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Cover Page Footnote

I thank the anonymous reviewers for their time and insightful comments on this article; their suggestions have been exceptionally valuable.



Comfort, Contingency, and Writing Center Work: An Essay in Three Illusions

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Abstract In this hybrid essay, I engage creatively with the illusory nature of contingent work, presenting three episodes from my personal experiences as a contingent writing program administrator (WPA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, I interrogate these experiences by building on past critiques of “comfortable” writing centers, applying Sara Ahmed’s work on the affectiveness of (dis)comfort in order to examine comfort and its uneasy relationship with labor. For whom is the writing center expected to labor to provide comfort? Whose comfort, and moreover whose safety, is jeopardized or made invisible in the process? In answering these questions, this essay proposes that writing center work during the pandemic offers three valuable insights into contingency: first, how contingency is a state that generates semantic shifts around its workers, such as the slippery meaning of “comfort”; second, how contingency reproduces itself aesthetically in “comfortable” writing center spaces; and finally, how writing center professionals might work to resist the exhaustive demands of contingency within writing center work.

Keywords contingency, labor, writing center studies

Smoke and Mirrors: An Introduction

Summer in the Pacific Northwest brings smoke. When the wind whips up from the Sierra Nevadas or over from the Cascades, we walk across campus beneath an incinerator sky, inhaling places with names like Bootleg, Rattlesnake, Paradise. From the tutoring center where I work as a writing specialist, I can tell campus has mostly cleared out, just short of a ghost town.

Yet winter will bring a different kind of dread, one that clings with an even stubborn grip, like cold rain on the back of the neck. Before I know it, COVID-19 cases have begun to

spike throughout the country once again. Over winter break, coworkers whisper about mask availability and campus closures, while tutors ask questions I can’t answer. When I press higher-up administrators for action on safety protocols, they waver and stall.

“We don’t want to make decisions based on student comfort,” one says.

In this hybrid essay, I engage creatively with the illusory nature of contingent work, presenting three episodes from my personal experiences as a contingent writing program administrator (WPA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, I interrogate these experiences by building on past critiques of “comfortable” writing centers (e.g., Camarillo,

2019; McKinney, 2005, 2013), applying Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on the affectiveness of (dis)comfort in order to examine comfort and its uneasy relationship with labor. For whom is the writing center expected to labor to provide comfort? Whose comfort, and moreover whose safety, is jeopardized or made invisible in the process?

In answering these questions, I propose that writing center work during the pandemic offers three valuable insights into contingency: first, how contingency is a state that generates semantic shifts around its workers, such as the slippery meaning of "comfort"; second, how contingency reproduces itself aesthetically in "comfortable" writing center spaces; and finally, how we might work to resist the exhaustive demands of contingency within writing center work.

I. The Sleight of Hand: Contingency and Language

It's January 2022, and words have shed their meanings like autumn leaves. The health care workers that were once "essential" are now reviled across social media as worrywarts, scolds, and unpatriotic liars. Face masks have become symbols of unforgivable weakness. In the same month that 60,000 people in the United States will die of COVID, my university puts out a press release: "We are fortunate that this surge does not constitute a public health emergency for the university."

I'm a queer person of color in charge of a writing tutor program at a public university in the Pacific Northwest, where our center is housed among other tutoring services within the campus library. In addition to supervising approximately 14 peer writing tutors, I also teach courses, hold writing consultations, run our tutor certification program, deliver workshops, do outreach, and the rest of an ever-expanding list of job responsibilities, several of them outside my original contract. Meanwhile, as other campus services thin due to attrition and illness, faculty and partner programs demand more—more tutors, more hours, more help. It is a recipe for burnout, as swift and

surefire as high wind and discarded cigarettes during the dry season.

