4-2019

"Thanks to 'X' For Beta-ing!": Fan Fiction Beta Readers in the Writing Center

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"THANKS TO 'X' FOR BETA-ING!":
FAN FICTION BETA READERS IN THE WRITING CENTER

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at The University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Deborah Minter

Lincoln, Nebraska

April 2019

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IN THE WRITING CENTER

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University of Nebraska, 2019

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In this thesis, I pose the question: what can we learn from fan fiction beta reading practices that can be applied to the writing center? Through interviews of writing center consultants who have had beta reading experiences, I consider what collaborative practices they have transferred into their writing center consultant skill sets. This project records how their affinity groups supported their literacy habits, and which dynamics of power and embodiment meant the most to them in these two discourse communities.

Combining historic texts on what ideal writing center pedagogy looks like, I explore how writers could interact with acknowledgement of peer review and influence, the models of knowledge-sharing that shift and change with the power dynamic of novice and expert, and the othered-ness of affinity groups and writing centers through their feminine perceptions. Using the theory of feminist repurposing, I hypothesize that beta reading and writing centers both repurpose the traditional editorial process into the Burkean parlor/workshop, though sharing knowledge with the mutable dynamic of expertise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is about to be the most important part of this project--as Hannah Arendt said, "For excellence, the presence of others is always required." Firstly, I need to thank Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil and Julie Bevins for fostering my love of writing, writing centers, and all of the *joy!* that one could possibly need. Next, Becky Grabowski, maker of delicious bibimbap, roommate of quality, and rhetorical listener of the highest skill set. I have so much gratitude to give my committee: Rachel Azima (no foxes given!), Shari Stenberg (we're doing stuff and things!), and especially Debbie Minter, who always tells me that my writing projects and I are "very cool"--I always strive for coolness.

I extend my thanks to a mix of my English 151 students--Angela Beltran, Will Hayes, Levi Licking, Tristan Morten, Delainie Johnson, Emma Nesson, Alaina Harrison, Vasili Sgourakis, Jake McHale, Kale Kosiski, and Cherish Perkins, for reminding me just how powerful peer review can be. Much love from this anxious white lady, and queen of pettiness. To all of my writing center fam that spans across institutions--Anna Fischer, Emily Clements, Erin Dwan, Heejin Jung, and especially Mark Houston. Mark, without your insights, advice, and good, old-fashioned dad jokes, this wouldn't have gotten off the ground!

Even more instrumental to this project, I'd like to thank my master's cohort and my graduate school friends--you know who you are, and none of you are imposters! Gina Keplinger, especially, for giving me the language to put this project to work with the thought that "You know, beta reading and writing center work sounds like it's the same!" Zoe McDonald, for hounding me to write, and walking me through the process of

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Introduction

This project is a study of how fan-fiction beta readers approach working in writing centers, which investigates how the field might draw from the protocol that fan fiction writers and beta readers use. At the center of this project is a commitment to writing as a social practice and a desire to make that aspect of writing more visible to developing writers. Beta reading as a writing community and a practice has existed alongside writing centers, but as a vibrant discourse community operating outside of academic institutions. Fandom affinity groups define beta readers as follows:

> A beta reader (or betareader, or beta) is a person who reads a work of fiction with a critical eye, with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public. ("English-Language Learners, Fan Communities, and 21st-Century Skills" 691)

This description closely parallels the description applied to writing center consultants, but is repurposed from the computer software industry, and is "intimately connected with the Internet age" as a part of fandom culture (Karpovich 172). Beta testers are the antepenultimate users of a product, hence beta readers are the first person to read a fan fiction before it goes public, much like how a writing center consultant reads an essay before it is turned in.

In writing this thesis, I look at beta reading as practice which can usefully inform both composition pedagogy, and writing center studies. My thesis answers this question throughout this project has been: how can we learn from beta reading to inform work in

the writing center? These are similar, but not identical, practices that have thus far taught me about acknowledgement of writing partnerships, the power dynamics within these partnerships, and subversion of the lore-informed idea that synchronous tutoring is the best way to work with writers.

