

*Resisting Institutional Narratives: One Student's Counterstories of Writing and Learning in the Academy*¹

by Rebecca L. Jackson

To understand the social present is very much a matter of recognizing and understanding the extent to which and ways in which our everyday lives are invested in and impacted and punctuated by counternarratives and the “official” narratives against which they emerge as oppositional responses.

—Michael Peters and Colin Lankshear

Writing centers, like all educational spaces, are sites of contestation and struggle, of the wrangling that takes place between “official” narratives that shape writing center identity and practices and counternarratives that resist and work to rewrite the grand narratives about who we are (or should be) and what we do (or should be doing). An obvious example would be our disciplinary efforts to counter institutional narratives about writing centers as sites of remediation with the more subversive tale of writing centers as sites of a liberatory pedagogy. Less obvious is the narrative struggle for meaning and identity that occurs at the micro-level of tutor-student interaction—for example, in the often subtle, yet powerfully-telling counternarratives students share with tutors about the “real” work of writing, learning, and negotiating identity in the academy.

In this article, I take up Beth Boquet’s call to explore the “moments not accounted for” (56) in writing center practice—to dwell within the “excessive institutional possibilities that the writing center represents” (55)—by examining the counternarratives one student (Yolanda) offered her writing center tutor (me) as we worked together in mandatory writing center sessions over the course of a semester. In part,

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my purpose is to show that students *do* level narrative challenges to institutional and disciplinary stories told about them, and that recognizing and acting upon these stories in creative, potentially liberating ways may be some of the most important work we do in the writing center. Recognition is not always so simple, however, pulled as we are in different directions every day, struggling to keep up with the grading and the students and the writing of reports, finding it simply easier to shrug off the latest story as typical, ordinary, obvious, unremarkable. Still, when we can learn to hear the *counter* in the narratives our students tell, particularly those students who are marginalized, we are awakened to—made to realize—the discursive and material obstacles they face as they work to find a meaningful and productive place in the academy. As part of this argument, I want to suggest that writing centers—as sites of “still unknown possibilities” (Juriki 51)—may be ideally situated to engender the conditions necessary for “tactical resistance” in narrative form, for nurturing what Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey have called the “consciousness of opportunity” upon which students’ resistant (narrative) acts depend (1336).

Before I look at the counternarratives Yolanda shared with me during our work together in the writing center, I would like to provide contextual and theoretical footing for my argument: first, I sketch the institutional contexts and attendant narratives—the institutional “backstory”—that led to and shaped our relationship and interactions; second, I offer an overview of postmodern theorizing about narrative and negotiation of identity, particularly the role that counternarratives play (and might play) in foregrounding the educational experiences of those who have been traditionally excluded or simply forgotten, and in countering dominant institutional or disciplinary discourses. I conclude by exploring the ways in which counternarratives might be used strategically to jumpstart transformative change in writers, writing centers, and institutions.

“Narrating” Yolanda: The Institutional Backstory

Several years ago while directing the writing center at a mid-size university in the Southwest, I received a call from one of the faculty advisors in the College of Education regarding the writing skills of several of their upper-division undergraduate students. The problem was that each of these students had failed—sometimes more than once—the writing component of the departmentally-administered exam required for admission into the primary and secondary education programs. All the students were female, all were Hispanic, all were classified as “non-traditional” students based on their age upon entry into the university, and all had failed

the written component by a very small margin. The advisor wondered if I would help. Would I be willing, she asked, to set up and monitor mandatory, three-hours-per-week writing center consultations for those students who'd failed the exam?

The advisor explained that in addition to tutorials, students would be required to take an advanced writing course, even if they had already taken the requisite number of writing courses for their degree. This would ensure that the students had adequate content to draw upon during their required tutorial sessions. Tutorials would be known officially as "independent studies," would require the students to pay for an additional three credit hours, would be pass-fail based on attendance, and would act as a substitute for the exam. In other words, if the students faithfully attended their three-hour weekly sessions in the writing center—a situation I, as the writing center director, would have to oversee—they would not have to retake the exam, but would still be admitted into the College of Education to begin the last leg of their journey toward primary and secondary teaching careers.