The writing tutors come to me with concerns about COVID-19 exposures, immunocompromised loved ones, and the uncertain future. They are afraid to work in person, but cannot afford not to. They want to know why the school isn't taking the pandemic seriously, or why quarantine guidelines have shrunk nearly to nonexistence, or why we won't be reinstating the flexible remote structures the tutoring center relied on earlier in the pandemic. In response, I can't even tell them whether or not our division intends to provide them with masks.

Later, in private, when I press the same administrator as before on the seriousness of these concerns, I am told that tutors who do not feel comfortable coming back in person should "consider whether this job is the right fit for them."

What sort of magic trick took place in that conversation? In the blink of an eye, my tutors' desire for *safety* had been transmuted into their desire for *comfort*. Further, this framing was mobilized not only to reject tutors' concerns, but to imply that the demand for comfort (let alone safety) from one's working conditions could be tantamount to a fireable offense.

The COVID-19 crisis has made us more attuned to the realities of contingent writing center work, and especially how contingency intersects with wellness and care. As Genie Giamo (2020) writes, "issues of labor are issues of wellness. One cannot be well if one labors precariously." Yet my singular conversation with the administrator above drew my attention to a different, no less important facet of contingent labor: that it is intricately bound up not only with wellness, but with the idea of "comfort." Exploring this entangled relationship, in turn, led me to the first significant feature of contingency I wish to discuss: how it maintains itself by destabilizing language and meaning. Put differently, entering into or existing in contingency alters the ways words are used about and around us.

The writing center is an unusually productive venue for exploring the idea of contingency as a sort of semantic magnetic field, a

zone that warps the meaning of language that leaves and enters it. Comfort, for example, has generally been framed as a positive and a priority when considering how to welcome visitors to the center, particularly nervous students; as Singh-Corcoran and Emika (2011) observe in their review of space in various WC case studies, “A comfortable, inviting, and non-institutional space—one with soft lighting and comfy chairs—is designed to ease a student’s apprehensions.” Indeed, a quick Google search of writing center mission statements shows that the word “comfortable” features prominently, e.g., “a comfortable atmosphere” (Vilanova, n.d.); “a comfortable space with tea, snacks, and a snazzy couch” (Scripps, n.d.), and so on. Designating one’s writing center space as “comfortable” is a quick and easy promotional shorthand designed to soothe the anxieties of potential visitors and foreground the center’s nonclassroom, less high-stakes environment.

At the same time, many writing center scholars have pushed back against the portrayal of “comfort” as an unalloyed good. Notably, Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2005, 2013) has dismantled the dominant narrative of writing centers as “cozy homes,” critically reading the troubled gender and class dynamics involved in figuring the center as a home. Eric Camarillo (2019) and Wonderful Faison (Faison & Treviño, 2017) have further problematized this narrative, elaborating on how poor students of color are alienated by the white, middle-class norms that characterize writing centers. More generally, Nancy Grimm’s (1999) *Good Intentions* has critiqued what she calls writing center work’s modernist urge to prioritize well-intentioned but temporary comfort or aid at the expense of long-term equity.

However, these scholars do not draw explicit connections between “comfort” and labor itself; in this essay, I would like to expand on precisely *what kind* of comfort writing centers are expected to labor toward, and to what end. Sara Ahmed (2010) describes the phenomenon of *public* comfort as follows: “Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies ‘go along with it’” (pp. 68–69). Per Ahmed, whiteness, or heteronormativity, or other normative ways of being are

comfortable only for the people who can inhabit them, who naturally feel as at ease in such spaces as they would sinking into a chair that already holds the impressions of bodies like their own (Ahmed, 2014, p. 148). The rest of the world, meanwhile, is forced to perform a kind of “comfort duty” wherein those who do not “fit” must conceal their discomfort for the sake of others’ comfort. Going along is getting along, writ large.

