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Rearticulating the Work of the Writing Center

G iven topics of interest in literacy studies these days—the scenes of writing, extracurricular literacy, problematic representations of students, issues of subjectivity, identity politics, the space of the author—it is worth asking why we so infrequently hear from writing centers in the pages of *CCC* or *College English.* The silence may be partially attributed to the fact that writing centers have their own forums, including professional journals and national and regional conferences, but given that composition students are the most frequent users of writing centers, and given that we now have writing centers on more than 90 percent of the campuses in the US (Bushman), one might expect a stronger presence of writing center voices in composition forums.

Not only are writing center voices infrequently heard in composition scholarship but writing centers also occupy contested positions on their respective campuses. The stories shared among writing center people ring with familiar themes—faculty suspicion about what happens in writing centers, refusal to grant departmental voting rights to writing center professional staff, faculty dismay about the condition of papers that "went through" the writing center (the laundry metaphor), exploitation of part-timers, miffed reactions to undergraduate writing tutors who ask questions about teaching practices, confusion about the status/role of writing center directors. Recently, a writing center friend told about coming up behind a group of fellow faculty members gathered around a bulletin board. From a distance she could see her name on the recently posted list of nominations for the outstanding teacher award. Next to her name, someone had drawn several large question marks. As she drew nearer to the group,

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she heard her colleagues question her eligibility. Even though she had recently earned tenure and regularly taught courses for graduate and undergraduate students, the fact that she also worked with students in the writing center placed her outside the circle of those regarded as teachers eligible for awards.

Writing center people often gravitate toward practical solutions to these ongoing problems. They urge one another to get control of their budgets and get out from under the English department. They advise one another to look for the university's five-year plan and make the writing center indispensable by matching its philosophy to that plan. In spite of these practical solutions and perhaps *because* of them, writing centers on most campuses remain in subordinate service positions. They are marked by social notions of what women provide—refuge, nurturance, emotional support, personal guidance (Lotto, Olson and Ashton-Jones, Trachsel). The work of the writing center is not integrated theoretically or structurally within the intellectual work of the university. Writing centers are the haidmaidens of autonomous literacy—a value-free, culturally neutral notion of literacy—which although extensively challenged theoretically is still strongly at work in the academy.

Writing centers are supposed to deal with heterogeneity—students who speak English as a second language, students who use a nondominant dialect, students who have learning disabilities, students who don't follow assignment guidelines—and writing centers are expected to master and control this heterogeneity rather than interpret it. A lack of dialogue between writing center workers and composition teachers maintains the *status quo.* Composition scholars theorize about difference, but the social differences that discursive practices create and maintain are contained and silenced in the writing center. In this essay, I want to rearticulate the relationship of the writing center to the institution by attempting to address the gap between theorizing about difference in higher education and working with differences in the writing center. I want to situate writing center work within the democratic desire to understand and negotiate difference, to work within heterogeneity rather than to manage or eliminate it.

In a book called *The Culture of Literacy,* Wlad Godzich calls attention to the separateness of two movements that developed in the 1980s: the spread of theory—a "speculative, effete pursuit" and the spread of writing programs—a "crassly utilitarian one" (2). Godzich, whose interest is in emergent literatures, speculates that the separation of these two movements may have been intended and that mainstreaming students into traditional study of literacy was perceived as the ultimate goal of writing programs. Although composition theorists have begun to address the gap between theory and practice in recent years, this work has not "trickled

down" to writing centers. In fact, writing centers are still by and large per-
ceived as places where students are prepared to participate in the main-
stream. Students whose written work is marked by difference are "sent" to
the writing center with the view that removing these markers of differ-
ence will better prepare them for academic and professional success. Even
though revisionist literacy theorists have challenged us to see that factors
of race, ethnicity, gender, and class—not 'literacy skills'—are more likely
to determine the degree of participation in the mainstream, the work of
the writing center is still implicated in the myth of meritocracy underlying
literacy teaching, the idea that success goes to all those who work to earn
it. This pretense of neutrality and its implications in myths of schooling
make literacy an overdetermined sign. In fact, almost any adjective can be
attached to literacy, and we all pretend to know what it means—cultural
literacy, visual literacy, sexual literacy, emotional literacy, critical literacy,
scientific literacy, and so on. Brian Street points out that this overdetermi-
nation allows us to divert our concerns about grave social issues into dis-
cussions of literacy: "Issues of poverty and unemployment can be turned
into questions about why individuals failed to learn literacy at school"
(125).

The work of literacy within a pluralistic democracy is deeply paradoxi-
cal. Democracy, in its respect for difference and its task of governing diver-
sity, contains, as Chantal Mouffe puts it, "at the same time the condition of
possibility and the condition of impossibility" (*Return* 8). To position writ-
ing centers to contribute to a dialogue about difference within higher edu-
cation does not require a simple reversal of hierarchy—a move out of a
subordinate service position. It demands a much more complicated and
necessarily ongoing effort to maintain openness in the discussions about
literacy and to address the conflicts embedded in our myths without ex-
pecting a tidy resolution. With Mouffe, I understand the idea of democracy
as "always uncertain and improbable," as "fragile," as "needing to be de-
fended as well as deepened" (6).

To rearticulate the work of the writing center in ways that avoid its im-
plication in meritocratic myths about literacy, I will apply arguments about
the nature of language and power from theorists such as Foucault, Gramsci,
Vygotsky, Pratt, and Laclau and Mouffe to the writing center, a move that
composition scholars who have aligned their work with a social justice
mission will recognize. However, academic theorizing alone will not ad-
dress the problematic relationship of writing centers and composition
studies. To rearticulate the relationship of the writing center to the institu-
tion, I will also draw on the practical wisdom about rebuilding relation-
ships that circulates in trade nonfiction books—particularly Harriet
Goldhor Lerner's trilogy, *The Dance of Anger, The Dance of Intimacy*, and *The*

Dance of Deception. By introducing the relationship-building perspective, I hope to address some of the polarizing that has occurred as a result of avoiding our social contradictions with neutral talk about literacy. I believe composition studies and writing centers have both "cut off" from this anxiety by distancing themselves from each other.