My own interest in investigating the feedback practices of fan fiction came from personal experience--I am a recovering fan girl of the early digital age. My own writing habits are shaped by working closely with Natalie (a college student on the East Coast) and Heidi (a Hong Kongese high schooler), beginning with a multi-chapter *Harry Potter* fan fiction. Even though that project was never finished, my beta readers became important to my emerging understanding of the revision process. After all, as Hannah Arendt has said, "For excellence, the presence of others is always required." My first fan fiction affinity group, MuggleNet Fan Fiction (or MNFF), "encourage[d] all authors to find a beta reader," even veteran fan fiction writers. In addition to the guidelines set up by the community, the organization's resources noted explicitly that beta readers should be there to help the writing process ("MNFF Help Essay Library" n.p.).

However, this transfer of feedback wasn't an easy one for me once I started college. In my keystone English course, my professor had the policy that a response paper receiving a C or lower had to be taken to the writing center and turned back in-- an...*interesting* diagnosis, because, as Stephen North says, "You should not scrawl, at the bottom of a failing paper, 'Go to the Writing Center'" (440). This policy made me unenthusiastic about visiting the writing center, but once I went, as required by another

class, I was hooked. It felt like home, like being back online at MNFF with my beta
readers.

In this project, I will discuss the results of three interviews, conducted with
writers who have experience working in writing centers and with beta reading in affinity
groups. By engaging these results with scholarship on writing process pedagogy and my
own experiences, I conclude by posing questions about what and how we can learn from
beta reading, in order to better understand peer review, as well as what the writing center
makes possible.

Literature Review

As with much scholarship on writing centers, this research begins with Stephen
North and Kenneth Bruffee, and I feel that there are many connections between beta
readers and writing center consultants when framed through this early scholarship. Beta
readers, just like writing centers, follow North's famous axiom that, "Our job is to
produce better writers, not better writing," and beta readers belong to affinity groups that
value writing as a process, just as North does (438). Both spaces spend time as pre-
audiences for writers, and both build reading and writing practices following Kenneth
Bruffee's model where "Peer tutoring made learning a two-way street, since students'
work tended to improve when they got help from peer tutors and tutors learned from the
students they helped and from the activity of tutoring itself," especially in fandoms where
beta readers operate as Bruffee's knowledgeable peers. Curious to know about academic
work about fandom writing practices, I started my research in fan fiction as a remix
writing practice, but instead, found Rebecca Ward Black's canon of work about

adolescent ELL fan writers who used beta readers. She found that these writers became more confident users of English, but I am moved by her work more for its argument that affinity group spaces allow for experimentation in composition, effective and dynamic writing partnerships, and a shifting notion of power.

Black's work is highly informed by James Gee's concept of affinity spaces, which appeared in his 2004 text, *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. Interpreting Gee's findings, affinity spaces are not necessarily physical, but "represent the cutting edge of effective learning environments," with their defining feature being ". . . that they are organized around a shared passion or a common endeavor" (*Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction* 38). While Gee places lots of labels and names on content creators within these spaces in this text, it is his study of the interactional benefits of affinity spaces that is most comparable to North's ideal writing center, and Black spends much of her time assessing the power dynamics within these groups, with Gee as her theoretical background.

Black's research is largely critical of the writing communities and classrooms that English language learners (ELLs) get placed in. I have interpreted her idea of the ELL classroom as operating like Andrea Lunsford's storehouse center, but instead of a skilled peer, an authority figure is teaching language construction. Black theorizes that fan fiction writers ". . .write in globally networked, pluralistic arenas where the convergence of different modes of representation, media, texts, and languages, literacies, and perspectives are commonplace," which removes the need for the hierarchical structure of the composition classroom because of their use of beta readers, in a pure peer tutoring

exchange that she connects to Bruffee (*Adolescents* 35). Much like the writing center, Black's vision of fan fiction and of beta reading allows for ". . . innovation and for writing outside the margins," and for individuals to "use language and other mediating systems" to freely express themselves and work through linguistic problems (35).