The comment from my administrator about student comfort mobilized this notion of “public comfort” on two levels. First, it posed the idea of tutors’ private, individual comfort in opposition to “public comfort”; it was tutors’ “comfort duty” to the center and to general campus morale to return to in-person tutoring. Given this, it is easier to understand why such a statement was followed by an implicit threat to remove tutors from their jobs if they did not feel “comfortable” working face to face. When public comfort is a duty, private comfort is a luxury. Workers who have had to battle for such so-called “luxuries” as paid time off, health care benefits, bathroom breaks, and other rights will find this type of language all too familiar.

Second, by raising the possibility that tutors would no longer find the writing tutor job the “right fit,” the administrator’s comments verbally shifted the narrative around tutors’ *discomfort* to a narrative in which the tutors themselves were *discomforting*. “To be comfortable,” writes Ahmed (2014), “is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (p. 148).¹ Conversely, bodies that are not at ease, that experience *discomfort*, are bodies that do not “fit” into the chair—the nonwhite, queer, disabled, poor, or otherwise marginalized bodies whose presence threatens to disrupt the comfortable majority.

This calls to mind the nebulous language that has long plagued the status of peer tutors in the writing center. Discouraged from seeing themselves as full workers—and generally prohibited from working more than a part-time number of hours per week—tutors’ identity as “students” tends to disappear when they take on the identity of “tutors.” Existing in this amorphous space between student and

worker, tutors can be rhetorically (and actually) disallowed both the *comfort* traditionally granted to students and the workplace *safety* to which workers should be entitled. They vanish beneath the unstable language of contingency.

II. The Magician's Box: Contingency and Aesthetics

How is it going to look? It's September 2021, our writing center is getting ready to reopen in person, and traces of the pandemic are not completely absent. Bottles of hand sanitizer crown each table; large tubs of sanitizing wipes flank the welcome desk. However, there are many more tables than before, placed closer together. Students are no longer asked to refrain from passing paper copies back and forth. Because we are housed within the campus library, it is also functionally impossible to track potential COVID spread. We cannot impose stricter masking or other safety requirements than the library itself, even though hundreds of visitors may pass through our space daily on their way to the stacks.

Most noticeably, the large plexiglass barriers of the previous year—a pandemic safety measure my writing tutors have explicitly requested remain in place—are vetoed. Rationales for this decision abound, all centered upon the question of “how things look”: the barriers are awkward and unsightly. They don't look welcoming. They don't fit on the new tables. They are deemed especially obtrusive on the busier math tutoring side of the center, since they reduce the number of available whiteboards; how would it look, I'm asked, if the writing tutors appear to receive different treatment from that of the STEM tutors? It's the STEM tutors' supervisor who asks me this, in the pointed tones of someone who has already agreed to certain working condition trade-offs and is incredulous that anyone would diverge from the party line—especially if it means reducing the amount of students we can serve at one time.

Meanwhile, at our new satellite tutoring center across campus, aesthetic concerns dominate both the dialogue and the budget.

Can we find couches that are less ugly? What decals could we put on the windows? Will handing out free energy drinks with QR code stickers attract more students to the new location? The more I'm drawn into discussions about color, design, furnishings, giveaways, and the eternal quest to appear “welcoming,” the more exhausted I feel. It's like an alternative reality: HGTV Higher Education. I watch the case numbers ticking up. *People are dying, I want to say. Does it matter what color the carpet is?*

Let's pull up that carpet for a moment. What do we find hidden beneath the squishy chairs, cheerful lettering, open-plan design, and bright lighting of the “comfortable” writing center? As Ahmed (2014) writes, concealment is essential to the project of public comfort:

The availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labour of others, and the burden of concealment. Comfort may operate as a form of 'feeling fetishism': some bodies can 'have' comfort, only as an effect of the work of others, where the work itself is concealed from view. (p. 149)

Comfort, in other words, is the magician's box of contingency: labor climbs into the box and disappears. But what's the trick? How does contingency reproduce itself *aesthetically* as well as in language?