To skeptical readers who hold self-help books in disdain, I offer comments from Murray Bowen, the most influential theorist in family systems therapy. Bowen reminds us that it is possible to be "brilliant academically" yet live chaotic personal lives (373). A key point of Bowen's theory is that even though humans have uncovered the secrets of the universe and created technology to master our environment, we tend not to apply our intellect to emotional matters. In fact, Bowen observes that we are more likely to use our intellect to deny automatic emotional process than we are to confirm these responses and learn to read them in order to manage our reactivity (348). Even though therapists themselves are critical of some attempts to popularize psychology, particularly those efforts which apply broad labels to human behavior, Lerner's work, which is grounded in Bowen's theory, is well-regarded because it recognizes the complex interconnections of behavior patterns.

By articulating academic theory and the popular discourse on relationships, I foreground my conviction that change in the operations of the academic community, particularly its tacit habits of exclusion, must begin with the network of relationships we build—or more often fail to build—in our workplaces. The relative absence of writing center voices and the conflicted nature of writing center institutional positioning has much to do with the hierarchical structure of the academic community, with the notions we internalize about who should speak and who should be listened to, with the ways our relationships within the academic community are mediated by institutional language and practices. As Street puts it, "When we participate in the language of an institution, we become positioned by that language, in that moment of assent, myriad relationships of power, authority, status are implied and reaffirmed" (127). I hope that my carnivalesque juxtaposition of self-help theory with academic theory will call attention to the contradictions in that positioning. I also hope that my reliance on the relationship metaphor will offer generative insights because of its roots in conflicts we experience in daily life, particularly as we renegotiate traditional roles.

Deliberately mixing popular advice about self-recovery and theoretical criticism is the same move recently made by Gloria Steinem in the *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* and bell hooks in *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery.* As activists for political and social change, both of these women offer self-help texts with the realization that exter-

nal political change is more likely to occur when accompanied by internal personal change. Although our academic theorizing is useful for analyzing the operations of language and power that maintain existing relationships, the self-help discourse suggests steps we might take to change those relationships.

However, Lerner cautions that "Self-help advice can be bad for our emotional well-being if it ends up conveying the message that major changes can be made easily or quickly" (*Anger* 222). The analysis I undertake and the suggestions I make are not simple step-by-step solutions to complicated situations but rather an effort to make the link that Lerner makes when she observes that "the patterns that keep us stuck in our close relationships derive their shape and form from the patterns of a stuck society" (*Anger* 223). The most important principle underlying Lerner's theory is that the renegotiation of roles must begin with an increased self-focus rather than a reactive focus on the other. For too long writing centers have worked to please others at the expense of defining a clear mission. Writing centers are triangulated into the relationship between teachers and students for the purpose of managing cultural anxiety about literacy. In family systems theory, humans are inevitably involved in triangular relationships. As Lerner puts it, "Triangles solve a problem by lowering anxiety when it can no longer be contained between two persons" (*Intimacy* 148–49). Because triangles are inevitable in human systems, the key to healthy functioning is recognizing triangles and taking responsible rather than reactive positions in them. Identity at a personal and institutional level is inevitably relational. Politics is about learning to manage the inevitable tensions or hostilities in those relations.

My effort to make the conflict-ridden position of the writing center an intellectually interesting place to live is frustrated by the too-familiar binaries of good guys/bad guys and insiders/outsiders and the too-easy way I can chose a pronoun to position myself inside or outside writing centers and composition studies. Like many writing center people, I have both studied composition theory and taught composition courses *and* felt the distancing and marginalizing effects of professional staff positioning. For 16 years I was involved with all the material realities of part-time/administrative staff positioning and more recently I am a tenure-track faculty member who directs a writing center. I address my argument both to writing center people and to composition people, knowing that they are the same people but that often they do not recognize themselves or each other as such. Because writing centers are in the subordinate position, I structure my argument to focus on how writing centers might initiate change in the relationship, offering four self-help axioms to move writing centers into dialogue with composition and create a less comfortable but more

scholarly and active role for writing centers within their institutions. These four axioms are: give up the protection of old beliefs, understand history, focus change on the self, and share more.

Give Up the Protection of Old Beliefs

Therapists call attention to ways that our awareness of problems is obscured by cultural norms and programming. For example, Bowen notes that cultural beliefs about family togetherness and loyalty often keep us stuck, fused in family relationships and incapable of self-differentiation. In an undifferentiated state, we act because of pressure or coercion or because of a need to please others. According to Bowen, a healthy differentiated self changes from within on the basis of new knowledge and experience not in response to external pressure (473). We rarely achieve this differentiation because our cultural beliefs position individuality in opposition to connectedness. Bowen's point is that we function better within families when we have differentiated a self. Making a similar point about self-limiting cultural beliefs, Gloria Steinem observes that our cultural beliefs about romance obscure our ability to see that romantic attraction often operates more like an illness, offering us clues of something we lack, even making us exhibit symptoms of manic-depressive disorder—mood swings and distortions of reality. Our cultural programming sets us up to respond in patterned ways, creating rewards and punishments for certain performances, making it difficult to give up beliefs and behaviors. Lerner's use of the dance metaphor throughout her three books calls attention to the cultural patterns and rhythms that keep us in self-defeating and problem-perpetuating behaviors. Her metaphor also reminds us what to expect if we change the pattern: there will be countermoves and demands to get back in step.

In the academy, cultural beliefs about academic community and literacy operate similarly to the ways that notions of romance and family togetherness operate in our private lives. Even though revisionist literacy theorists have demonstrated that language is a site of cultural conflict and that we often use language for exclusionary rather than inclusionary purposes, writing center workers and composition teachers continue to talk about their work as that of enabling students to understand and enter the academic community. In 1984, Kenneth Bruffee conceptualized peer tutoring as the employment of undergraduates to promote the use of community conventions. Bruffee observed that peer tutoring worked because it changed the social context of learning yet "did not seem to change what people learned" (4). This theorizing didn't account for the fact that students are already members of many communities, that community values

operate in tacit and arbitrary ways, and that the values of some communities conflict. Even though these community conflicts are visible in writing center practice, even though writing centers were established to meet the needs of students who were raised in communities quite different from the academic community, the community metaphor suppresses discussion of the conflicts and costs that some students encounter in their efforts to join the academic community.

