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## Queer Contingency in Writing Center Administrative Work

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# Queer Contingency in Writing Center Administrative Work

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**Abstract** Using a sprinkle of Queer Theory, their on-the-job experiences, and writing center scholarship that challenges disciplinary orthodoxies, two intersectionally queer and contingent writing center researcher-administrators examine the constraints of contingency; discuss the underlife of queer labor; and point to queer labor nuances and possibilities alongside contingent writing center work.

**Keywords** writing center administration, queer identity, contingency, labor, work

**W**e write this article as two queer contingent workers who hold or have held leadership in writing centers. Patrick is a doctoral student, graduate assistant, and writing coach who held similar positions at previous universities. Travis is a pre-tenure assistant professor who was a non-tenure-track writing center director for many years. Before this call for papers, it hadn't occurred to us with such precise clarity that our core writing center professional roles have always been contingent, despite such a reality being quite obvious upon careful reflection and alongside the discipline's empirical examinations into this very phenomenon. Key longitudinal studies, including the Writing Center Research Project, corroborate the national realities of writing center directors' professional precarities (2021), as do data-driven studies of past and present (see Balester & McDonald, 2001; Isaacs & Knight, 2014; Valles et al., 2017, among others). In their recent study, Dawn Fels et al. (2021) remind writing center practitioners of these labor realities through

empirical examination into the working lives of 48 contingent writing center professionals, noting that writing center contingency is relatively brushed over, underexamined, and invisible despite its ubiquity (pp. 352–353). We recognize that contingency in higher education is precarity associated with and grounded in one's own professional standing at an institution. This contingency is often associated with a high workload for low wages and an adjacent second-class citizenship within those very institutions.

As we engage the work of Fels et al. (2021), we recognize that precarity and contingency in the writing center world are also other things. Writing center contingency is undergraduate and graduate students tutoring in the writing center at low, part-time pay, as these researchers note. It is part-time instructors working as tutors. It is professional tutors, perhaps at three-quarter time, as Travis's former center used to offer. It is staff members who hold full-time positions in at-will employment states. It is pre-tenure writing center administrators. It is a center worker whose contingent work is taxed by their identity and

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uncompensated. It is, perhaps, even the recently tenured associate professor who struggles to advance and later to recover lifetime wages toward promotion because they do not have children, are single, and are viewed by units, departments, and colleagues as more available for time-intensive service by default. It is cycles of work that stop progress and publications. It is, then, perhaps, work that holds workers back or simply holds workers indefinitely in place, so to speak.

These contingencies are complicated by queer people doing this work. Queer contingency is queer people doing contingent work on the job in a writing center, certainly. Along these lines, our discussion unpacks how two queer people do contingent work in writing centers in and alongside sometimes stable but often unwieldy work landscapes. We also inquire into what it means when two queer people *queer* contingency conversations in writing center work. Using a sprinkle of Queer Theory, our on-the-job experiences, and present writing center scholarship that challenges disciplinary orthodoxies, we examine the constraints of contingency; discuss the underlife of queer labor; and point to queer labor nuances and possibilities alongside contingent writing center work.

### A Poor Queer Framework for Contingent Writing Center Leadership Work

Writing center studies are best situated in queer theories that center contingency and, well, poverty and class stratification, as centers are rarely elite sites on university campuses. By their default historical inception, writing centers are spatial, pedagogical, and ideological manifestations of panicked institutional responses to historically excluded groups gaining access to higher education, whether working-class students enrolling in open-admissions sites or veterans attending university with G.I. Bill support. Present writing center research, while rich and nuanced, arguably dates back just to 1980, when *Writing Center Journal* surfaced as a major publication venue. We are certain to note that writing

center sites, theories, pedagogies, and research are, in 2023, rich spaces and dynamic research areas that far exceed these reactive inceptions. However, we argue that writing centers, their work, and their contingent labors, while perhaps queer in all the right ways, certainly, have “poor” origins and orientations in theory, pedagogy, space, and research as well.