We know invisible labor is the grease that makes the writing center wheel turn. Lauren Brentnell et al. (2020) explore, for example, the “hidden and invisible acts of vulnerability” that abound in the center; Kristi Murray Costello (2020) compiles a detailed list of the emotional labors writing tutors and administrators perform in their daily work, which often go unseen. Dani Nier-Weber (2017) analyzes how the struggles of adjunct faculty consultants are made invisible in order to keep their contingent positions underpaid, exploited, and impermanent. Given that writing centers are frequently marginalized on campus, whether due to their physical location,² their institutional status and funding, or their reliance on contingent workers, it comes as no surprise that the center's most integral workings are likewise its most unacknowledged.

It is also important to recognize, however, that making labor invisible is part and parcel of writing center practice. Tutors are usually trained not to leave physical comments on or to mark up students' papers in any way. Tutoring also makes student papers more comfortable for the faculty reading them, helping to hide any "unsightly" errors of spelling, grammar, and style (which are themselves often tied to the "unsightly" realities of race, class, etc.). On a grander scale, writing centers serve to make the *university itself* more comfortable. Despite the best of intentions, they launder the compositional capabilities of students who may have been admitted without college-level writing skills, and who are soon left to flounder once the tuition bill is paid. The presence of a writing center can also mask other institutional issues, such as the gouging of specialized student support or the exploitative conditions of composition faculty and graduate students.

This is not to suggest that tutors should start drenching papers in red ink. It is to begin to tease apart *why* the writing center's physical space is such a natural environment for contingent aesthetics to take hold. This affinity is partially due to the emphasis on physical *things* as symbols of the "comfortable" writing center discussed above. As McKinney (2005) writes, physical markers such as lamps, comfy couches, plants, and coffee makers have long been the traditional hallmarks of "cozy home" writing centers, especially as the center sought to move away from the more sterile connotations of the writing "lab."³ By anchoring the notion of the center's effectiveness first and foremost to its (re)movable, aesthetically pleasing objects, the discussion about writing center design distracts from the intangibles of labor, time, pay, equity, and other values that really structure center work. This conversational thrust endures even though evidence has shown that tutors tend to prioritize such intangibles, especially quiet and privacy, above all other design considerations.⁴

At the same time, recent treatments of physical space in the center—even those that acknowledge the flaws of the "cozy home" model—reveal the field's ongoing struggle to escape the aesthetics of contingency. Rachel

Azima (2022), for instance, states that her center renovations were guided by Bradley Hughes's recommendations for

"a very welcoming entrance, with lots of glass on the outside which allows students and faculty to see and sample what's going on and reassures them before they enter," a café-like feel, and a reception desk "that isn't too high or forbidding looking, not the command center for the starship Enterprise."

Interestingly, Azima and Hughes frame the ideal writing center in terms of two of the world's most exploited customer service professions, food service (a café) and office administrative work (a reception desk)—professions that may feel welcoming to customers, but rarely are to their workers. The recommendation for a glass-covered outside that allows passersby to "sample" what's going inside is also reminiscent of the current trend in design "openness" that promises transparency and collaboration, but in fact accomplishes the aims of capitalism—the open office plan that encourages employees to surveil one another's productivity; the open-concept floor plan that prioritizes fantasies of "entertaining" over realities of (over-)consumption, noise levels, and lack of privacy.⁵ Indeed, per Kate Wagner (2018), these open-concept spaces tend in fact to be "labor-creating": by privileging aesthetic features over practicality, they become more difficult to keep consistently clean and functional.

Conversations about writing center design livability also presuppose the center as a space where tutors and WPAs are encouraged to spend a great deal—often excessive, that is, contract-encroaching, amounts—of time. In their survey of physical space in the writing center, for instance, Singh-Corcoran and Emika (2011) conclude: "The design of the space may have less of an impact on the student who is passing through than it does on the tutor and director who actually *live* in the center." But should tutors and WPAs consider ourselves to "live in" the place where we work? How does this rhetoric contribute to the sense that doing one's part to participate in

the “life of the center” requires overtime, collapsed work-life boundaries, and extra labor? When, in our efforts to design comfortable writing centers, we concede the point that work equals life, I worry we’ve handed contingency (and capitalism) the game. Contingency has managed to generate the conditions for its own reproduction—its own survival.