The belief in community, with its connotations of shared understandings, mutually supportive relationships, and equitable relations of power obscures failures of community within the fiercely competitive and hierarchical structure of higher education. As composition theorists have pointed out, the term community offers little acknowledgment or regard for communities other than the academic one, and it entertains little openness to flux and change within that community (see, for example, Joseph Harris, Marilyn Cooper, Patricia Bizzell). Bizzell observes that the invocation of community allows us to at once promise not to exclude anyone and at the same time not to admit anyone "truly disruptive of the status quo" ("Marxist" 59). According to her, composition studies' invocation of community functions as "an utterance that helps middle-class teachers fend off criticism from those both above and below them in the social order." As she puts it, "The very warmth of the word conceals the fact that the academic neighborhood does not welcome everyone equally. Just as in other communities, tacit exclusions obtain" (59).

Even though the notion of community has been theoretically complicated, practice remains the same because our institutional roles protect us from the conflicts that result when cultural norms are challenged. Mary Louise Pratt vividly reveals the conflict that the community metaphor masks with an analogy to a little known historical fact about the original dedication of the Statue of Liberty. Pratt tells us that according to historian Leslie Allen, a rented boat of suffragettes circled this early dedication and issued a statement protesting the use of a statue of a woman to signify political liberty in a country where women did not have even the right to vote. Pratt explains how including this protest in the national story would deeply mar the veneer of the national vision of a unified social world and create incoherence, placing "the dignitaries at odds not just with the suffragists behind them, but with the wives at their sides, the statue before them, and indeed with themselves: why have they chosen to celebrate their ideal in an image not of themselves but of their subordinated other?" ("Linguistic" 55). There are interesting similarities between this image of male dignitaries regarding the statue of a woman and that of composition studies regarding the student as the center of their discipline. Susan Miller has argued that the student at the center of the gaze is a much more complex individual

than the discipline imagines her to be. Moreover, that student at the center
of the discipline is the same student who is sent down to the writing center
when she is perceived as needy or lacking, yet the work she does in the
writing center is not accounted for or theorized within the discipline.

If we give up belief in the neutrality of academic community, then we
are more likely to recognize the price some students must pay in their at-
tempts to join this community and acknowledge the invisible roadblocks
to membership. If writing centers acknowledge the cultural conflicts em-
bedded in literacy, they will need to engage in frank discussion with teach-
ers who are more likely to locate "the problem" in students than to
recognize that "tacit exclusions" are at work. Without the protection of old
beliefs, writing centers will also need to talk more frankly with students
about what is lost and what is gained as we move among communities. If
writing centers and composition studies want to make movement among
communities more likely, they will need more complicated notions of sub-
jectivity that allow for a self as always conflicted and under construction,
yet at the same time a self capable of negotiating with subject positions of-
fered by assignments and coerced by grading practices. If writing centers
differentiate themselves and move out of the awkward triangulation be-
tween student and teacher, where they are expected not to change what
students learn but to get students to conform to institutional expectations
and values, they can become genuine spaces where students negotiate
conflicts and where knowledge about the conflict among literacies can be
generated and shared.

Understand Historical Patterns

In the novel, *The Robber Bride,* one of Margaret Atwood's central characters
is a history professor who studies war. In order to better visualize the strat-
egies of war, she buys a used sandtable from a day care center and creates
on it a three-dimensional map of Europe and the Mediterranean. Using
kitchen spices—different colored peppercorns, seeds, lentils, cookie deco-
rations—she recreates battlefields, noting the "continuous ebb and flow, a
blending, a shift of territories." As Atwood explains, "When she wants to
change the year or the century, she scrapes off this or that population and
sets up again. She uses tweezers; otherwise her fingers get covered with
seeds. History isn't dry; it's sticky, it can get all over your hands" (112).

The sticky history of remediation haunts the scene of writing center
work. This institutional history is rooted in a time when "underprepared"
students began coming to college and writing centers were created to offer
these unfamiliar students one last chance to remove traces of their educa-
tional and cultural backgrounds. Family systems therapists trace the roots

of emotional problems in one generation to unresolved and unprocessed issues from generations past. Addressing the anxiety that keeps us locked in position requires revisiting the past to process old issues. Even though many writing centers seek to put their remedial history behind them, the writing center questions-that-won't-go-away—questions about the ethics of collaboration, about relationships with faculty, about proofreading, about dependency, about what to call the people who work in writing centers—are all questions rooted in the fact that writing centers were expected to solve the problems students weren't supposed to have when they came to college. Anne DiPardo and Mike Rose have called attention to the ongoing institutional ambivalence about meeting the needs of underrepresented students. DiPardo argues that faculty remain "essentially unchanged" because equity programs are separated from the essential business of the university and equity students are often taught by adjunct or part-time faculty (172). Moreover, as DiPardo points out, when budgets are constrained, no one acknowledges the socioeconomic conditions of the students in equity programs; instead they blame them for not already being prepared for college. In reflecting on the politics of remediation, Mike Rose connects the ambivalence about the developmental needs of students with a conservative force, the preservation of disciplines in higher education. He claims that "the American university has yet to figure out, conceptually or institutionally, how to integrate its general education mission with its research mission" (197).

My own institutional history confirms the insights DiPardo and Rose offer. The professor who trained me as a new tutor in 1978 cautioned me to not spend too much time with any one student because, as he explained, "students who come here (the Language Skills Lab) probably won't make it through the university." His philosophy was that to invest too much time with this population would be a waste of the university's limited resources. As the director of a university program designed to manage the 1970's "literacy crisis" he was committed to maintaining the university *status quo.* Although the program appeared to serve those students who came to college without the preferred literacy, it was careful to handle the population with tweezers, attempting to remediate, yet careful not to get too involved. This minimal but visible effort on the part of the university, made it easier to shrug off responsibility for those who didn't make it. Although our writing center has since undergone many transformations in philosophy, staffing, and institutional placement, those of us who work in it still encounter regular reminders that our work is regarded with distrust and our positions with skepticism. At worst, strong writing centers are perceived as a threat to faculty autonomy, and weak writing centers are seen as places for competency testing.

