Notes from the Field

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It may come as a surprise to some that the majority of critical work in English studies that uses theories of othering is not aimed at literary texts or linguistics or capital-R rhetoric or pedagogy. No, it seems most 'othering' work occurs in matters of public policy: national identity, secular relationships, ableism and disabilities, racism, and sexism. However, the scholarship in this issue does reflect the discourse—if only a portion. Concepts of othering can be found in literature, linguistics, rhetoric, and pedagogy, and these notes aim to show another facet of it.

I was a writing tutor for six years, a specialist for two, and a lecturer for two. I've worked in a writing center, in the university and high school classrooms, and in online spaces. Back then I didn't often find myself applying these important findings of othering to my work, nor did I find myself situated in these tangibly othered spaces, but at the end of a decade in English studies, I've realized just the opposite. In these notes I want to address the following questions: For those of us who work in and around English departments, what does othering look like day-in and day-out? How do we situate ourselves—or find ourselves— in othering contexts? With whom? How do we negotiate from there?

To begin, let's first establish a working definition of othering. From its philosophical roots to the current discourse in social sciences, othering at its essence is a system of boundaries that distinguishes and negotiates the self from the other, creating areas of inclusion and exclusion that are necessarily dependent on socially constructed identities. Othering, therefore, is not necessarily destructive or dangerous. For ontological purposes, for example, the distinction between self and other is at times theoretical and fundamental and does not lend itself immediately to conversations of othering as demonizing. However, when dealing with education, health, economics, or other matters of public policy, the system of othering tends to include cultural values and moral ethics that turn 'others' into unwilling scapegoats or pariahs. For these notes, I want to focus on othering in three contexts.

Multilingualism in Writing Centers

"In what ways are writing centers unwittingly complicit in racist practices?" So asked the authors in the *Introduction of Writing Centers and the New Racism*, echoing Victor Villanueva's talk from the 2005 IWCA/NCPTW conference. Villanueva called out the blind and silent responses to racism that existed within the writing center community's "language, rhetoric, and material reality"; wherein students were newly situated in a space that often pointed out their deficiencies and inferiority. Working along the U.S.-Mexico border, I tutored bilingual writers on a daily basis. In fact, the majority were Hispanic first-generation college students, some having just recently picked up English, who lived in the area most of their lives. Except for being a native English speaker with fluency in Spanish, I identified almost entirely with them, which is likely why I had not noticed any systems of othering at the time. But there were two distinctions that rendered otherness between me and my students.

First, I was fluent in academic English, and second, I was in an institutional position of power; my working at the writing center advertised as much. Often, students sought my help not because they needed advice on exploring their voice or determining the best rhetorical approach for a particular project, but because they wanted to improve 'the grammar' and

subsequently get a better grade on a paper, and some students didn't seek help at all but were instead referred, and thus identified as weak writers, by faculty. Sessions that begin under these terms potentially other students and force them to face the reality of language, power, and identity. With these students, I and other tutors ran the risk of discussing the writing in terms of 'errors and mistakes,' highlighting for some students the 'interference' from their native language. In my case, there was at least enough common ground in language and culture to avoid othering, but writing centers with more diverse student populations are more prone to treat English from a position of power. But there is a solution. In "Rethinking our Work with Multilingual Writers," Olson discusses the idea of a metalanguage, a method of talking about language. She argues that by talking about academic English as a tool rather than a standard, the inherent boundary between the tutor and student is fuzzed. She writes:

> Discussing with multilingual writers the various reasons behind a question or suggestion about language use—whether it be a grammatical rule or a discussion of the reasons informing the typical American academic essay styles and forms—allows for multilingual writers to make connections between the use of American academic Englishes and the other discourse communities of which they are a part. It also places them at the helm of control. (4)

And it diffuses the inherent tension present in a system of othering, making tutors much more accessible. The identity of tutor and student changes, too. Students who at first may have perceived themselves as someone in need of 'correcting' now have a foot in two linguistic territories with the potential to navigate more, and tutors who at first feel like "gatekeepers of access and conservators of particular conceptions of academic Englishes" now decentralize the language and themselves to allow for students' agency (2). Thus, othering in writing centers, at least in the context of language, power, and identity, can be negotiated successfully when tutors engage in metalinguistic discourse.

Points of Authority in Classrooms

Undergraduate research is a priority for core curricula across the country, and for first-year writing programs, the challenge of research *writing* is daunting to be sure. The answer for a while now has been to create democratic classrooms that focus on inquiry-based learning, but both the environment and approach come with challenges, specifically with how students become authors/authorities. Working in a first-year writing program, I became familiar with and eventually solved the riddle of being an instructor to students who were just coming into their own while at the same time being a facilitator for student-led discussions and projects.

The typical understanding of classroom interaction is assumed to be a binary of instructor and student, similar to the environment discussed in the writing center, where the instructor possesses knowledge of the subject and must impart that knowledge to a student. However, the potential for othering in the classroom rests less on language and much more on agency. For decades, the term 'student writing' had been equated with 'novice writing,' and when scholars used student writing in articles, their names were removed, effectively omitting student authorship. In line with a binary system, many articles dichotomize 'student writing' with 'expert' or 'professional writing,' but sorting writers into these camps would hardly be easy, and it certainly begs some questions. What are the criteria for student and expert writing? At what point do student writers become experts? If the definition of a student writer is predicated on their learning progress, who are these experts that are no longer learning?