Writing in affinity groups with the exchange between writer and beta then means that:

> . . . [T]here are no constraints in place to prevent novice and/or ELL writers from posting fictions in the same spaces that advanced writers and native English speakers would. In turn, this affords novice and ELL writers access to the same resources and forms of participation that experienced fan fiction authors and native English speakers have.
> (*Adolescents* 39)

Because of this shared nature of composing fan fiction and the open affinity space with access to resources, especially the resource of beta readers, writing is taught to be a social practice to members of many affinity groups. In looking further into how Black continues to talk of the power dynamics within the beta reader/fan writer dynamic, she has an interesting insight, that ". . . novice and expert roles are not fixed, but rather shift between actions and activities," with readers and writers brokering knowledge, reviews, and opinions all the time (*Adolescents* 44). This exchange, however moves beyond just improving language skills. Affinity groups have a sophisticated gift culture at work, which first begins with the acknowledgement of the beta reader and the work they've done.

Angelina I. Karpovich traces the development of the practice of beta reading in "The Audience as Editor: The Role of Beta Readers in Online Fan Fiction Communities," and explores how the beta reading practice has benefitted fandom composition strategies. Karpovich's work informs my own in that her tracing of history is very useful to building an understanding of the beta reader and what one does in fan fiction writing, but also in that she expounds on how beta readers help develop a work, much like a peer consultant does. There is a community aspect to the process of setting up a story to go live on a platform:

> In practice, the beta process can be viewed as a series of distinct stages. The process is almost always initiated by the fan writer, who, upon completing a draft that she is happy to make available to a beta reader, either makes contact with an existing beta reader or seeks on by searching in online forums, posting public requests . . .or approaching other fan writers. A beta reader will read the story as a draft and will offer feedback [with all the focuses previously touched upon in Black]. (Karpovich 174)

However, as ubiquitous to fan fiction writing as beta reading is, it is still a fairly recent practice in the history of fandom culture and fandom writing. The first venues for fandom writing were more traditional, as ". . . fan clubs formed, and fans wrote newsletters, zines, and APAs ('amateur press association'. . .) and got together at conventions," with fan writing being edited traditionally by the publication's staff up until the 1990's (Busse and Hellekson 13). However, the advancement and increasing accessibility of the internet changed fandom discourse, as the use of online platforms sped up the publishing

practices of fan fiction. The process of revision and finalizing writing became more personal, with writers seeking out their own editors in beta readers.

Finding and using a beta reader is self-motivated, much like using the writing center, and just as in the ideal writing center, an ideal beta reader is Bruffee's knowledgable peer. Affinity groups value the use of a beta reader, and in some groups, the use of beta reader is required (Kelley 56). Scholar Brittany Kelley examines the relationship one successful fan fiction writer has with her own beta readers in "Chocolate Frogs for my Betas! Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website." She finds that "...the affordances of digital technology have allowed fan communities to develop an alternative to the 'commodity culture'," which she calls a *gift economy* (49).

The gift economy she finds at work is particularly useful to her case study, who goes by the handle 'Chivalric', who is also an English language learner. Kelley surmises that working with beta readers has ". . . engaged her in sophisticated interpretive practices, as well as sophisticated learning that has allowed her to develop both confidence and rhetorical effectiveness," (Kelley 57). In a personal interview, Chivalric also emphasizes that her betas do the "hard work" with spelling and grammar for her, and she would not be so successful without them, though in the center, these lower-order concerns might not be addressed right away (Kelley 57). In turn for doing this sort of work for her, Chivalric returns this gift by beta reading and reviewing the writing of her beta readers, fulfilling Bruffee's two-way exchange of knowledge between peers.