Because of the academy's ambivalence about underprepared students, writing centers remain anxious about remedial history. As an alternative to the association with unprepared students, many writing centers figuratively scraped this population off their hands and aligned themselves with the emergence of the process movement in composition studies where they found a suitably neutral vocabulary for describing their work—"collaboration" and "student-centered." By adopting the vocabulary of the process movement and integrating the latest computer technology to support the writing process, many writing centers disguised their historical alignment with students who "didn't belong." Indeed so many students appreciated the opportunity to visit a writing center in order to have a friendly reader talk with them about their work that the "clientele" of writing centers expanded. But history is sticky, and writing centers remain vulnerable in times of shifting budgeting and administrative priorities. This vulnerability can position them as eager-to-please wives, ready to serve the needs of students and faculty whatever they may be. By avoiding a clearer articulation of their own mission, particularly in regard to cultural differences manifested in literacies, writing centers protect both themselves and composition teachers from the anxiety of change.

A frequent starting point for improving relationships is what therapists call family-of-origin work, a self-examination of history that seeks to understand relationships from our past, particularly the relationships of our formative years. Otherwise, dysfunctional patterns continue to influence our reactions to current relationships; our fingers remain sticky. For example, John Grey, author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* talks about the "90/10 principle," suggesting that up to ninety percent of our reaction to an event is colored by our past experiences with similar events. Therapists say that until we are aware of the repressed issues from the past, we often continue to set ourselves up to repeat patterns, believing subconsciously that with one more go-round we might get things to turn out right. This pathological repetition compulsion keeps us locked in position, preventing the moves that bring change. Writing center positioning contributes to institutional ignorance about the students' engagement—or lack of engagement—with academic literacy. To move differently, however, creates anxiety because writing centers are supposed to suppress knowledge that challenges culturally accepted norms. They are supposed to make do with what they have, to keep the home tidy and put a perky ribbon in their hair when visitors come.

To manage anxiety that keeps us locked in position, therapists recommend reconnecting with repressed issues of the past. This therapeutic reexamination of the past closely resembles what many political theorists call critical reflection. Antonio Gramsci writes about the process of making

critical an existing activity, of understanding ourselves as part of an histor-
ical process. Foucault begins his political analysis with genealogy, empha-
sizing the value of understanding the ancestry of systems and ideas
(*Discipline*). Jameson insists that our capacity to act is attendant on our
ability to develop cognitive maps, a "heightened sense" of our "positioning
as individual and collective subjects" (54). As places designed to handle
the students whose literacy backgrounds departed from middle-class ex-
pectations, writing centers represent what Foucault would call the re-
sponse of a disciplined society. Instead of excluding underprepared
students from the university, we used, in Foucault's words, "procedures of
individualization to mark exclusion" (*Discipline* 199). Writing labs were
supposed to correct, measure, and supervise abnormal writers to help
them meet the standards set by the institution. Foucault writes of the
many ways that systems subjugate or make subjects out of people, noting
that "pastoral power" is one of the most effective. Pastoral power aims for
individual salvation, is self-sacrificial, looks after individuals, and is exer-
cised by knowing the inside of people's minds. As a power, it seeks to
shape individuals into very specific patterns and forms ("Subject" 213–
214). Such power lurks in the history and the training programs of many
writing centers. On most campuses, writing centers continue to focus on
changing individuals to fit into systems because the general education mis-
sion itself hasn't changed.

Even though writing centers have sought to put remedial history be-
hind them and to be viewed as essential resources for all writers, the ther-
apists would say that they are still driven by historical forces, that
unresolved issues from the past continue to lurk beneath the surface. As
places historically intended to preserve the system by shaping students to
suit the system, writing centers will experience anxiety if they begin to
probe at the contradictions of practice. Why, for example, are writing cen-
ter tutors not supposed to write anything on students' papers when these
students' teachers are *supposed* to write on them? Why are students ex-
horted to chose their own topics and then sometimes told that their topics
are not appropriate? Why are students told to write about their personal
experiences but expected to do so in academic diction and genres? Why do
some instructors tell students not to bother with the writing center, to do
their *own* work instead? Why is collaboration such a buzz word and plagia-
rism such a serious offense?

Rather than studying these contradictions, writing centers avoid them
by exhorting tutors not to write on papers, not to question teachers or as-
signments, but to support the system as it is. In order to become places that
generate understanding of the economic, cultural, and political forces that
come into conflict with the tacit expectations of academic culture and in-

hibit literacy learning, writing centers need to come to terms with their history of remediation. To transform themselves into "hothouse[s] of knowledge-making" (Spooner 3), writing center workers need to manage this historical anxiety by addressing the hot issues of the past and making themselves "vulnerable enough to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into [their] consciousness" (Delpit 297). Engaging with the sticky history of remediation in positive ways that emphasize the value of understanding difference rather than reacting to it can position writing centers to achieve their potential as rich sites of research.

Focus Change on the Self

Because writing centers have been in vulnerable positions for many years, they are accustomed to frequently checking to see how they are regarded by others and adjusting their behavior and adapting their services to improve this regard. In fact, writing center workers pride themselves on their tradition of responding to local conditions, and they respect the programmatic variety among differently situated writing centers. Intelligent response to local conditions is a healthy behavior as long as it is done out of a sense of self-differentiation and direction. But when response to changing conditions develops from an anxious reactivity related to unprocessed issues of the past, we repeat patterns rather than change orientation. *Writing Centers in Context* (1993), a collection of essays edited by Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris, showcases the local response tradition. Most of the essays tell about the many ways writing centers serve existing practices and power relations, developing their programs in response to institutional conditions. In concluding reflections, Kinkead observes that little has been written about the politics of writing centers, the issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, or the potential of the writing center as a site of research (246–47). The tradition of responding to local conditions creates a pattern that keeps writing centers from dealing with some of their most significant issues.

Lerner argues that "change occurs only as we begin thinking about and working on the self—rather than staying focused on and reactive to the other" (*Intimacy* 86). To effect change, Lerner says that people need to "struggle with theory rather than to focus narrowly on technique" (202). To legitimate themselves as academic units rather than as service units, writing centers need to undertake an ongoing effort to justify their practice theoretically rather than numerically. In order for writing centers to better clarify their function in higher education and improve their relationship with composition, they need to define their own priorities and beliefs in a context that exceeds yet respects the local context. Knowledge of how the system works, what the system expects, must be tempered by what writing

centers learn about who students are. As Lerner puts it in terms of intimate relationships: "Only through working on the self can we begin to enhance our connectedness to others" (9). Although specific institutional contexts are certainly a formative influence on each writing center, beyond that site-specific formation writing centers can benefit from theoretical explorations.