Bear with us. We know *poor* is a politically loaded term, as does Matt Brim (2020) in his monograph, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*. In it, Brim centers class and race stratification and elitist realities in higher education alongside the notable emergence and lacking reach of the Queer Studies discipline. He uses the word *poor* for its rhetorical juxtaposition with its counter term, *rich* (pp. 18–19), shedding light on Queer Studies’ institutional homes and ideological and material commitments and conditions, which center, by design, wealth and privilege. He suggests that the disciplinary and experiential foci of Queer Studies exist, front and center, at the university where he works, an underfunded City University of New York (CUNY) site, the College of Staten Island (CSI), and many “poor” universities and colleges like it. To Brim, Queer Studies is positioned in and predominantly serves elite academic institutions of the Ivy League and its adjacent sites, where most of its research and researchers reside. There, despite the theory’s proclaimed reach to queer people and culture, it serves neither, rarely gesturing to poor institutions or disadvantaged students.

Brim (2020) invites readers to “realize” poor queer studies (PQS) alongside him (p. 21). In a narrative chart, he describes nuanced scenarios that gesture to how he has been enacting PQS at his unconventionally queer site for years in ways unrecognized and for students unacknowledged by and within Queer Studies. His chart describes varied instances and their queer realities for his work (p. 21), drawing readers away from elite institutions: A queer Latina student begins her seventh year of undergraduate studies (this example is in the “It looks like” column); in the “when in reality” column, Brim explains that this student fears “graduating and remaining single without

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the excuse of college to defend her against her parents’ heteronormative impatience” (p. 21). Brim discloses several similar “it looks like” versus “when in reality” examples that span queer orientations and nuanced explanations related to class or university performance. In another example, Brim describes another student’s three-hour commute from the Bronx as a surface-level “bad decision” of a student, but later reveals that she is a “a young black lesbian who is closeted at home, who wanted to go away for school, but couldn’t afford, and CSI is the furthest CUNY campus from her neighborhood,” where no one knows her (p. 21). Like the other instances, the commute example has a queer underlife. In a final example, Brim illumines a less-than-obvious exchange that productively complicates his PQS chart. He notes “a moment of bonding” between him, a white gay male, and his literature student, a “white, butch working-class lesbian,” during which she asks about when they will “read books by white people” (p. 21). To be clear, we interpret this PQS moment to be indicative of Brim’s gesture to queer underlives that signal teachable moments between professor and student, despite the racist undertones he highlights. An excerpted visualization of the full table is included in Figure 1.

We bridge Brim’s (2020) work with writing center contingency for two reasons: (1) Writing centers, by design and by default, are queer and poor: queer, in their institutional standing, in that they aren’t classrooms, aren’t traditional pedagogical spaces, and aren’t led by teachers wielding grades or assessing student writing; poor, simply by the institutional standings of their leaders, their workers, their served students, and their material, spatial,

and oft-contingent and precarious realities. (2) Brim’s PQS framework, especially his chart, offers a queer lens for identifying possibility and promise in the perils of writing center contingency, as we will discuss in later sections. The next section offers readers our contingency stories. In them, we examine the intersections of our queer, contingent identities with our contingent writing center work in various administrative roles. We then use the stories in tandem with Brim’s chart that illuminates cursory phenomena and their queer underlives.

### Patrick’s Contingency Story

Patrick began working in a writing center as an undergraduate as part of a pilot program for embedding writing tutors across the curriculum. He knew from the beginning that his appointment was temporary. The grant associated with the program would not be able to keep him in work for more than a semester. Unfortunately, he was not able to resume his work as a tutor for almost an entire year, when he entered an adjacent graduate program and worked there as a graduate teaching assistant. The writing center director was non-tenure-track faculty, and her job did not have affordances for research; it is a testament to her hard work that he was able to have that job at all. From the moment he entered writing centers, Patrick was aware of how tenuous and short-lived his employment was. Furthermore, he was quite aware of the relationship between his work and his wages. His work as a graduate tutor did not pay well. While his current position as a PhD student offers a stipend

**Table I.1. Realizing Poor Queer Studies**

<i>It looks like</i>	<i>When in reality</i>
Stasis, a Latina student in her seventh year of school.	She is terrified of graduating and remaining single without the excuse of college to defend her against her parents’ heteronormative impatience.