I found myself in a quandary. It seemed clear to me that the students' advisor wanted them to succeed and that she saw the writing center as a potential avenue to this success. And yet I was hesitant, skeptical about the proposition. I worried that eligible students would resent the arrangement, even if they "chose" it as an alternative; I worried that hours reserved for particular students would take away from others who might need our services; and I worried about the institutional narrative this arrangement might tell about our writing center. Were we ready and willing to retell the tired story of writing centers as "fix-it-shops" (North) or, worse still, "border police" (Howard), despite the hard work we'd done to revise those very narratives over the two years I'd been on the job? The decision wasn't easy, but in the end I agreed to the arrangement. We began our work with the students the following week. I would consult with a woman named "Yolanda."

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I "know" Yolanda before I meet her, at least in the institutional sense of the word. She has been described, categorized, and labeled. She has failed a high-stakes exam and is now one of the "academically suspect," a student who needs to prove her worth despite years of success in the very institution that now questions her academic and intellectual abilities. She is, in Becky Moore Howard's words, the student no other teacher wants or is able to teach, the student whose "writing marks [her] as [an] outsider, the student who, by virtue of being 'sent' to the writing center, is yet again being marked" (10).

Yolanda knows she has been scripted in this particular way. She is angry when I first meet her, as are the other women who have been offered the "writing center

plan.” She is angry, not at me necessarily, or even with the stipulation that she visit the writing center three times a week. She has, in fact, visited the writing center on her own for work in her other classes. She is angry because she has been “narrated” by the university as a particular kind of student, a “deficient” writer. She is angry, as well, because the College has offered her this option so late in the game, a good two semesters after she has failed the exam, two semesters after she has finished all of her required writing classes. She is angry because time and money is scarce, and because the option she is offered seems to squander both. And it is not lost on her (or me) that the only students who are in her situation are Hispanic women of non-traditional college age.

As our relationship develops, I come to know Yolanda as a much more nuanced, sophisticated, and complex woman than the featureless character she plays in the institutional narrative told about her. Yolanda is a “good” student, a junior-level education major with high grades and an intense, almost palpable, desire to succeed. She is Hispanic, a native of this small, but currently thriving city in the southern tip of a very poor state. She is a returning student and, as woman in her thirties, is above the average age of most students at this university. Yolanda is not new to poverty or difficult circumstance. One of numerous siblings in an extended family that still resides in this area, Yolanda has worked most of her life, going to school when times have been good and stopping when money was tight or when someone needed to be cared for. As she explains during one of our earliest meetings,

I have like 117 credits. It's because when I first started school I was an art major and then I stopped going to school. I don't know. I felt like I had to because my mom got so sick, so I stopped going to school and after that she was sick for like eight years. After she passed away, that's when I just thought I've got to do something with my life and I started going back to school.

Despite many setbacks and obstacles, Yolanda has managed to buy a small piece of land, and she owns the trailer she and her boyfriend have lived in for several years. Her dream is to become a teacher.

I come to know Yolanda through narrative, through the stories she shares with me as we work together in the writing center. Yolanda is a storyteller, and she is a good one. I hear stories about her childhood, her mother and father, her siblings, her boyfriend. I hear stories about work, about school—writing courses in particular—about extracurricular activities, and about classmates. In these same stories, I hear other stories I've never heard (or, perhaps never listened to) before: narratives about the temporal and material realities that shaped, in very profound ways, the

work that Yolanda was able to do in the academy, narratives that illuminate her identity work in this institutional setting, and narratives that, viewed collectively, constitute “counternarratives” of academic life.

As the material, institutional, and ideological backdrop for such counternarratives, the writing center began to tell a new story about itself. Retold, the writing center emerged as a discursive site of regulation and resistance, constraint and play—a hybrid space characterized by both institutional rule-keeping and institutional rule-breaking, a space where students like Yolanda might feel comfortable articulating resistance to policies they considered unfair, and challenging conventional institutional narratives about students and writing and success in the academy with their own very different personal stories, stories often informed by race, class, and gender. In making this point, I do not want to paint too romantic a picture of what happens in writing centers: writing center practices are often constraining; our work, examined closely, often reveals the ways in which we are “complicit with the values of the institution” (Grimm 13). What I do want to suggest, however, is that writing centers are also often sites of their own undoing, particularly if we reframe “undoing” as a potentially liberatory move—if by “undoing” we mean that writing centers both *promote* and *promote resistance to* particular values, practices, narratives.