The theories of Lev Vygotsky offer rich possibilities for theorizing the work of writing centers. Many think of Vygotsky as building on the work of Piaget when in fact he was challenging Piagetian assumptions. Although he was interested in Piaget's observations about the stages of intellectual development, Vygotsky wanted to understand the genesis of intellectual development. Through his own empirical work, he found that intellectual development did not occur as a gradual flowering of innate individual ability but that our abilities, ideas, and language result from our interactions with others. Our understanding of how to use tools and symbols are gradually internalized from our interactions with others, brought inside, and then externalized as thought and language.

The notion that intellect develops as a result of interactions with others justifies writing center practice more powerfully than a list of multiple services provided. But this theoretical justification of intellectual development is at odds with many cherished beliefs of the academy, including all the systems we have in place to safeguard "individual" work such as plagiarism policies, protection of intellectual property, the academic promotion and tenure system, and the Library of Congress classification system which demands a single author. Andrea Lunsford has argued that the tradition of erasing the collaborative nature of creative endeavors is located in the masculine appropriation of birthing. A metaphor of paternity underlies systems that insist on sole authorship or that hold collaboration in suspicion.

In light of the academic reverence for individual production, writing centers need to focus on Vygotsky's strongest conclusion—that language is learned by *participating* in human relationships, not by sitting on the sidelines and listening to the rules being explained. When Vygotsky sought to understand what made writing difficult, why so many struggle to bring thought into words, he found that writing requires a double abstraction, one from the sound of speech, another from the interlocutor (*Thought* 182). His point is that we cannot abstract from something that was never there in the first place. Inner speech, which is what we draw on in order to write, is internalized through a socialization process. It is not something that is simply there as the result of a developmental process, but instead is brought in from the outside as a result of our interactions with others. If we do not have the opportunities to interact with others on topics that we must write about, then we cannot internalize the concepts we must draw on in order to write.

This process of socialization into language begins with the infant's first sounds and movements which are given meaning by the responding adult. Our intellect develops as we interact with people in our environment and in cooperation with our peers (*Mind* 90). Vygotskian theory insists that an interactive relationship with someone willing to construct a scaffold for the work of abstraction, someone willing to recognize and engage existing patterns of literacy is essential for literacy development. This theoretical argument makes writing centers essential to the pedagogical mission of the university, particularly a university committed to democratic ideals. It also suggests a research mission for the writing center, one that seeks to understand the desires, needs, interests, interactions, and emotions that impact literacy development.

The Vygotskian shift from a focus on individual performance to a focus on the social, interactive, and relational nature of literacy development is echoed in the work of many literacy theorists. Shirley Brice Heath explains that literacy develops not just from opportunities to read and write but from opportunities to talk about what has been read and written, from participation in literacy events. Good teachers provide these opportunities in classrooms, but too often the floor is controlled by those students already comfortable with academic ways with words. Heath insists that only by participation in literacy events does one learn the contextually relevant meta-rules that govern written discourse ("Protean"). David Bleich observes that literacy rests on the discovery of our "mutual implications" in others lives and the exercise of our "mutual responsibilities" (67). Deborah Brandt identifies relationships as the key to literacy development: "People do not read themselves into literacy—they have to be talked into it" (113). Richard Ohmann also emphasizes the relational aspect of literacy: "Like every other human activity or product, [literacy] embeds social relationships within it . . . Literacy is an exchange between classes, races, the sexes, and so on" (226). Not only do these theorists expose the well-guarded cultural secret that academic literacy privileges students from the dominant class, they also suggest that relationships across difference are essential to the development of literacy in a democracy.

Theorists who place relationships at the center of literacy development make clear how difficult it is to achieve these relationships in a classroom. Bizzell stresses "how difficult it can be to make education truly reciprocal, and not something done to one person by another" ("Arguing" 151). Ellsworth comments on the same difficulty:

> Dialogue in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large because at this historic moment, power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust. The injustice of these relations

> and the way in which those injustices distort communication cannot be
> overcome in a classroom, no matter how committed the teacher and stu-
> dents are to overcoming conditions that perpetuate suffering. (316)

Writing centers are not immune from the distortions in communication
that occur because of social conditions, but because of the more intimate
relational nature of their work, they are better positioned to understand
the ways that cultural assumptions embedded in educational discursive
practices affect performance by positioning some students more unfavor-
ably than others.

   If writing centers define themselves as sites of knowledge-making, then
valuable insights about cultural differences can be more consciously
sought and more strategically shared. For example, in a writing center set-
ting, a newly enrolled Latina graduate student explained her trouble with
the question faculty members frequently asked her: What sort of career
did she plan after graduation? She wanted to know how she was supposed
to be able to answer this question. How, she asked, could anyone possibly
know what they would be doing in five years? As I explained that the in-
tention behind the question was to gather the information that would as-
sist faculty in advising her about courses to take, she nodded her head.
That much she understood. She also explained that in her cultural frame-
work to answer such a question shows disrespect for the inevitability of
unpredicted events and a lack of belief in divine intervention. To her, edu-
cation is not a matter of climbing a ladder to a professional career but an
opportunity to explore connections among the various threads of her life.
To continue to confront her cultural beliefs with well-intentioned ques-
tions about career aspirations is to continually raise her doubts about
whether she could find in graduate school the opportunities to learn and
to study the issues that interest her. A more productive approach might
have been to invite her to talk about the connections she was interested in
exploring. But I don't want to propose a simple solution here because the
longer I have worked with this individual, the more I have come to see
how deeply embedded in cultural differences these issues are. Helen Fox
concludes her book, *Listening to the World,* with these questions: "Are we
ready to imagine knowledge differently? Are we willing to spend time
learning the details of vastly different cultural contexts? Are we persistent
enough to listen to the gaps and silences until we hear, in the distance, the
voices of thousand-year-old intellectual traditions?" Fox reminds us that if
indeed we are ready to listen, then what we hear will require that we pro-
foundly rethink the goals and purposes of higher education. (136).