Back in 1980, Nancy Sommers began moving away from the binarism. In her landmark article about revision strategies between two kinds of writers, she wrote, "I use the terms

student writers and experienced writers because the principal difference between these two groups is the amount of experience they have had in writing" (579). Decades later, the literature in composition studies looked further than the writing process for evidence of identity and agency. Laurie Grobman, for instance, argues that this dichotomy of student-expert is not true to the nature of research writing. Instead, authorship is a continuum. She encourages us to "see *all* scholarly authorship in composition studies on a continuum that extends from novice to expert, and it is fluid; scholarly authorship is not an all or nothing proposition but a matter of degree, and student scholarly authorship creates opportunities for varied modes and arenas of expertise" (179). Thus the initial boundary between instructor and student is replaced by a spectrum of experience, and expertise is defined by performance in the discipline and discourse rather than institutional hierarchy.

Evidence-based Research in English Studies

During a training session at the writing center, my former colleague stressed the need for RAD research: replicable, aggregable, and data-supported research. Indeed, the transition from qualitative to quantitative research can be seen in virtually every discipline today. Here again, though, we can see the potential for othering in the English discipline. One example can be found in Driscoll and Perdue's discourse analysis of writing center research. They note:

> [T]here are more writing centers and more professionally trained composition scholars than ever before… Nonetheless, many writing centers continue to be staffed by graduate students and faculty 'transplants' from English literature programs, more directors are trained in the humanities than in the social sciences, and many balance both departmental and writing center appointments. (15)

An analysis of this statement and others like it, as well as their context, is needed to understand the form of othering that frequently occurs in writing center scholarship and English studies in general.

First, Driscoll and Perdue dichotomize graduate students and faculty from English literature programs presumably with faculty from English composition and rhetoric programs. The writing center I worked at was in fact run by graduate students for two years before faculty from the English department were appointed as directors, and some were certainly trained in literary studies. However, as a compositionist myself, I never once felt that the legitimacy of the tutors' work or the mission of the writing center was ever in question. Second, they discriminate between those trained in humanities as opposed to social sciences, as if one is more credible or certified to direct a writing center than the other. I have worked for three faculty directors, two who were trained in humanities. All three employed policies, best practices, and tutor training informed by writing center scholarship; all three were familiar with the literature and ongoing discourse; and all three understood the intersectionality of English studies. So why is a distinction between these disciplines needed for writing centers, and what does this distinction say about the state of scholarship in English studies?

One hint can be found in the conclusion from Driscoll and Perdue's article: "It is likely that writing center practitioners can appreciate the role of RAD research because they are in the position of having to justify their programs and budgets to educational administrators and faculty across the disciplines who expect research-supported evidence" (35). It would seem, then, that the push towards evidence-based research is informed by bureaucratic powers and influence from other disciplines and is not, as they and others have suggested, "a wake-up call to our field" (Babcock and Thonus).

There is, however, a happy medium. On the International Writing Centers Association website, Rebecca Babcock and Terese Thonus shared their views of writing center scholarship. Although they stress the need to move towards RAD research, they later admit that the majority of writing center scholarship is qualitative in the form of case studies and teacher research, narratives of tutors and teachers. Driscoll and Perdue also arrive at the same conclusion after analyzing the literature in the field, but that isn't surprising. For those of us who work in and around English studies, scholarly inquiry is the foundation of much of our research. Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs best define it in their book *Writing about Writing*:

> [Scholarly inquiry] is, and *means to be*, imperfect, incomplete, inconclusive, and provisional. It doesn't offer easy or full answers. It is question- and problem-driven. It includes a great deal of personal opinion rather than clear, objective facts… The point of most scholarly inquiry isn't to gather and transmit *existing* knowledge; rather, in scholarly inquiry, researchers come together to try a lot of different approaches to the same problem, and then, through argument as *conversation*, gradually develop consensus about what the best explanation of, or solution to, the problem is. (26)

Perhaps the source of othering in this context then is in how institutional hierarchies are organized and, as a result, how English majors are trained. Recently, English departments have been splitting into academic silos, separating literature, composition, culture, rhetoric, linguistics, and pedagogy into departmental niches. It is not uncommon to see little to no collaboration in research and turning what used to be three degrees in English studies—B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English—into many concentrations: B.A, B.A. with Teaching Certification, M.A. (Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy), M.A. (Linguistics), M.A. (English Studies), M.A. (Literature and Cultural Studies), and the same or more with PhDs. Are all these divisions necessary, and if so, what are the benefits of the separation? And how can we foster a community of collaborative researchers in a divisive setting?

There are clearly several issues of othering at work in English studies, some that were not mentioned in these notes. Even those that were discussed here could be further elaborated and researched. Although the focus of these notes was limited to my experience in different settings, othering can be seen in the volatile discourse in scholarly research, in the less public conversations within department hallways, and in the intimate spaces of teachers, tutors, and their students. Othering, as I said, is not necessarily dangerous or negative, but that can quickly change if not studied carefully in these contexts. In the tradition of the humanities, these notes asked more questions than provided answers. I ask readers to carefully consider othering not just as a cause of exclusivity or privilege but also as a system of difference with multifaceted consequences—some that can be resolved with compromise and others that cannot.

Works Cited

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