I turn now to a brief overview of postmodern theorizing about narrative and reality, narrative and self, narrative and identity, focusing in particular on current conversation among critical, critical race, and Latino critical theorists about the value and role of counternarratives as discursive resistance to what Richard Delgado has called “majoritarian stories” (“On Telling,” 672). I will draw upon these theoretical conversations in order to read Yolanda’s narratives as stories of resistance to the institutional narratives about who she is and how she should learn.

The Struggle for Meaning: Narrative and Counternarrative in a Postmodern World

In the essay “Border Disputes: Multicultural Narrative, Identity Formation, and Critical Pedagogy in Postmodern America,” Peter McLaren poses what might be considered one of postmodernism’s most difficult questions: “Do narratives speak us or are we spoken through narratives?” (203) For many, the answer is both “yes, and yes.” As Susan Chase observes, “narration is a major way in which people make sense of experience, construct the self and communicate meaning,” but “personal narratives no matter how unique and individual are inevitably social in character” (79). We fashion selves through the stories we tell of our lives, and yet the stories

we tell (or can tell), our “individual” narratives, reflect and reproduce the broad institutional and cultural narratives to which they are inextricably linked. Referred to variously as “canonical forms” (Bruner); “grand récits,” Lyotard’s master narratives; “majoritarian stories” (Delgado, “On Telling”); and “dominant discourses” (Gee), these largely invisible—naturalized—narratives shape our so-called “individual” meaning-making practices: we are “born into or enter (through socialization) existing stories or storied institutions” (Ospina and Dodge 293). “Much of our self narrating,” Kerby observes, “is a matter of becoming conscious of the narratives that we already live in and with” (6).

Narratives speak us, yes. For many of us, however, the story of a totalizing narrative is, well, too totalizing. We want to argue that individual stories are not wholly contained within or by the institutional, social, or cultural, but exist instead in dialogue with them. “My story” is significant not because it captures in total “my experiences” or because it blindly reproduces particular institutional, social, and cultural narratives. My story is significant, from a sociopolitical narrative perspective, because it foregrounds the ways in which I negotiate the particular, the local, the experiential, and the institutional, social, and cultural. Mine is the “little narrative” that challenges the dominant discourse, inserting itself into the always-present gaps and fissures of the grand narrative to counter and, perhaps, reconstitute it. The focus shifts: the “dominant discourse” shares space with the resistant script. A new narrative, however small in size or voice, is formed.

Critical race and Latino critical theories sharpen this perspective on narrative and identity in their emphasis on “counternarratives,” inherently subversive, insurgent, potentially emancipatory stories of lived experience told by those at the margins of society. Richard Delgado, legal studies scholar and activist, observes the power of counterstories to challenge cultural master narratives:

Stories, parables, chronicles, and narratives are powerful means for destroying mindset—the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings...that make current social arrangements seem fair and natural. Counterstories challenge the received wisdom. They can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. Counterstories can quicken and engage conscience. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot. (“Legal” 2411)

Counterstories work to “denaturalize” the narratives we live by. As such, they have long been used by “outgroups” as a means of survival and resistance. Delgado elab-

orates this perspective when he suggests that counterstories are not new to those who have been oppressed or victimized in some way, whose voices have been ignored or silenced: "The proliferation of counterstories is not an accident or coincidence" ("Legal" 2411), Delgado writes. Instead, "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation...a means of psychic self-preservation and a means of lessening their own subordination" ("Legal" 2411).