**Figure 1.** Matt Brim, “Introduction: Queer Dinners,” in *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*, pp. 1–27. Copyright, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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that covers more than 75% of the academic year, along with tuition remission, this was not the case during his master's work. He was not guaranteed funding for the duration of his program; only one year was funded, and he did not work in the writing center during his last semester in the program, nor receive tuition remissions. He earned about half of what he does now and worked more hours to earn it. Money was a major stressor for all tutors at his center, in fact, and most had jobs outside the university. Understandably, tutors were fixated on course grades. None could afford to lose assistantships upon academic probation or dismissal.

As a graduate assistant, his time working was split between peer tutoring, administrative work, and professional development and training. The staff were given leeway on what they were permitted to do for their professional development. He chose to dedicate his own time to the campus Safe Space Committee, a group of volunteers that provided sensitivity training on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and asexual (LGBTQA) topics. He sought the training he needed to become a training facilitator. Once he was certified, he trained fellow tutors each semester for the remainder of his time working in the writing center. A queer man, he felt the labor undertaken was important; queer people are everywhere, and he felt an obligation to accommodate them. He received support from his director to accomplish this work; she gave him the time to prepare training materials and scheduled the training days for the staff (i.e., 16 hours' worth of training). In spite of this arrangement, it was only through his actual work alone that the writing center staff became Safe Space-certified. None of the tutors sought the training before he provided the opportunity (and why should they? All were graduate students with full schedules). When he left the center, the number of Safe Space-trained staff declined, as the personnel he trained moved on. In the wake of COVID-19, the only remaining staff member who had taken Safe Space training was his former director.

The work he chose to undertake as a queer tutor extended beyond what he volunteered for: working with clients demanded of Patrick

a degree of emotional labor that encompasses both self-regulation and affect. He recalls that, when he began tutoring, it had been only a few years since marriage equality had become U.S. law. Debates about transgender people serving in the military were still very much in the zeitgeist. LGBTQA personhood then, much as it is now, was an issue that many people felt comfortable reducing to an intellectual topic of debate. Queer, biracial, and ex-military, he coached many clients who wrote essays debating marriage equality, "religious freedom," the legitimacy of queer military servicemembers, stochastic violence against the LGBTQA community, and, of course, the dreaded public bathroom controversy. His clients were not uniform in their opinions on these issues; there was as much support as there was homophobic, transphobic, and nationalist sentiment. Regardless, it took effort to remain professional when sitting with clients who transformed concrete people into abstract ideas, simply because it made for a good first-year writing paper. He was not good at keeping neutral. His coworkers could tell when he was working with LGBTQA-hostile, racist, and jingoistic clients. It showed on his face, his body, and in his speech, they said. As his friend put it: "I can always tell when you are reaching for your patience." He was unhappy when he got these appointments; they were difficult to manage, and he worried that if he challenged his clients' ideas, he would jeopardize his own position. He often feared his own precarity and job security.