In order to thank betas, the most common method is to include an author's note once the story goes public online, modeled after book-writing practices. These

acknowledgements are often the first thing a reader sees in a fan fiction, as hosting sites for fan works often format posts so that author's notes come first on a computer screen when the hyper link is clicked--even before the title of the story. At my old affinity group, MNFF, and commonly on *Archive of Our Own*, the standard practice is to also thank a beta in the story's description, before a reader even engages in a story. With the public acknowledgement, beta reading is promoted, and the thanks given shows the value of a beta reader. Chivalric follows the acknowledgement patterns that Karpovich emphasizes, thanking her betas profusely for their help. This practice is lacking in undergraduate work in the university, in addition to the idea of writing in pairs or a group, due to fears of plagiarism.

Because fan fiction is already a remix culture free from the constraints of academic plagiarism (in many ways, fan fiction is plagiarism with disclaimers to making a profit), beta reading is not viewed in term of this stigma. The value that many fandom communities places on feedback is an element that writing center communities also share. Acknowledgement is also remarkable in fan writing communities, as fan writers are not obligated to use a beta reader's suggestions or keep their changes, but ". . . the community does expect the beta readers' efforts to be acknowledged," and their names are included in authors' notes or headers in thanks, hence the title of this project (Karpovich 175). In fact, there are popular fan writers who are known more for beta partnerships than by the single author's name, as the two writers exchange back and forth, and sometime write together. Gift economies' acknowledgement practices teach affinity groups the value of beta reading in a unique way, by showing the good,

successful, and popular writers use a beta through acknowledgements sections and author's notes--it's *cool* to use a beta.

In academic work, however, it is rare to see this sort of public acknowledgement at the undergraduate level. Beta reading's gift economy and acknowledgment requirement doesn't necessarily translate to the current state of the university. Part of this is because of a subscription in American universities to ". . . a deep-seated belief in individual 'genius,' in the Romantic sense of the term" (Lunsford 93), and a "reaffirmation of the Author-genius as scholar, producing an original take on the existing work in our fields" is absolutely required (Blair 179). Secondly, in the university setting, writing is cultural capital that must be done alone because this Romantic ideal is in place (Blair 180). As scholar Cheré Hardin Blair describes, "composition classrooms become a seat for production of the 'practical' skills necessary for doing academic work and preparing for employment in the marketplace," and so writing is forced into a solo endeavor (179). Blair also acknowledges that this capitalistic look into composition as a practice has much to do with panic over academic plagiarism in world increasingly marked by remix culture, and so she finds that writers are commodified by how many pieces they can author by themselves, because their capital is valued by original thoughts alone.

While composition pedagogy does encourage writers to find their own voices and assert their own thoughts, there is no active acknowledgement going on once a paper is turned in, unlike in fandom writing once a story goes live. Acknowledgements, as Laura R. Micciche finds, show that "we want to know how writing happens, and knowing how it happens potentially detracts from writing's power and value" (29) Still, because of the subscription to the idea of individualistic, Romantic writing, acknowledgements change

how the writing is perceived. In her book *Acknowledging Writing Partners*, Micciche studies the acknowledgement practices in book-writing, and her own acknowledgements are intertwined with the preface. I find her acknowledgement of her own writing partner, Gary Weissman, particularly touching, and also interesting:

> His expert reading and exacting feedback helped me clarify just about every sentence in here, or at least made me question what struck me as self evident, hopefully producing better thinking, better prose. Gary and I have been writing together for almost 20 years now; it seems to be working out! (Micciche x)

Here, it is clear that this was Bruffee's two-way exchange, and further, Andrea Lunsford's garret model of the writing center is at work, with Gary's feedback helping Micciche unlock her potential. Good composition, as Micciche defines it, is communal, and requires the social practices of Kenneth Bruffee, and through *Acknowledging Writing Partners*, Micciche starts to undo this notion of the loner-writer-genius (an impossible being) in academia, which affinity groups have already undone.