In the writing center and elsewhere, counternarratives shed light on alternative educational experiences, those not often reflected in conventional stories about schooling. The counternarrative helps us see the inadequacies of traditional educational practice by foregrounding the ways in which it fails to meet the needs of so many of our students. I want to argue that through the counterstory, we come to *know* differently. As Christine Sleeter and Delores Delgado Bernal have argued, counterstories "put a human and familiar face on educational theory and practice, and challenge perceived wisdom about the schooling of students of color" (246). In our own field, Becky Howard's theory of "backwriting" helps us not only to (re)conceptualize narrative acts of resistance that take place within asymmetrical relations of power, but to imagine their liberatory potential as well:

[B]ackwriting refers to the practices whereby writing center directors, tutors, and students critique, respond to, confront, and revise the dominant academic structures whose hegemonic operations become so painfully evident in the institutional space that is the writing center. Unlike writing back, which functions for two distinctive cultures in conflict, *backwriting* can be the act of a single individual (if such thing exists), even while it negotiates and challenges cultural premises and subject positions....*Backwriting* holds out the promise of empowering marginalized students, not to mention their tutors and the writing center itself. (7, 10)

As I hope to show in the following section, Yolanda's counternarratives provide us a window onto this work.

Yolanda's Stories: Counternarrative as Critique in the Writing Center

Conversational storytelling, many sociolinguists would argue, is risky business. In a bid to hold the floor for what might be an extended period of time, storytellers are constrained to tell stories that are not only "worth telling," but also "worth hearing" (Polanyi 53). One way of accomplishing these objectives is to tell a story that is firmly situated in ongoing talk. Storytellers who want to be considered "compe-

tent” narrators, Livia Polanyi observes, do not simply “start to tell a story at any moment” (54). Instead, they must tell stories that are perceived as “follow[ing] naturally from a point being made, a topic being dealt with in the general talk” (54). While Polanyi focuses on stories that emerge in everyday conversations—situations where interactants share similar degrees of power—the point she makes about perceived relevance is nonetheless useful for thinking about narratives that emerge in writing center conversations. The notion of *perceived* relevance forces us to ask hard questions about our perceptions. If we do not *perceive* that a story arises from ongoing talk, if, for example, we perceive the story as irrelevant or obvious, unremarkable or “off task,” we ignore the possibility that the story does in fact partake of the current conversation and is vitally relevant, only not in the way we expect it to be.

Many of what I have come to call Yolanda’s counternarratives, for example, might easily be ignored as “off task,” ostensibly irrelevant to conversations we had about her writing at any given moment, particularly if we define writing narrowly as the literal words and sentences and paragraphs we happen to be looking at as we stare down at a piece of paper or look at a computer screen. If we think about the temporal and material dimensions of writing—the fact that it takes time and tools to write—then we may just come to see that the stories our students tell about time pressures and financial difficulties, for example, are not irrelevant after all, but central to their conversations about writing and their literacy work in the academy. As Nedra Reynolds rightly observes, “writers can’t dwell in ideas or questions of arrangement or style unless they have the time and space necessary for such intellectual work” (168). If we consider, too, the overwhelming presence of dominant cultural and institutional narratives about schooling, it becomes even more clear that our students’ stories often arise out of a complex contextual matrix that is very present but largely hidden from view.

Many of the stories Yolanda tells focus on the temporal dimensions of writing—the fact that writing takes time, in many cases, more time than she has to devote to it, and the fact that the writing process “story” I and her teachers encourage is simply not a story that she can tell. In one of our very first writing center sessions, Yolanda refutes the disciplinary narrative about writing process embodied in the writing center itself when she offers the following story of her own writing practice:

Everything is so tight because I’ve got four reports due Wednesday [and] one report due Thursday. [I have] just a beginning report due Friday. This one on Black Elk is due Saturday and I have an oral presentation Saturday so I’m just doing everything. It’s hard. Actually, I

told my boyfriend “Don’t pick me up at all, even if it’s twelve at night.” I didn’t even bring my truck. I said, “I’m not even going to bring my truck because if I bring my truck I’m going to want to go home. So I said “Don’t even bring my truck. I’m going to stay here. I’m going to live here tonight.”

For Yolanda, writing is a highly-regimented process, one that takes place out of necessity in the moments she isn’t in class, making dinner, working, or tending to family responsibilities. Yolanda has a process, of course. It just doesn’t sound or look very much like the “first you brainstorm, then you write, then you reflect, then you revise, then you reflect some more” process we often encourage our students to adopt.