   I describe writing centers as a site of knowledge-making in the postmod-
ern sense of knowing that our understanding is always partial, always capa-

ble of obscuring understanding of others. Many of the failures of literacy work occur because those who are thoroughly socialized in the dominant discourse are unaware of the tacit expectations and assumptions that are carried in academic literacy practices. If we stop thinking of literacy as "a set of skills or abilities or competencies to be taught by 'us' and learned by 'them'" (Brodkey 294), and instead think about discursive practices embedded in naturalized ideologies and world views, we have much more to learn. As Brodkey explains, "To think of literacy as discursive practice means trying to identify the political as well as the cognitive and cultural dimensions of literacy theory, research, and pedagogy" (295). Writing centers can be the setting for unpacking the differing assumptions in these world views and for getting at the motivational root of literacy development. According to Vygotsky, not only does the individual develop language and thought from the outside in, interactions with others also provide motivation. "Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation, i.e. by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency" (*Thought* 252).

This affective-volitional tendency is critical to engaging students in academic literacy, but too often it is interfered with because teachers' practices "alienat[e] students from literacy by failing to articulate their students' representations of themselves as subjects different from their teachers" (Brodkey 315). As Susan Miller has shown, the frequently intransitive academic tasks that students perform to earn grades at the university are embedded in power relations that too often characterize the student as a "young beginner...a presexual, preeconomic, prepolitical person" (87). With an increased focus on themselves as researchers and knowledge-makers, writing centers can begin to study how these disempowering representations work and offer more complicated representations.

Lerner acknowledges that women are usually the seekers of improved relationships. She observes, not unlike Hegel and Marx, that "In relationships between dominant and subordinate groups, the subordinate group members always possess a far greater understanding of dominant group members and their culture than vice versa" (*Intimacy* 6). Writing centers are indeed knowledgeable about the status of writing instruction in any college or university; in fact, they are likely to know more even than the writing program director or department head about how students are responding to programmatic goals. But few faculty are knowledgeable about what goes on in their writing center. If writing centers continue to shape their programs in line with specific institutional missions, they will continue in subordinate and silenced positions. Lerner makes the point that "as long as women function *for* men, men have no need to change" (8). The same is true for writing centers. As long as they enable students to get

through the system, the system has no reason to change. Conforming to the system, seeking approval from the system, does not result in improved relationships or improved practices.

If writing centers work on themselves as knowledge-producing units, they can position themselves as partners in dialogue about institutional response to difference. Writing centers need to develop their theoretical moorings and scholarship if they are to going to join in this task. My capacity, for example, to contribute to discussions about students from other countries who have difficulty with the Western tradition of documentation will be strengthened if I am knowledgeable about how other cultures view the idea of intellectual property, about their culturally specific writing instruction, about their rhetorical traditions. I will contribute persuasively not simply by testifying on behalf of the students' difficulty but by also demonstrating how our own culture's notion of text ownership is being eroded by postmodern theory and technology. I can't do this in a credible fashion if I respond to all institutional requests for services, such as the professor who recently called me to suggest I purchase software that promises to help students assess their study skills. I'll need theoretical convictions to explain convincingly that this technology will not do more to improve study skills than pencil and paper exercises did ten years ago, that it will in fact be a distraction from the real thing—a relationship that motivates learning. I'll need the same convictions to respond to the request to teach keyboarding to foreign students during the December holiday break. If writing centers stop overfunctioning as service units, they can put more energy into theorizing about what happens in the center and use that knowledge "to give feedback, to share our perspective, to state clearly our values and beliefs and then stand firmly behind them" (Lerner, *Intimacy* 209). To enact a different relationship with their institutions, writing centers need a theoretically grounded understanding of their practice.

Share More

I began this essay with observations about the silence of writing centers in composition forums, a silence I attribute to the unarticulated need to manage anxiety about literacy and cultural change. To move out of silence and into dialogue, writing centers need to "share more" of what they learn from the students who reveal the invisible borders to discourse communities, students whose lived experience reveals the contradictions in our democratic discourse about literacy. But this is not a move to make lightly or thoughtlessly.

Creating a climate in which information can be shared requires the courage to move against "patriarchal injunctions that promote silence and

denial" (Lerner, *Deception* 154). Universities, grounded as they are in mas-
culine epistemology and hierarchical top-down decision-making and
charged with the job of protecting knowledge and safeguarding traditions,
are especially resistant to change. The situation is not unlike efforts to
change gendered relationships. John Gray, focusing on change in male/
female relationships, writes that any attempts to change men make them
feel "controlled, manipulated, rejected, and unloved" (146). In fact, Gray
recommends giving up any efforts to try to change men. He advises ex-
tending invitations to talk, honest sharing, accepting imperfections, and
sharing negative information not as an effort to change the other but as a
request to be taken into consideration. Gray's advice leads to increased un-
derstanding, a basis for incremental change. Gray focuses on communica-
tion, on offering information while at the same time assiduously avoiding
criticality and lecturing.

Lerner's approach for moving into dialogue is more complicated than
Gray's; she insists that one moves into dialogue only after a great deal of
personal grounding, reflection, and research into historical positioning.
Even then one must be prepared to manage the anxiety triggered by the
inevitable demands to "change back." Self-help theorists consistently cau-
tion readers that change occurs incrementally, one step at a time, some-
times moving us backwards before it can move us forward. This process
approach to change eschews aggressive or demanding approaches which
only entrench positions.

Lerner views women's silence as a form of deception. The reasons she
gives for women's silence can be readily applied to writing centers, which
maintain silence in order to: protect students; maintain the *status quo*,
which includes a subordinate relationship to faculty; ensure viability of
their work, which requires the trust of faculty. Lerner observes, "We de-
part from truthtelling through silence when we do not ask an essential
question or withhold information that could make an essential differ-
ence" (12).

Writing centers also engage in forms of deception with students by
withholding information and observations. In an essay applying family
systems theory to writing center conferencing, Louise Z. Smith reveals the
"feigned patience, feigned effort, feigned teaching, and feigned learning"
that occur in conferences where underlying political tensions and ambiva-
lence about our relationship to academe are not addressed (66). Rules of
politeness make it easier for us to engage in "dissemblances, double-binds,
and mystifications" (70), than to frankly address the underlying tensions
that interfere with real learning.