A particular menace during his time as a master's student in the writing center was the rise in prominence of Turning Point USA (TPUSA). TPUSA presents itself as a conservative movement that advocates for "freedom," small government, and free markets. At the same time, it is also an organization with noted ties to far-right hate groups and prominent alt-right figures. It was no secret to Patrick what sorts of attitudes far-right factions had concerning LGBTQA, race, and military issues. On his campus, TPUSA put up flyers in every building he had reason to enter, including prominently in front of his writing center workspace, which had Safe Space stickers plastered on its windows. Appearing

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ubiquitous, the group placed its stickers on lampposts, bathroom stalls, and bike racks. A major peak of their activity on his campus involved the TPUSA chapter president wallpapering the humanities building's first floor with flyers. Alarming, this young man invited the school newspaper editor to observe and write a story on the incident. The article was trash, making no mention of TPUSA's ties to far-right movements. Further, it solely centered the chapter president and naive witnesses and presented the organization in a favorable light. Patrick wrote a report and made a call to the dean of Student Affairs. The dean was less than useless, ignoring the context Patrick was offering him, failing to note that the vandalism took place in a building that housed departments of African, Jewish, and Gender Studies. Patrick gave up his efforts against the organization. He was a graduate assistant without the time or energy to oppose the group, even if seeing their posters around his workspace filled him with dread as a queer and bi-racial person. In his contingency, Patrick also held little power do much of anything to combat the violence that gestured toward, if not invaded, his workplace.

### Travis's Contingency Story

In 2012, Travis finished his PhD and began work in a full-time, visiting position at a research-intensive university near Washington, D.C. Despite having fantastic colleagues and residing near a major U.S. city, he was lonely and isolated, he missed his family in Texas, one of whom was ill, and, from a distance, he had just met his now-husband of ten years, a born-Houstonian like him. He took a risk to leave his position after just one year, but secured a postdoctoral teaching fellowship in Houston, eventually moving there to care for family and later get married. He centered his life over academia. Decisions that center ourselves and our loved ones instead of our academic work tend to accompany contingency. Institutions of higher education prefer workers willing to move, isolate, and commit, often alongside broken promises of roots, community, and stability. Not yet

quite cognizant of this labor reality, Travis took the work he could get. He realizes it was better work than what most face when making such decisions in past and current academic job markets and in other industries. Piecing together a career that was quite different from his graduating cohort's tenure-track landings, his visiting professorship and his postdoctoral fellowship provided him experience enough to secure a full-time staff-level position at a regional comprehensive writing center. He was quite lucky. He was a writing center person by training, and the position was local to his then-home. He did not have to move. He had been trained by the field's top writing center researchers and would soon network with others. He started his writing center directorship with the mindset that his writing center was a site for research alongside student support. This positionality complicated his work and his relationship to it, especially his contingency alongside this local-to-him, at-will position.

In retrospect, Travis realizes that his writing center work to that point, dating back to 2002, was all and always contingent. Over the years, he was a work-study tutor, a graduate writing center tutor, and a graduate assistant administrator. For the first decade of his career following his PhD, he moved to, from, and across contingent positions—a visiting professorship, a postdoctoral fellowship, a writing center directorship, and two pre-tenure positions, including the position he holds at present. Even in his first directorship, he was contingent. Texas, where he first directed a center in a full-time, benefits-eligible position, is an at-will employment state, meaning employers can terminate full-time or part-time workers at any time and for any reason that is not illegal. As he writes this article with Patrick, Travis is still contingent, in fact, as he is pre-tenure. It is important to note that he is able to go up for tenure at a research-intensive university following several years of visiting or staff-level positions because he wrote a book, *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace*. He worked extensively on it while in the staff-level, at-will position mentioned earlier. While on the job, he applied for and was awarded a research



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grant from the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), conducted 20 interviews over two years, and queried the Utah State University Press. In a tenure-track position, he wrote the first manuscript, underwent and responded to anonymous reviews, and moved onto contract, production, and print with the press, albeit he was, in theory, more secure in those later stages.