The collision of these two ideas—these two stories about writing process—is captured most powerfully in a series of exchanges Yolanda and I have about writing and reflection, and in my advice that Yolanda set aside her writing for a period of time so that she can return to it with fresh eyes. Generally, I think this is good advice. It is certainly advice we repeat often enough when we talk to students about their writing and how they can improve their drafts. Good advice or not, it doesn’t necessarily speak to our students’ realities. It certainly did not acknowledge Yolanda’s reality. As we see in the transcript below, Yolanda’s lack of any real response to the story I offer about my own writing blocks constitutes a refusal or inability to take up the narrative altogether. Yolanda begins by describing her writing block visually as trying to see through a cloud:

Yolanda: What happens is it’s like I see everything like a cloud. Everything’s just so blurry and I don’t know what happened that I had such a good idea for this [paper] and then throughout the week I just lost it. I couldn’t think. It’s like I got into a block and I thought how do I get out of this? It feels frustrating, really frustrating.

Becky: Where you think and then you think you kind of have it mapped out and you sit down to write and it just doesn’t play out.

Yolanda: Uh huh.

Becky: I don’t know. For me, I usually find it means that I still need to incubate. I need to let those ideas still incubate some more. I thought I was ready to start writing but I really need some more thinking time.

Yolanda: Uh huh. So what do you do?

Becky: If I sit there for three hours and it’s still not coming and I’ve tried to write some things down, then I just try to make peace with it and say it’s not time for me to write yet. I don’t realize it but I still need

to incubate a little bit more. And usually if I just don't panic and just stop and believe that these things are swirling around in my head—I'm not aware of it but they are—then the next day I go to write and something's happened in the mean time.

Yolanda: It comes to you, huh?

Yolanda clearly doesn't buy the "incubation" metaphor I try so hard to make her understand. Considered in relation to the other narratives she has shared with me about writing and time, this should come as no surprise. "Incubation" requires time; writing requires time. Yolanda does the best she can do with the time she does have. But her notion of time is different from my notion of time; her stories about time are different from my stories about time. Her stories about time *confront* my stories about time. The problem is that I don't hear Yolanda's refusal to take up my narrative as a story, albeit a silent one, about the conditions she must contend with as she writes. I thus "refuse" her story in the same way that she "refuses" mine. The difference, of course, is that I hold most of the power in our interaction. I can continue to drone on about the need to "incubate," all the while failing to hear that I'm not really getting any kind of meaningful response, decide to stop when I want to stop, and then move the interaction into an altogether different direction as I see fit. The potential exists for Yolanda and me to engage the collision of narratives here, but it is not realized in this particular moment. Instead, engagement plays out here, in this essay, as I puzzle over the counterstories Yolanda told me in a different time and place, and struggle to understand what they might mean for the work we do in writing centers now, even after the moment of their telling.

The materiality of writing—of access to writing tools—figures prominently in Yolanda's stories as well. In many of our sessions, Yolanda narrates experiences with writing and technology that oppose stock institutional narratives about equal opportunity and access. In one particular example—what I call the "crazy days" narrative—Yolanda tells the story of losing all of her work when a campus computer freezes up:

Well you know how the Mac computers they just all of a sudden freeze? And you have to turn everything off? So it froze and I had to turn everything off. And then the second time I tried it, I wanted to print in color and they [student workers] said "yeah you can print in color" and I know how to do it. I wanted to show the teacher I know how to use a color printer and I wanted to print in color and that way she knows that I know how to use it. He lost everything. I don't know how it happened. He lost everything. He turned [the computer] off and

everything got lost. So again I was there right after the class. I was there all day long, all day long into the night. So it's just been like that, crazy days.

In *Geographies of Writing*, Nedra Reynolds reminds us that “acts of writing require tools,” and yet Yolanda cannot afford a computer of her own; in order to complete her work, she must use available computers on campus. This means negotiating access—computer labs are often reserved for classroom instruction—and negotiating risk—risk of contracting viruses (a not uncommon occurrence) and risk of losing her work altogether. Working full time, which Yolanda has done her whole life even while in school, complicates matters further, rendering the institutional narrative about equal opportunity access and sustained intellectual engagement even more suspect.