By pairing Micciche with Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," it becomes clear that power dynamics are at hand, however, in both beta reading and in the writing center. Lunsford establishes that writing centers can be either a storehouse, where knowledge is dispensed to those who seek it, a garret, where writers are uplifted for their own form of genius, or a Burkean parlor, which would ". . . place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group" (97). Affinity groups are not free of hierarchies, as all three of my

interviews confirm, and there are challenges to how to negotiate power as retold by all three interviews. As found in Black, the role of expert and novice are not fixed in beta reading, nor is this a fixed role in an ideal writing center, but that is not to say that it does not exist. Even in Lunsford's Burkean parlor model, power and expertise is negotiated: this results in better collaboration, but both beta reading and writing centers have other factors complicating who has the expertise and who is the novice.

Here rests a query that I have wrestled with for many years; given that women generally take charge of the center, are "the images and narratives that have coded writing centers and the people who work in them [are] marginal in some way," (Nicolas 3)? "As a pedagogy, a process, a democratic mechanism, [that is] not anti-male but *pro-collaboration*," feminism is at the heart of the the feminized work that beta readers and writing centers both do, if enacting Lunsford's garret or Burkean parlor model (Denny 91). Tied with Cheré Hardin Blair's thought that feminist-coded collaboration is othered, I often wonder if the writing center, so immersed in feminist pedagogy and teaching methods, is also othered? Furthermore:

> It could be argued that writing centers, often started by women, were designed as a female space in opposition to the institution at large, which was male, uncomfortable, foreign. This would constitute an internal assertion of identity. Or, alternatively, writing center spaces could be gendered female by the outsiders based on the gender of the director or the feminization of the field at large. (McKinney 26)

This discomfort with collaboration, and commodification of writing seems patriarchal in nature, but I am curious as to what the feminized, othered-ness of affinity groups can teach us about effective composition practices (Blair 180). In her book *Cyberspaces of Their Own,* Rhiannon L. Bury's study of the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade (the DDEB) examines the dynamics of power through women invested in *The X-Files*, and how culture has shaped their interactions and communication with each other on a fandom listserv.

Bury's writing on fandom dynamics further points to flaw in enacting non-directive tutoring and communication techniques in the center. Bury theorizes that fandom, historically female-driven and led, forces women into a hyper-feminine performance of communication--arguing that the long tentacles of etiquette manual culture have found their way into women's online personas, not just their face-to-face lives. While they are writing collaboratively, the DDEB's communication practices when debating amongst each other and giving feedback to fan fiction was marked what Bury calls "modest speech" which she determines to be inefficient even though it helps the DDEB avoid conflict. She defines this concept as a written modality of uncertainty and hesitancy, with the use of auxiliary qualifiers like "may", "possibly", "could mean", and "sort of," and are most often used on the listserv to actually establish who was in charge but trying to not be dominant. As these are speech markers I often find myself using while enacting indirect tutoring, and that showed up across my interviews, I find myself connecting Bury's work to non-directive tutoring practices. Thus, Bury informs me of the

negative aspects of indirect tutoring, and how it can *cause* tension in a writing center session.

With these themes of affinity groups, acknowledgement, writing as a social practice, and feminist pedagogy, I hoping to find key practices from beta reading that can inform the field of writing center studies and composition. Through my following interviews, I will make connections through these different aspects in order for to pose some questions for how to improve protocol for specifically online peer consulting, acknowledgement practices, and feminist pedagogy-informed consulting.

Methods & Methodology

In order to investigate connections between beta-reading and writing center experiences, I chose to continue with the tradition of qualitative research within the composition and rhetoric field, and conducted an interview-based study. Having completed Internal Review Board requirements, I was limited to the population of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's writing center where I found three participants. All interviews were conducted in the fall and winter of 2018. Two of the participants were recruited through speaking at a UNL Writing Center staff meeting with an IRB-approved recruitment script, asking for participants who had beta read before. The third was recruited via email using the same recruitment script after a suggestion from a colleague. I arranged meeting times with each participant via email. Two interviews were conducted in my office and the third in the writing center's low-distraction room.