The move into honest dialogue must be grounded in an understanding
of what is at stake as well as what has prevented the dialogue. When

Bizzell argues that "we should complicate our communal relations with one another, share more, reveal more" (66), she acknowledges that "sharing more" is a dangerous move to make, one that may well expose the "explosive realm of major contradictions in our national life" ("Marxist" 67). Not sharing protects us from anxiety but it also maintains hegemony. As Gramsci teaches us, hegemony exists because of consent. To change a world view, we need to find and name its contradictions, the places where it leaks. Gramsci locates the possibilities of change at the nexus of groups, the spaces in between, the links between individuals of different classes and allegiances. Because writing centers are the site of these linkages, they can become significant sites of change. But as a theorist of political change, Gramsci linked his hopes to contestatory practice and to essential categories such as class divisions. A contestatory practice will not work for writing centers. As marginal as writing centers often feel, they are still located within institutions and financed by institutions. Moreover, a contestatory practice is an either/or political strategy with one side winning, the other losing. The defensiveness that occurs does not lead to mutual understanding or to lasting change.

The ability of writing centers to explain their understandings is limited by the language of power, the discursive hegemony. Because world views are linguistically defined, the terms for naming a different reality are not readily available. People who live on the border between realities find it difficult to articulate their understandings. As Mike Rose puts it, "Having crossed boundaries, you sometimes can't articulate what you know, or what you know seems strange" (241). Not only is our expression limited, but our thinking as well. As Victor Villanueva explains it, hegemony "limits how deeply we look" (121). In order to overcome the frustration of lacking a language and a vision, I once again make the point that writing centers need to be grounded in critical discourses. Even though this critical language is not easily attained, it confers "new powers of understanding and articulation" (Johnson 43) when it can be applied to concrete cases which are plentiful in the writing center.

Following Gramsci, Villanueva locates the leakage of hegemony in the memories and experiences of those who have been traditionally excluded (126). Many writing center students come from backgrounds not included in either the middle-class or high-culture notions of academe. Some of them reside prominently outside mainstream culture, others only partially. In general, such students are either chronically absent in representations of higher education or else represented as exhibiting attitudes or behaviors in need of intervention. Discussion of students in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example, is limited to a brief section and often focuses on problems of alcohol abuse, racism, sexism, lack of career goals, and lack

of job opportunities. The dominant representation of students in the university and in the smaller context of composition studies is contradicted in more than one way in the writing center.

Writing centers are uniquely situated to begin revealing the contradictions in the dominant representations of undergraduates, but a counterhegemonic stance requires personal courage and conviction. More than that, it requires persuasive capacity grounded in a workable theory of political change. Lerner cautions that "truth-telling demands far more than 'honesty' and good intentions, as these are conventionally defined. It also requires us to relinquish our habitual, patterned modes of reaction and thought, so that we can move toward an expanded vision of reality that is multilayered, complex, inclusive, and accurate" (*Deception* 213). Without recognizing how partial, subjective and contextual our 'knowing' is, we try to impose a version of our reality on others (209–213).

As an alternative to a confrontational strategy, I propose a strategy theorized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.* Laclau and Mouffe argue that the possibility for a deeper democracy exists in an acceptance of the radically open nature of the political terrain, the multiplicity of viewpoints in circulation. They recommend not a contestatory political practice, not a hopeful holdout for a revolutionary event, but an ongoing effort to articulate multiple discourses in the direction of greater democratic practices. Their key term—*articulation*—is associated in the US with clear, carefully enunciated spoken language, but it gains added meaning from its British use. Stuart Hall explains the nuances of the British meaning of the word with the image of an articulated lorry, a truck linked to other vehicles. This more fully developed sense of articulation includes not only the clear, well-defined expression of a position, but also the productive linkage of that position with other concerns. One needs to clearly articulate a need or position, to roam in search of concerns that can be linked to that issue, and to move in concert with others to address that need. This approach to change can work for writing centers. For example, last year when a department in my university pressed a scientific misconduct charge against an ESL graduate student accused of plagiarism, I was asked to serve on an arbitration committee. My knowledge of cultural differences in notions of intellectual property, the university's desire to understand and respect diversity, and the instructional needs of ESL students came together in a productive linkage to move the university toward change—a change that now requires them to embrace a more complicated understanding of cultural differences in regard to "ownership" of texts. This linkage of diverse concerns is a political practice that is rhetorical and persuasive more than it is contentious and oppositional. It is also an appropriately postmodern practice because it does not seek to locate truth in

one position but instead locates it on a horizon that can be approached from multiple directions.

Articulation depends on the ability to recognize what Laclau and Mouffe call "nodal points" or issues, interests, concerns, arguments that can be "articulated" or joined to efforts to create a more open and democratic system. Interestingly, family systems therapists also use the term nodal points to identify the opportunities, often occurring at times of crisis or conflict, to begin moving differently in patterned relationships. As Murray Bowen explains, recognizing these nodal points comes after the hard work of differentiating a self apart from our formative relationships, of defining independent goals, of coming to terms with the self-limiting anxiety and external pressure to "change back" that arises when one begins to move differently. The courage to move differently comes not from denying or ignoring the conflicts but from having understood their historical development and from using the intellect to recognize and name the contradictions and inconsistencies previously clouded by cultural programming.

Articulating practice does not seek to close down understanding but to maintain openness. Systems and relationships renew themselves by incorporating differences and maintaining openendedness. The university operates in ways similar to Bakhtin's description of the epic. The epic has a strong authorial presence and limited open spaces for contact and response. Its values and truths are located in traditional forms and protected from contact with the present. The centrifugal forces that institutions suppress are the forces that have the potential to revitalize the system. As Bakhtin puts it, "It is necessary that heteroglossia wash over a culture's awareness of itself and its language, penetrate to its core, relativize the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature and deprive it of its naive absence of conflict" (368). When institutions remain closed off to these forces, they become more vulnerable, losing their ability to educate an increasingly diverse population of students in ways that prepare them to work in an international world. Bakhtin calls attention to the fact that the novel came into being at the same time that Europe emerged "from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society" into "international and interlingual contacts and relationships" (11). Writing centers emerged at a similar time in the history of the American university. Like the novel, writing centers expose the centrifugal forces, the multivoicedness that the system seeks to contain; they make space for contact with the present and the personal.