Interwoven with these concerns is how contingency’s aesthetics fundamentally rely on oppression, a dynamic we can witness in many accounts of writing center work. Isaac Wang (Nordstrom et al., 2019), for instance, writing from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, describes the problems of designing a writing center whose “comfortable” architecture requires erasing the land’s history of settler colonialism. Wonderful Faison critiques how homey writing center aesthetics—“the Aloe plants, soft lighting, pastel colors, earthy tones, etc. one encounters in various writing centers across various PWIs” (Faison & Treviño, 2017)—racialize the center as white and exclude students of color. Talia Nanton’s firsthand account of the writing center as a racist, hostile space for Black tutors—including her eventual forced resignation—highlights all too well the link between contingency and the weaponized “comfort” of majority groups (Morrison & Nanton, 2019). These and other experiences demonstrate Ahmed’s argument that the production of comfort is reliant on the concealment of difference, which is often located in non-normative bodies.

As a person of color at a PWI, I find that Ahmed’s formulation of “comfort duty” and “public comfort” help explain the urgent pressure I felt to swallow my concerns about COVID-19, racism, and access whenever we discussed writing center design. I’m struck by the adjectives McKinney (2005) collects as popular descriptors of ideal writing centers: “soft, calming, welcoming, comfortable, attractive, familiar, non-threatening, and friendly” (p. 8). Flip these around to their antonyms, and we get a laundry list of the highly racialized language routinely weaponized against people of color, especially Black people, in order to cast them as loud, aggressive, threatening, and predatorial. In my case, my fear of being thus labeled was enhanced

by and entangled with my contingent status; I sensed innately that continuing to “push the issue” of COVID-19 would categorize me as aggressive and ungrateful, jeopardizing my job security and my ability to help students.

III. The Endless Water Jug: Contingent Affects

Throughout fall 2021 and into the winter quarter, campus life takes on a stale and desperate texture, like the air in a locked room. The asynchronous Online Writing Lab (OWL) is deluged. Students in remote classes vastly prefer the convenience of submitting a paper asynchronously. With other student services gutted during the first waves of the pandemic, advisors and faculty tout the OWL’s usefulness instead of our in-person services. When the Career Center is swamped by skyrocketing demand, we get a call: can students get help with their resumes?

I see an unusually steep increase in students whose OWL submissions do not follow our guidelines about page length, turnaround time, spellchecking, and so on—guidelines put in place to protect our students’ time and integrity. Because our OWL system isn’t automated, I must reject each one via an individual email to the student, trying to offer kind, carefully tailored resources without compromising our boundaries. This labor is invisible, draining, and incessant. It feels as though student services staff are expected to sacrifice ourselves on the altar of care—to become endless wells of student comfort, drawn on as needed.

These demands creep into every aspect of my life, steady and unassailable as a dripping pipe in the walls. I check my email at all hours and come to dread the menacing *ding* that signals an Outlook alert. When I come home, it’s all I can do to slump onto the couch, where I imagine ludicrous scenarios that might shatter this cycle of endless, unrewarding labor even for a day—multicar pileups, freak blizzards, itinerant mountain lions.

It has only a thereness, reads a journal entry of mine from this time, as I struggle to put into words my feelings of utter exhaustion and defeat. *Flat and boring and everyday . . . a familiar*

trick of despair: that it is not a cycle, or a product, or even a direction. It is a sea.