As a staff writing center director, he conducted interviews when he could fit them in between meetings and day-to-day writing center activities of a bustling, student-facing site. He would venture to his center's conference room, phone participants who had elected into the project, and put them on speakerphone, recording conversations using his laptop. He rarely closed his office door, so this conference room space was a friendlier alternative for his staff. Somehow, he was rarely interrupted with a crisis because of the fantastic assistant director, fiscal coordinator, and senior tutors with whom he shared leadership. He usually did this work on Friday afternoons when he wasn't leading a tutor staff meeting. He also used his Saturday mornings for writing, too. He would drop off his husband at Houston's Hermann Park, where he volunteered. Travis would then drive to the Houston gayborhood's Starbucks, pop in his headphones, read for the literature review, sift through data, and study emerging data patterns, which he would later do more officially in his first tenure-track job using coding software. This writing project was not completely off the radar of his then-superiors. He was open about having received an IWCA research grant. However, he was less open about writing and interviewing on Fridays, as this likely would have been met with low-key raised eyebrows. Staff people in his unit certainly attended conferences and did local professional development; however, they rarely conducted research, wrote, or published. Understandably so, as they certainly weren't paid for such work. He rarely used the word "book" when speaking about and reporting his weekly work to supervisors and superiors. Somewhat unrelated to his work at his center (he was quite happy at that job), some changes to his and his husband's personal life made it possible for him to think about a life outside of Texas, which was

increasingly becoming even more conservative. He went on the market and was able to compete for tenure-track jobs, for which he was able to use the research project as evidence for competition in such pools.

The first tenure-track job he eventually got was not a writing center job. He was a Writing Across the Curriculum Director, as he is now, but with close ties to the university's center. He had inadvertently written himself away from a job he loved, albeit slightly further away from the professional precarity of his former position. Immersed in the data for nearly three years by then, he wrote a full draft of what would become his book during the summer after his first year on the tenure track. Having earlier queried Utah State University Press and having received a letter of interest from the press, he sent the full manuscript's comments in November 2019 and making revisions in March 2020, just before the pandemic went full force.

His contingency changed. The book also moved him into a supposedly more prestigious position, where he currently works. He misses his writing center and his staff-person life, however. He is away from writing centers again and away from much of the work he loves, which led him to write a book in the first place. While a writing center director, he wrote himself pseudo-out of contingency. As he will discuss later, he has complicated thoughts about his queerness, his contingency, and the field's current ideas about work that extends into activism, just given what his workload looked like for a long while, as a queer person tapped for heavy labor because of his identity. He does not lead a writing center right now. His queerness, his contingency, and his labor of past and present years has changed his ideas about how he will lead a future one.

### **Applying Poor Queer Studies to Contingent Writing Center Administrative Work**

We do not seek to replicate Brim's (2020) chart from this article's previous section. However, PQS helps us, as two queer contingent laborers, to see the labor in front of us; question

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its uptake, interpretation, and normativity; and examine and narrate alongside its queer nuances, which can be rarely streamlined as “good” or “bad.” Brim’s take allows for queer possibilities of the lived, intersectional, oft-marginalized, and poor conditions of queerness in action at unconventional sites, similar to writing centers, given that few centers hold elite status in the academy. Brim’s processes of charting his poor queer studies work at his lower-tiered, poor institution is not always predictable. His opening chart does not offer a supposedly “good” scenario disguised as a “bad” one or vice versa; there is notable nuance in each of his PQS scenarios. A long commute to campus, for example, isn’t a queer student’s bad decision; rather, it is a safety net to be out (as queer), safe, and far away from a homophobic neighborhood community, as noted in the previous section. Along these lines, we narrate, grapple with, and extend the surface level of our work and its implications when we, as contingent queer people, do queer writing center work. Our “What It Looks Like” and “When in Reality” discussions signal complex, work-based phenomena that are distinct for queer contingent writing center workers, for the implications of contingent writing center work, and for their impact on writing center research and praxis.

### Labor Scenario (Patrick)

#### *What It Looks Like*

Patrick worked in a contingent tutoring role in his former writing center. As a queer and bi-racial person committed to queer visibility and intersectional harm reduction, he also took responsibility for conducting some of his site’s Safe Space training. Patrick shouldered this labor for the good of his writing center and university community. Its outcomes and deliverables were salient and impactful.