Like counternarratives about (lack of) time, the realities of technological access tell a similar counternarrative about idealized notions of writing and the writing process. Yolanda’s experience foregrounds the very real material conditions within which students labor; her writing process is intimately connected to and impacted by material conditions often ignored in official disciplinary conversations about the practice of writing.

Reflecting on a similar experience with her own students, Reynolds concludes that “places and tools do affect composing....Material conditions and regulation of textual space not only impact upon decisions made but also contribute to the construction of a writer’s *habitus*” (168). Yolanda’s *habitus* may not be familiar to many of us who are firmly entrenched in academia, but it is the geographic and metaphorical reality within which Yolanda (and so many others) dwell. Reynolds’ reminder is instructive: when material realities make it virtually impossible for our students to complete the work we ask of them, we must “pause to think again about how much we take for granted regarding material conditions for getting done the work of learning” (170). Counterstory, heard as such, brings this tension into clearer focus.

Counterstory brings into focus, too, Yolanda’s work to craft a writerly identity that counters the “deficient writer” story the institution tells about her. The clearest instance of this occurs roughly three quarters of the way into the semester, well after we have established a productive working relationship and genuine friendship. Despite our relative familiarity with one another, I am unprepared for, uncomfortable with, awed when she wants to open our session one day by reading me a poem she has written. She begins by telling me the story of how the poem came into being:

This one I did for my teacher in Spanish. It was just something that I did. She asked me if I could write a love poem or something like that because we were talking about poetry one time. I said, "Yeah!" So I wrote it and then I typed it up for her and I gave it to her. I don't know what I did with the original so this is the rough draft of it. Want me to read it?

Yo por siempre te quiero

No le dejare

Por siempre mi corrido amor

Yo te amore

Mi corazon esta en tus manos

Para tener quidad y averdad

Por siempre en mi vida te llamare

Aquererte es mi desèo

Cuentarme que mi quieres yo te amore

Yo por siempre te quiero

No te dejare

Por siempre mi vida te amore

This is another one that I did. I did this last semester. Actually they put it in *The Roundup* [the student newspaper].

Yolanda's story is resistant and transgressive. It is a counternarrative within a counternarrative, a multi-layered instance of "backwriting" that challenges official institutional narratives about acknowledging authority, staying on task, laying claim to a writer's identity, and working within approved genres. It is a "war between stories," as Richard Delgado describes it, a moment when the majoritarian story and the counternarrative collide ("Legal" 2418).

Yolanda begins her writing center session by telling the story of her former teacher's request that she [Yolanda] write her a poem. Yolanda agrees, writes the poem, and reads a version of what she has written during her writing center session with me. Ostensibly at least, Yolanda engages one of the writing center's most highly touted narratives—that writing centers are sites of discussion about student writing, particularly about those aspects of writing that students themselves most want to discuss.

The official narrative goes something like this (and I take this from the writing center promotional materials I developed myself):

At the Writing Center, our goal is to help you become a more confident, independent, and successful writer. Writing Center consultants

are trained to consult with students on any type of writing project at any stage in the writing process, from understanding an assignment and brainstorming, to drafting, revising, and editing. In short, the Writing Center is a safe, comfortable, and friendly environment where students can freely discuss any writing challenge they face.

Yet Yolanda does not read her poem because she wants to discuss it. Discussion would be impossible because I am not fluent in Spanish. She does not read the poem because she wants to revise it. In fact, she has *already* revised the poem. Yolanda reads the poem to share it, to invite an aural appreciation of it—of the words, the sounds, the rhythms—one writer to another. Reading her poem, Yolanda levels, if not overturns, asymmetrical power relations characteristic of even the most democratic and egalitarian writing center relations. Yolanda is the poet, the teacher. I am the audience, the student. The subversive nature of this move becomes more clear when we consider, as well, that the College of Education, in collusion with the writing center, has mandated Yolanda's weekly writing center visits, and that the College has done so for the express purpose of helping Yolanda improve her academic writing skills. Yolanda resists the institutional (and middle-class) imperative to "stay on task"—in this case, to focus exclusively on assignments for her advanced writing course—opting, instead, to remake our writing center session, if only for 15 minutes.