Typically, writing centers imagine themselves as mediators between students and the institution. When writing centers perform a mediating function, they cooperate with the overdetermined nature of discourse, its "attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differ-

ences, to construct a centre" (Laclau and Mouffe 112). When writing centers focus on changing writers, they are performing a mediating function, bringing the student to a greater awareness of an externally authorized literacy. Although writing center workers learn from their students and develop a greater awareness of diverse literacies, the faculty who send the students remain unchanged. And often even though students may revise their papers to conform to the singular standard, they themselves are unchanged. A fixed notion of literacy, a singular standard, closes down understanding.

To illustrate the difference between mediation and articulation, I will draw on the example of an African-American student, Hajj, who has worked with our writing center over an extended period of time. While he was enrolled in an advanced composition course, he brought a draft of a paper to the writing center in which he had chosen to use the language of his neighborhood to evoke memories of childhood afternoons in the city. A week later, his paper was returned, marked for issues of diction, questions of appropriate word choice. Within a fixed standard of literacy, Hajj's language is not valued at the university. If writing centers support the idea that literacy is singular (even my word processor reminds me of this when it flags *literacies* as a misspelling) and if they support teachers who think that students who depart from a singular standard of literacy can be "fixed" by "sending" them to the writing center, then writing centers contribute to closing the system to difference. Not only does this prevent the system from revitalizing itself, it also potentially damages individuals. When the university finds his language inappropriate, Hajj gets the message that even though he has been admitted to the university, he doesn't really belong because he has not left his home community behind. As Hajj himself puts it, "The purpose of signing up for this class, I thought, was to improve my writing skills, not to stifle the skills that I already have. I was asked [in this assignment] to describe a place and a person. Both of my subjects came from my childhood in my old neighborhood. To accurately describe what was going on, I had to use the dialect." (See Matthews and Flemings for a fuller account of this case.)

Within a mediating practice, writing centers support students' efforts to revise their papers in response to teachers' suggestions. Students like Hajj can expect to find momentary comfort and fix-it advice in such writing centers. But if the writing center only "helps" Hajj revise his paper to get a good grade and maintains silence about the forces at work, the writing center blocks change. Within an articulating practice, a writing center can be a place where students like Hajj find opportunities to discuss the ways that standard English is frequently linked to practices of literacy that exclude and devalue other literacies. The writing center could be a

space in the university where students like Hajj can discuss the possibilities and impossibilities of negotiating cultural and racial conflicts. It is no easy matter for a white middle-class writing coach to open up a dialogue about black English. Family systems theory helps here as well. When anxiety is high, Bowen says we revert to cause/effect thinking. Our best bet in these situations is not to react emotionally or even to speculate, for example, on *why* Hajj's use of black dialect was found unacceptable. Instead Bowen says to accept *that* things like this happen and to *think* about what we want to say about them. Usually when anxiety is high, we react by blaming or by withdrawing in silence rather than applying our intellect to state our beliefs and listen to others. Within an articulating practice, the writing center's task is not to change professors or to second guess their intentions but instead to think about how writing centers talk with students like Hajj. Moreover, writing centers can identify other spaces, other nodal points, where issues raised by our work with students like Hajj can be discussed.

A writing center that emphasizes articulatory practice seeks to maintain openness; it seeks not to protect faculty from knowledge of students but instead to increase the contact. Writing centers are in an excellent position to invite students like Hajj to join with them in conference presentations and publications which will contribute to a professional awareness of what happens at the thresholds where literacies come into contact with one another. Writing center workers need to think of themselves as fieldworkers, curious about the liminal understandings that occur on the borders of cultural and academic practices, inviting students to articulate their observations about what happens at these crossings. This requires acknowledging that institutional forces are not always benign, that they can seek to contain and silence differences. As gendered sites, writing centers have protected the institution from challenge and conflict rather than trusting the institution to work through conflicts to new understandings.

Surely some readers are asking the "What about standards?" question by now, and other readers with a more liberal bent are wondering "What will happen to students like Hajj if they don't master the dominant code?" There will always be standards. African-American students know better than we do whose standards they are. The problem is that as things currently operate in writing centers, we *pretend* these standards are neutral rather than standards that favor students born into the dominant group. We do students a disservice if we withdraw from discussions about the consequences of not mastering the dominant code. But we do them an even bigger disservice if we assume that because they use a nondominant code they haven't mastered or don't know about the dominant code. We also do them a disservice if we assume we know what is best for them.

Skeptical readers may ask if writing centers, given that they are often staffed by undergraduates, are up to the transformative tasks I have outlined here. Are we simply transferring our desire for a more just society onto those most poorly situated to accomplish it? In my experience, students have been both eager to and capable of assuming the roles of teacher, scholar, and researcher. The naive and childlike subjectivity we have constructed for them is the chief barrier to their participation in theoretical discussions and institutional change. Some readers may believe that my experience is too locally defined, that *their* students are much more in need of traditional remedial assistance. I invite them to read *Children of Promise*, an account of work that shows the transformative power of constructing differently those students we perceive as our weakest. In this book, Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola share their stories of cross-age tutoring programs. In one program, non-native English speaking fifth graders with a history of poor school performance were invited to tutor first graders. Not only did the younger children benefit, but the fifth graders advanced in their conceptualization of literacy events, transferred literate behaviors from Spanish to English, placed greater value on being literate, developed self-confidence and leadership, steered their tutees to literacy activities involving selection of books, retelling stories, sounding out words, writing their own stories. Such changes don't happen automatically; writing center directors need to be prepared to develop not only their tutors' cultural knowledges but also their critical languages and perspectives. As sites of articulating practice, writing centers will be less tuned to helping writers master community conventions and more tuned to developing the capacity of the staff to entertain multiple perspectives, to resist binary alignments, to think in systematic and complicated ways about literacy practices, to manage emotional reactivity, to gather evidence, and to explore the contradictions in literacy work. As places of research and knowledge-making, writing centers are uniquely situated to invite undergraduates into intellectual work that makes a difference.

Have I answered the questions I began with: Why do we hear so little from writing centers in composition forums? Why are writing centers such contested sites on so many campuses? Professional elitism and the material conditions of our respective workplaces could easily take the blame. But if we want to avoid blame and get at the root cause, we must confront the fact that honesty in literacy work leads us to profound social contradictions we aren't yet prepared to address. I have outlined the steps writing centers can undertake to move towards dialogue. I invite us all to prepare ourselves to listen and think about the implications of what our students might have to teach us.

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