#### *When in Reality*

He felt and saw the work as important to his center and university. Other university stakeholders did as well. It was also unsustainable work. Patrick was his center’s sole Safe Space training contact, enacting this gratifying yet exhaustive labor, which was discontinued

after his contingent leadership of it. He graduated and moved on, as he had to do. He did not have the resources, time, or power to continue the initiative, nor did his director. Like him, she was an overworked laborer. His institution did not help him train a successor, nor did they compensate him in the first place. Such forward-looking, proactive response was not on their radar at all, he realizes. When Patrick and Travis discuss these efforts, they zero in on the fact that work deliverables themselves become contingent in addition to the bodies of workers. Likewise, queer work is balanced upon queer commitments that spill over and complicate on-paper job duties. As Sara Ahmed (2012) argues, diversity work in higher education, such as the kind Patrick discusses, is bound up in contingency. For her, “time, energy, and labor” are needed for diversity work to surface, thrive, and be sustained (Ahmed, 2012, p. 29). If diversity work is a “given” in institutions of higher education, “givens must become given” (p. 29), Ahmed notes. In this case, it is Patrick’s time, energy, labor, and queer body that drives this work’s hopeful presence, its transition to a precarious “given” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 29), and its contingent peril.

#### *What It Looks Like*

Patrick described complicated feelings and visceral risks that surfaced from his work. He regularly interfaced with being out (as queer) and available for affective iterations of emotional labor for those in the writing center and its adjacent community. His identity and his work environment, namely his interactions with a vast but sometimes hostile student body, made his work gratifying yet complicated and sometimes quite difficult, too difficult, even dangerous and deflating.

#### *When in Reality*

At present, the writing center field centers activism and advocacy. Queer writing center workers, among many others, do this work as a pseudo-calling and because it is difficult to turn away from because of an innate queer and raced responsibility, regardless of one’s rank or status (Webster, 2021). Much of this work and research comes from practitioners who hold stable positions at well-funded writing centers



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(i.e., Purdue University, Michigan State University, Virginia Tech University), though notable exceptions exist, especially from queer writing center practitioners nationwide (Webster, 2021). The work isn't always safe, as Patrick's intersects with a quite dangerous organization that physically and violently impacts his workspace and his queer and biracial body. Patrick's work speaks to what queer activist writing center work could look like for workers who are not as privileged as those who write about writing center work from this vantage point. However, the act of having a writing center that does the work we, in the writing center field, value is, perhaps, its own radical queer act (we return to this claim in our conclusion). A writing center is a university space that doesn't have a teacher, a classroom, or a traditional pedagogical orientation. Just the space of a writing center is often queer and activist enough, especially when the work becomes too difficult, too embodied, too dangerous, and too expensive for its queer workers, especially those in contingent roles.

### Labor Scenario (Travis)

#### *What It Looks Like*

Travis collected data and partially wrote a queer writing center book on the job as a writing center staff person. On paper "what [this task] looks like" was, perhaps, unmistakably a good thing. A queer writing center book gets written. Travis cared about and saw through a project that he hoped will contribute to the field's research.

#### *When in Reality*

This scholarship was unpaid and unaccounted for in Travis's annual performance evaluations. Research and publication weren't part of his job duties, though he was drawn to and inspired by the project's research question. It arose from his and others' responses to national events and queer tragedies through writing center labor; the work felt and still feels important to him. It was work critical to his job, he felt, even if it did not count toward his duties, evaluations, and earnings. To Travis, writing center directors are researchers as much as administrators and teachers.