Contingency is exhaustive: it sucks the air out of the room. Both in writing centers and higher education at large, contingent employment promises success and fulfillment, yet often swiftly mutates into dull, repetitive, customer service-type work. *In the Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild (1983/2012) coins the term “emotional labor” to refer to the ways in which workers, especially those in customer service, must suppress and manage their own emotions in order to produce a certain state of mind in others—for example, the barista obligated to serve coffee “with a smile” to make customers happy. Hochschild goes on to describe how the airline attendants she interviewed came to see their smiles as an extension of the tangible elements, such as the uniform or the “soothing pastel colors of the airplane” (p. 7), that helped produce passengers’ positive mood. Emotional labor, we might say, quickly becomes part of the wallpaper. It also comes hand in hand with any increase in writing center demand: not merely the OWLs, the administrative emails, the forms for students to carry back to professors, the open hours, and so on, but also the implicit need for tutors and staff to keep visitors happy at all costs, to “keep our numbers up.”

I suggest, though, that there is even more at play in the contingent writing center than the understandable concerns about usage and budgets. In describing emotional labor, Hochschild (1983/2012) specifically names the pressure that workers face to go beyond seeming to love their job and into “actually trying to love it” (p. 7). This brings us back both to Ahmed’s theories on comfort and to contingent higher education. Contingency relies on the same affective demands as public comfort and emotional labor do: not only that workers modulate our emotions to produce a sense of comfort in others, but, even worse, that we’re supposed to act as if we like it. *This* demand—not simply to *do* labor but to *love* labor; to be the magician’s assistant smiling while we’re sawed in half—makes contingency unusually exhausting and unsustainable. It is the interminable tension between our reality as contingent workers and the too-pat narrative of

vocational passion that we feel compelled to uphold.

Here I must highlight one last feature of both emotional and contingent labor: their perniciously gendered nature. As Hochschild (1983/2012) argues, women are expected to do significantly more emotion management and emotion work—that is, work that affirms and shores up the well-being and/or status of others—than men are. The effort required by this emotion work is expected to go unseen, as with housework; we think again of how Ahmed’s “comfort duty” succeeds by making the struggle to produce it invisible.

Therefore, when contingent labor in academia is cast and feminized as “carework” (Cardozo, 2017), student support contexts like writing centers exert immense pressure on contingent staff to care both *about* and *for* students, and to seem to do this “emotion work” effortlessly. As Robin Zheng (2018) demonstrates, this alliance between gendered labor and academic contingency is a feature, not a bug: “gendered myths about merit and work, on the one hand, and academic casualization, on the other, are mutually reinforcing.” It is no surprise that, during COVID, our student services core hemorrhaged a staff that was predominantly contingent women. I also cannot fail to note that the more attrition occurred, the more I faced demands from white women for special attention to their (mostly white) students, along with microaggressions if I could not comply. When the demand for emotional labor soars, the cost is swiftly outsourced to those marginalized not only by gender, but also by race, class, and so on; in times of crisis more than ever, these cracks in the everyday wallpaper of contingent labor begin to show.

So, when the curtain falls and the lights go up, what are we going to do about it?

In the wake of media articles on the so-called *quiet quitting* phenomenon⁶ (a phrase derogatorily applied to doing exactly what one’s job requires, and no more—which calls to mind the time-honored labor strategy of “working to contract” or work to rule), I must admit that I took an approach I like to call *loud quitting*. That is, shortly after the conversations cited above with the administrator, I handed in my resignation letter. I was already

emotionally and mentally depleted; the insistence that I become complicit in potentially firing tutors for their COVID-related concerns felt like the last straw.

I'm not necessarily recommending the Big Quit as a panacea for all labor ills. Yet if we can imagine quitting, more generally, as the act of saying *no*, I do want to close this essay by wondering what a writing center that takes up an ethos of refusal might look like. How could we refuse to replicate the linguistic shifts of contingency? How could we refuse questions of aesthetics as a distraction from questions of oppression?