Once together with the confidentiality paperwork signed, the interview was guided by these questions, with room given to tangential information and stories:

1) What are your education and literacy experiences?

2) Do you create, or have you created, transformative writing (otherwise known as fan fiction)? Are you currently involved in a fandom? Which one?

3) Have you ever used a beta reader in a fandom?

4) Have you ever been a beta reader in a fandom?

5) Can you describe a particularly memorable beta reading experience for me?

6) What drew you to beta reading?

7) What drew you to become a writing center consultant?

8) What skills do you associate with beta reading?

9) Are those skills also associated with writing center consulting?

   If not, why and what would you associate more with WC work

10) Do you see yourself using any skills from beta reading in your

   work as a consultant?

11) Do you see yourself using skills from the writing center in your

   beta reading?

12) What do you think about gender in these two discourse

   communities?

All interviewees were asked these twelve questions, but the conversation often became free-ranging. While I had anticipated each interview to take at least forty-five minutes, but no longer than an hour, the interviews averaged about 25 minutes between the three interviewees. Interviews were recorded using the VoiceRecorder app and then transcribed. The interviewees were given the option to choose which name they were identified by in this study.

Through interviewing these three participants, I intended to look for transfer and commonalities between beta reading and writing center consulting; to examine how the beta reading was being accomplished in comparison to the face-to-face techniques preferred by writing centers; and to examine the gender dynamics at hand within fan fiction. Scholars Jane Bailey and Valerie Steeves' compilation *eGirls, eCitizens* served as

a model for how I approached data gathering and interpretation. It is important to note that all three participants took English 3/880: Writing Center Theory with the UNL Writing Center director Dr. Rachel Azima in the same semester (the same semester as myself, as well) and thus, have some of the same theoretical backgrounds to consulting because of the coursework required in this class.

Profiles of Interviewees

Meredith:

Meredith grew up in rural South Dakota, was homeschooled from kindergarten through the eighth grade, and then graduated from a Catholic high school on a scholarship--she's been involved with fandom of some kind since she was "eleven to thirteen" (1:15). While attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, she earned a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in English with minors in Theatre Arts and Philosophy. She is currently involved in a few fandom affinity groups: "*Sanders Sides* fandom, the *My Hero Academia* fandom, the *Voltron* fandom, specifically the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fandom, and *The Dragon Prince* Fandom," all of which place her firmly in new and emerging fan communities (0:48). She is also the youngest participant, as she was a fourth-year undergraduate student at the time of the interview and was preparing to graduate.

Meredith had both used and been a beta reader at various points in her writing life as a fandom participant. Some of these people were her "real life friends" (1:24) when she was young, but she first had a structured experience with a beta reader while in the middle of writing a multi-chaptered story. She sought out several beta readers when

concerned about a plot twist being pulled off properly. Coming into writing center work,

Meredith had wanted to find another on-campus job aside from her work at the film

archive, so she applied to use her writing skills at the writing center. After being hired,

she took English 3/880: Writing Center Theory in the fall of 2017, so she had been

consulting for about a year at the time of the interview.

Jane:

Of the three interviewees, Jane had the most niche place in an fandom. Jane, like

Meredith, was homeschooled until the eighth grade and then pursued AP and honors

courses as a public high schooler; she described herself as academically minded, but this

wasn't her focus. Jane has a B.A. in English from a private institution in Nebraska, an

M.Lit in Gothic Imagination from a Scottish university, and is currently pursuing doctoral

work in Gothic literature. She reported that she wrote fan-fiction "all the time" before

starting her Ph.D, but she thought she would start again once she transferred from UNL to

another school (1:31).