Though contingent while he started work on a book, he did find and make time to do so—a privilege, certainly. The research itself took him away from student and tutor support and some of the on-the-ground work of his former center and his current professional life, which he has written himself out of. That labor is, perhaps, what Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny (2013) would praise; however, he was, perhaps, a less engaged, transformational leader on occasion, when he wrote independently on Friday afternoons or alone, strapped, and often tired on Saturdays. He did not have much time to do this work during work hours, choosing to do it when his center was not busy, when it closed, or on weekends away from his center. The job that was later afforded Travis—in part because of a contracted monograph—removed him from the writing center world for a time (only recently has Travis reemerged in writing center work, now at his current institution, albeit in a less formal way). These "when in reality" instances showcase complicated, often less than ideal realities; however, later, new positions that arise from this scholarship offered Travis more power to make an impact and produce knowledge in the broader writing center field. His pay increased with new positions. Research was *eventually* part of his job duties, especially at present. He now has more resources to help budding queer writing center scholars with securing full-time work, with making better lives for themselves and their loved ones, and with seeking publications that further the field. Travis worries about divulging these experiences, as he knows making and finding time to write in a staff position is not possible for everyone, especially those multiply-marginalized through their race, gender identity, or institutional standing, to name a few.

#### *What It Looks Like*

Travis's book, *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace*, took up activism in one chapter following various participants' discussions of it. For at least the past 20 years, writing center research has framed activism in our work to be a disciplinary norm and priority. Participants corroborated such an orientation to activist work,

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regardless of their institutional statuses, which were, in many cases, contingent ones.

### *When in Reality*

Similar to Patrick's Safe Space training, Travis questions how and in what ways writing center activism framed in his own book, for example, is possible at all and possible for whom. In fact, Travis, in retrospect, struggles with his book's activism chapter. In it, he wrote to and about the writing center field's work, but did, on occasion, struggle with whether, how, and in what ways writing center activism (i.e., holding events, holding space, and advocating for particular student bodies) fell upon contingent workers already intersectionally strapped with emotional, invisible, and identity-oriented labor (see Caswell et al., 2016; Geller & Denny, 2013; Green, 2018; Webster, 2021). In the book, he does note his hesitancy to always view activism as a good thing. Is it noble, necessary, and a step in the way of harm reduction? Most certainly. Are these instances of this work actually activism, justice, or equity outside of the university? It's hard to say. Are they hard, difficult labor exerted upon its queer workers? Always and most certainly.

### **Reality and Possibility in Poor, Queer, and Contingent Writing Center Administration**

These "in reality" moments speak to fluid queerness in our writing center work—its surface-level implications, its accompanying underlife—given the poor and queer realities of working in higher education and of leading centers queerly at the present political moment. Queer contingency means accepting the realities of our work landscapes and also acting accordingly in ways that embrace and counter these realities. We, as researcher-administrators, might also queer contingency by facing, embracing, and doing the best work we can in our writing centers that's already built into our sites, our core methods, and our universities. After all, writing centers, as we stated earlier, are radical and queer by default. Along these lines, queer and queered contingency might not always look desirable

nor disadvantageous, inhabiting, instead, a queer space for work and workers.

Brim (2020) calls for queer nuance in his work, as does Rebecca Hallman Martini (2022) in her book, *Disruptive the Center: A Partnership Approach to Writing Across the University*. Mind you, Hallman Martini's (2022) work is not explicitly queer nor about queer people in her methods, discussions, or analyses. However, her work offers quite beautiful possibilities for queer workers—and workers of all orientations—in higher education who navigate leadership of administrated writing sites. She encourages partnership models that both challenge and embrace disruptive innovations in the modern university that don't always follow best practices, but which help students, help workers, and help administrators better perform their work and advocate for writing spaces and pedagogies (p. 6). She does not cast aside or suggest we ignore these university responses. Instead, she calls for us to embrace them alongside unlikely neighbors and initiatives. Like Brim (2020), Hallman Martini (2022) invites practitioners beyond the surface into nuance and unorthodoxy. In moving forward, we look to her work for guidance, alongside other such writing center researchers who question orthodoxy. Take, for example, Steven J. Corbett's (2016) work on long-held best practices for course-embedded writing center pedagogies that gestures in this direction, and Harry Denny et al. (2018) work on questioning writing center orthodoxies that, in the case of their study on first-generation students, don't serve modern students' needs for writing support. Like these researchers, we argue that queer contingent orientations center provocative, unsexy answers on occasion, but from which there may be the most promise for writing center sites, research, and, ultimately, laborers. If centers are already poor and queer, that is, perhaps, an asset, a queer gem of existence within an always already queer university unit.

