or, can we possibly be a bit of both?

Again, the editors effectively follow her chapter with Derek Owens' chapter that clearly focuses on the self-creation of identity. He encourages us to think of ourselves as "cultural centers" regardless of whether or not outsiders support that goal.

In essence, while Bickford focuses on the advantages of leaning toward the mainstream, Owens focuses on embracing the advantages of being in the margins.

The discussion of identity continues in Chapter Ten as Christopher Wilkey and Donnelle Dreese share how they believe we should change the idea of collaboration so it includes not only interpersonal exchanges but a change in overall institutional dynamics. They want to see the writing center at their institution as integral to student citizenship and engagement on campus. Linda Bergmann and Tammy Conard-Salvo's chapter is similar to Bickford's in that their overall focus is on reaching out to other writing programs in order to avoid marginalization and separation from others in the university. Jennifer Beech shares how her writing center is more conscious of the documents they create to help change the perception of their space, and Jill Gladstein notes how her center is working on "quietly" bringing about change through discovering the various layers of relationships we can have with those across campus. The chapters in this section read extremely well together because each gives a different yet valuable perspective on the ways we can create our identities on our campus.

Neal Lerner's and Jill Frey's chapters both have us consider new ways of assessing the effectiveness of our writing centers. Lerner encourages us to question how we think of learning in writing center contexts and how we determine how and why that learning is taking place. Frey notes that just counting numbers of sessions and students is not enough in terms of showing how we really matter and make a difference on our campuses. Thus, both charge us to look at more than just surface-level results, but to dig deeper in order to really show our strengths. The book then ends with Terry Myers Zawacki's chapter as she explores the concerns that come about as we attempt to expand our centers; in particular, she questions just who the tutors in our centers should be, especially if our institutions have writing across the curriculum initiatives.

Taken together, this book gives a plethora of resources and ideas for how we can develop outreach efforts and identify ourselves. More important, it forces us to raise questions about what makes sense given our own institutional contexts, missions, and goals. Being in the margins means that the rules are still being formulated, and it is up to us to decide how much of a part we want to play in that process.

#### WORK CITED

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.