At another level, the story Yolanda tells about writing the poem, a story which includes reading the poem aloud, flies in the face of the unspoken, but clearly understood, institutional narratives about who is allowed to write poetry and who is not, who is worthy of an audience for their work and who is not, who should be proud and who should be ashamed. This majoritarian narrative is captured in my own response to Yolanda's reading, reading which makes me uncomfortable and embarrassed—for reasons I was not then able to articulate.

This is (quite painfully) exemplified in the conversation Yolanda and I have immediately after she finishes reading her poem:

B: It's beautiful

Y: It's about love—I will always love you

B: I recognize

um, "my heart is in your hand="

Y: mm hmmm

B: Um

Let me see (2.0)

I can't read that.
 "I" something
 Y: "will forever love you
 and will never leave you"
 B: "my love." Right?
 Y: mm hmm
 B: "My heart is in your hands"
 Y: "forever my love"
 B: and "por siempre" means?
 Something "in my life" =
 Y: mm hmmm=
 B "forever in my life?"
 Y: mm hmm. I will "llamare" like "adore you" or, yeah.
 B: That's right there?
 Y: mm hmmm.
 B: "To love you?"
 Y: Yeah, or "to want to is my desire"
 B: uh huh
 "also" What is this?
 Y: "Tell me. Tell me also that you love me"=
 B: "love me"
 Y: "And I will love you."

It sounds better in Spanish.

B: Yeah

Y: It's harder when you're saying it in English. It's hard.

I think Yolanda's poem *is* beautiful and I tell her so. And yet the poem throws me off guard as well and launches me into a tedious rendition of what I *do* know how to do well—take something apart and analyze it.

I simply do not know what to do with a poem—one of the most sacred and elite of genres—that has been written and read by a student who is not also a graduate student in the MFA program or a published poet. I have so internalized the official narrative—that only a precious few can claim identity as poets and can read their work aloud without embarrassment—that when I'm confronted with the counternarrative—"I am a poet"—I stumble around with intricacies of individual words. In their work on narrative resistance to legal authority, Ewick and Silbey note that resistance to the dominant is often "institutionally indecipherable" (1137). They explain that the "absence of rules or classification schemes makes [resistant actions,

narratives] officially unreadable, without instruction about what to do under these circumstances" (1337). In this case, I have no schema to draw upon. I simply don't know the story about how to respond to the student who reads me a poem. I have trouble deciphering the counterstory, and yet Richard Delgado argues that, deciphered or not, counterstories are not so "easily circumvented" ("Legal" 2414). Rather, "a telling point is registered instantaneously and the stock story it wounds will never be the same" ("Legal" 2414). It is for this reason that Yolanda's move is also very risky: "[T]here are dangers in storytelling," Delgado continues, "particularly for the storyteller. The hearer of an unfamiliar counterstory may reject it, as well as the storyteller, precisely because the story unmasks hypocrisy and increases discomfort" ("Legal" 2414). I do not reject the story or the storyteller, but I do struggle to hear and understand it and her.

Finally, there is also a story within the story or, perhaps more appropriately, a story that the story itself tells. What I mean here is that Yolanda's (counter)story about writing the poem tells the larger (counter)story about her identity as a writer and a poet. And this overarching story is a *counter*story precisely because it rewrites the narrative the institution tells about Yolanda—that she is not a writer at all, but a student whose writing must be monitored, regulated, and changed.

Narrating Change in the Writing Center: Some (Tentative) Conclusions

Six years have passed since Yolanda and I last worked together, sitting side by side in the writing center, talking, laughing, telling stories, working on writing. I have changed institutions, moved to another state. Yolanda still lives in the city where we first met. She graduated shortly after I left, began teaching in a school district outside of town, and recently got married. For me, however, our work continues: I think about our conversations often, puzzle over the meaning of the stories Yolanda told me so many years ago and try to figure out what to make of them, how to share them with others—convey the meaning they might have held for Yolanda, the meaning they continue to hold for me, and the meaning they might hold for others. Here are some of my (tentative) conclusions:

Writing centers invite oppositional discourse. Nancy Grimm and others have observed that because writing centers are "uniquely situated" in the university—both within and on the borders of the academy—they may offer the last best hope for institutional critique and the beginnings of transformative change (Grimm 13). How does this work? Perhaps it is because we somehow signal our marginal and innovative status—in the kinds of conversations we are willing to have, in the time we spend with students, in the way we perform our work—and in this signaling, this

marking of ourselves as at least somewhat different from the institution at large, we help to engender in students the awareness that narrative resistance is possible. It is perhaps equally likely that students narrate resistance in all educational spaces; the point I am trying to make is that writing center conditions may make it more likely that students and tutors become self consciously aware of such narrative acts of resistance and critique. The key, as my work with Yolanda shows, is that we must learn to hear the counternarratives our students tell *as* counternarratives—not because they might tell them, but because they do tell them. This leads me to my next point.

Counternarratives, as a form of oppositional discourse, foreground marginalized students' experiences and often reveal us to ourselves. Counternarratives challenge dominant discourses about literacy, forcing us to examine, in Dolores Delgado Bernal's words, "what counts as valid knowledge in schools and how this has directly affected [students'] lives" (106). What students have to say isn't always easy to hear, particularly when their stories expose the ways in which we reproduce oppressive institutional values or when we take up their narratives of experiences as opportunities to retell an institutional tale of exclusivity and oppression. "We see ourselves more clearly," Nancy Grimm writes, and "this isn't always a pretty picture—the effect of holding a mirror up to oneself" (13). Perhaps we need to hold the mirror up to ourselves more often. As I argue in my next point, we might do this through a robust narrative inquiry.

Engaging the full repertoire of narrative methodologies will help us tap into the experiences and insights our students have to offer. My own interest in narrative inquiry has led to me to record my sessions with students and actively listen for the actual stories we tell during our writing center consultations. This essay, in fact, grows out of that work. I also have interesting data on the ways in which tutors and students co-construct and build on each other's narratives. This is important work, work that might be informed by sociolinguistics, as well as various strands of critical and cultural theory. We might also begin to think about narrative as a mode of inquiry, a means of inviting students to tell their stories about literacy in case study interviews or focus group sessions. I have encountered very little of this kind of work in writing center studies, and yet I think it would yield valuable insights that might help jumpstart transformation—my next point.

The more we know about marginalized student's experiences the better able we are to advocate for institutional change. In their work on critical race theory and multicultural education, Sleeter and Delgado Bernal observe that counter narratives challenge us to hear other people's stories and find ways to "make those stories matter

in the educational system” (247). Resistance to our efforts will be strong. Others will argue that an individual story is an individual story—limited in its vision and relevance, a fine example of sour grapes. “Empowered groups,” Delgado argues, “do not need particularity, context, focus on the individual” (“On Telling” 672). This is precisely because

all the general rules, presumptions, and interpretations reflect them and their understandings. Stories that too forcefully call attention to injustice, particularly of novel sorts, will strike them as anecdotal, unprincipled, or unfair. They will give them pejorative labels like “agony stories” and deem them conversation closers—all the while overlooking that cheerful majoritarian stories strike us the same way. (“On Telling” 672)

Perhaps if we reframe our work as institutional leaders, we will find a way into a problem that seems, at times, simply too overwhelming to tackle. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the inspiring—and I think doable—advice offered in Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Beth Boquet’s recent book, *The Everyday Writing Center*. Drawing upon John Tagg’s work in leadership, they argue that any framework for institutional change must be founded upon our “willingness and ability to recognize the institutional authority we do have and to claim the functional authority to call one another, our tutors and students, and our institutions to a sense of mission, of purpose” (11). Hearing this advice, I want to imagine a different me, a writing center director who would have engaged the knowledge, the lessons of Yolanda’s counternarratives, to start a dialogue, for example, with the College of Education about her concerns that she had not been treated equitably because of the color of her skin. I want to imagine a different me, a writing center director who would have used Yolanda’s counternarratives to argue for greater access to technology, or for revised understandings about students’ time and commitments and values. I think the writing center director I want to be is slowly coming into being. I hope she is.

I know one thing for sure. Yolanda was always a writer. She was also always a teacher.

NOTES

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