If we take our own mantra to heart—that writing centers are always already radical and queer—it is, perhaps, worth spending less time on social justice statements, especially if those same statements are not grounded in a center's actual commitment to community

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accountability, justice, equity, and access, which, we argue, is difficult labor to do, especially in contingency. If and when we are “poor” through our contingency, it is accepting that, perhaps, spaces and relationships that the field pedestals might need reexamination and reimagining as higher education changes before us. In their forthcoming collection, *Writing Centers and Learning Commons: Staying Centered While Sharing Common Ground*, Steven J. Corbett et al. (2023), similar to Hallman Martini (2022), examine the possibilities rather than perils of writing center locations that depart from disciplinary orthodoxies (e.g., the writing center housed in an English department). Like Hallman Martini’s (2022) work, such a take is disruptive, innovative, and queer.

Likewise, we look to Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s (2013) landmark *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*. In it, she encourages writing center practitioners to question and work beyond a dominant writing center grand narrative—that of a writing center as a “comfortable, iconoclastic [place] where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (p. 3)—in order to better do our work and scholarship. Homing in on Grutsch McKinney’s (2013) discussion of iconoclasm (pp. 34–38) some 10 years after *Peripheral Vision’s* publication, her arguments offer prescient wisdom in what an iconoclastic take on writing center work may mean for queer and queering contingency. If we are too resistant to our institutions, we may put our sites and ourselves at grave risk, especially while queer and queerly contingent in various ways. A poor queer writing center approach that questions our “givens” is one answer to this iconoclasm. Perhaps, it is accepting that the English department or the field’s go-to sites are not always the answer nor always the best home for all writing centers. It is also accepting that pairings with other units aren’t always the end of us, the end of our sites, and the end of our best practices for training tutors and leading our sites. Nationally, English departments rarely have this contingency predicament figured out, in fact. Many of the stand-out writing centers around the country—e.g., The Writing Center at Michigan State University—depart from English departments, offering models that

may serve students more than we are comfortable with.

Is this approach, this embrace, queer and radical on its own terms, especially when Sara Ahmed (2012) teaches us that diversity work in higher education has an heir of contingency by default (p. 29)? If time, energy, and labor are needed for diversity to surface and thrive and be sustained, then in what ways are we spinning wheels through our contingent labor (p. 29)? If we are poor and queer in our writing center work through contingency, we should, perhaps, revel in and roll with what’s already queer, radical, and at the disposal and access of our labor. Perhaps we might uncover Harry C. Denny’s (2010) call for methodical subversion (pp. 15, 53) in order to do justice and harm reduction within the university through peer tutoring in writing. Denny (2010) does not necessarily evoke class explicitly in this particular argument, but, perhaps, a return to these methods, which speak to the underlife of our work, our commitment to justice, is necessary alongside contingent workers’ poor and queer identities in writing centers.

We end with possibility. We do so because we are realistic about the parameters and boundaries of our contingency and its implications for what we talk about when we talk about writing center labor. We counter but still embrace concerns that Ahmed (2012) articulates about queer and diversity work in higher education. That is, we make space for work landscapes that don’t drive us away and that allow us sustainable spaces and work lives. On the surface, this realistic approach might look like giving up on things like activism or shying away from it. But in reality, it means recognizing constraint in queer and contingent roles, embracing an underlife to our decisions while contingent, but still showing up to do the work, enacting subversion, and embracing the always already queer and radical work of writing centers.

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