When I think of saying *no*, I return invariably to the question of comfort. If contingency is a constant state of saying *yes*—of being forced to acquiesce without complaint to long hours, low wages, exploitative conditions, endless budget cuts, and so on—then this *yes* is the bedrock of institutional comfort. Saying *no* offers a different path. Thus Ahmed (2022, Conclusion section), writing on complaint as queer methodology, states: “*That* complaints are made is how we come to know something happened here, what happened here: *no* as a trail, another queer tale.” In this light, refusal is a powerful tool for counteracting the invisibility in which contingency thrives as well as for disrupting the unjust power dynamics of higher education.

A first step, then, might be to yank contingency out from behind its glamorous linguistic trappings and call it *precarity*. We might refuse to acquiesce to the ever-shrinking turnaround times for asynchronous tutoring services like the OWL, saying *no* to the expectation of a 24/7 customer service model that obscures the labor required behind the scenes. We might decline to provide faculty with the ability to surveil students' usage of tutoring services. We might make more labor demands that build solidarity between WPAs, faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate workers, ranging from free masks for student workers during a global pandemic to vocal support for unionization efforts.

Yet I remain troubled by contingency. Even as contingency reproduces itself in language, in aesthetics, and in spaces, doesn't it reproduce itself in us workers, too? Didn't I genuinely feel

uncomfortable—as though I had betrayed the students I purported to care about—when I turned in my resignation? The best illusions work because the audience members want to believe them.

The reality of contingency means higher education workers are sold a slate of promises meant to secure our eternal *yes*, and that those promises are genuinely alluring whether or not they are borne out: the promises of meaningful work; stability in the form of tenure; collegiality; intellectual life; success, and so on. In other words, apart from seeming to love one's job versus trying to love it, there is also the separate issue of *wanting* to love one's job. It's hard to turn down comfort. It is difficult to say *no* to those desires that have been inculcated in us through years of higher education. It is lonely to say *no* to a future you really do want. It is tempting to believe that the perfect job is just over the next hill, beyond the next crisis, beneath the next plume of smoke. This is the work of contingency that we do within ourselves.

Where does the protest against *this* work begin?

In lieu of a final answer, I can offer a final observation: When I quit, I witnessed the incredible speed at which institutional machinery can whirr into action, when it chooses to. I was to stop scheduling meetings with students, effective immediately. I was removed as instructor from the imminent three-week course I had offered to see through. I was strongly encouraged either to leave as soon as possible, before the full length of my notice term, or to take vacation days (i.e., disappear from campus) for the rest. However, I refused simply to vanish into the night while leaving coworkers to pick up the slack. Instead, I worked extensively with my colleagues to ensure a stable transition; I helped a coworker that took over my spring course build their course site; I acknowledged my resignation to the tutors and took any steps possible to guarantee their continued health and success.

Some people expressed outright confusion that I wasn't keen to shunt all my responsibilities off on my coworkers. *I don't understand*, one administrator snapped in my resignation meeting, visibly angry for the first

time. I was so obviously unhappy (as they put it) to be there, so why did I give a couple of weeks' notice instead of simply leaving on the spot? They could not understand that one can have loyalty to one's fellow workers without loyalty to one's institution; that when the threat of contingency is stripped away, solidarity is what persists. I only wonder what other ways of working we might conjure if we examine what we would be loyal to, build, and sustain without contingency.

Abracadabra. Open the box.

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Notes

1. Ahmed likewise characterizes discomfort as a "failure to fit" in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and in a blog post entitled "A Sinking Feeling" (2014).

2. As Sabatino and Herb (2021) demonstrate, writing centers housed within larger tutoring centers, student unions, libraries, and other "one-stop shop" spaces for academic services are especially contingent spaces, highly limited by the policies and internal politics of the realms they occupy as tenants.

3. On the shift from writing "lab" to "center," see also Boquet (1999).

4. See, e.g., Zammerelli and Beebe (2019) and Azima (2022).

5. See, e.g., Sarkis (2019) on the lack of privacy and safety in the American open office plan; Wagner (2018) on open concept house floor plans.

6. For further reading on "quiet quitting" see, e.g., Kilpatrick (2022), Lord (2022).

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