The only fandom that Jane considered an affinity group for herself was what she

called "Cherik"--a portmanteau of "Charles" and "Erik", meaning Professor X and

Magneto from specifically the *X-Men* reboot movies (portmanteaus are a common

practice in naming a preferred 'ship, or relationship, in fandom writing). As a fan writer

and a beta reader, Jane said of her affinity group: "I don't read anything [in that fandom]

where they're not together, I don't write much that's not for them--they're the only thing I

really care about [in the *X-Men* fandom]," so when compared to the other two

interviewees, she's writing and reading exclusively for a very niche group of readers and

writers (2:26-2:40). Cherik is also the only item she had beta'd or used a beta reader for, though she had dabbled in *Harry Potter* when she was younger.

Jane, the oldest of the interviewees, has been consulting in writing centers on and off since her undergrad years, giving her the most experience. She took a consulting break during her M.Lit in Scotland, where writing centers are not an institution. In the fall of 2017, Jane also took English 3/880 while working in the UNL writing center and had consulted for about six years at the time of her interview. She placed her desire to work in the writing center to her love of editing and working one-on-one with writers, and at the time of the interview, was in her third year of doctoral work, though in the midst of transferring to a Scottish university from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in order to pursue more specialized studies in Gothic literature.

Keshia:

As a graduate student, Keshia's fandom writing life had changed since she had entered graduate work, and I felt we had many similarities in our fandom writing lives, given our close age. Keshia grew up in rural Alabama and was an early participant in the gift-giving culture that fandom can provide, participating in the Accelerated Reading Program offered in her elementary school--this offered prizes for doing well on self-selected reading quizzes. She went to a combination elementary/middle school in a small town with some religious affiliation, though it was public, as was her high school. She has a Bachelor's degree in English with minors in communication and philosophy from a small, public liberal arts university in Alabama. She was in the process of completing her

master's degree in English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln while being interviewed for this study.

Keshia reported writing and beta-reading in several fandoms as well. Currently, she involved in "*Supernatural, Harry Potter, Naruto, A Series of Unfortunate Events,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,*" putting her in three older, more established fandom communities (*Harry Potter, Naruto,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), with the other two being newer. She felt that she'd been operating in the *Naruto* fandom the longest. She reported *being* a beta reader more often than using one, saying:

> The only person who's ever been a beta reader for me is my pen pal, and she's not actually on any fan fiction websites, so, like, that's not how I connected to her. It's just she offered to be my beta reader for this story I was writing one time. But, it's funny, even though I was a beta reader, I never actually used a beta reader actively myself. (2:33-2:53)

Keshia also recounted working on a long, sustained project for about four and a half years on a compete rewrite of the *Harry Potter* series. Her beta reading experience also reflected deep friendships that she'd made through fandom, and she found that she really enjoyed helping others improve their writing.

Keshia had worked in her undergraduate institution's writing center for almost four years, as she took five years to complete her bachelor's degree, and had been consulting at the UNL writing for a year and a half at the time of the interview. Her desire to work in writing centers stemmed from a composition and rhetoric class she took as an undergrad, where she "sort of fell in love with the field" of composition and rhetoric

(6:33). At the end of this course, she was allowed to apply to work at the writing center, as it had given her the necessary knowledge to consult. In the fall of 2017, Keisha took English 3/880: Writing Center Theory at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and started consulting at UNL thereafter. She had a total of six and a half years formal consulting in writing centers at the time of her interview.

Results

When considering the traditional model of a writing center, a writer either comes to the center having made an appointment or drops in intentionally, sits down face-to-face with a consultant, and then the consultant listens. Ideally, the two conduct Bruffee's two-way exchange of pure tutoring. In some ways, beta reading turns this model on its head--Meredith, in particular, used the word "structure" to describe how the writing center went about the exchange of critique in comparison to beta reading, which she felt had more free range. The protocols and training that the writing center have put in place are certainly different from beta reading, but these two differing practices have similar results of improved, audience-ready writing despite the difference in intention.

The commonalities my interviewees have in their experiences in beta reading and writing centers largely had to do with method of conducting feedback, power and hierarchy, and communication strategies. Meredith, Keshia, and Jane all conducted their beta work online--via a mix of fanfiction.net, tumblr.com, or *Archive of Our Own*. Once in contact with a writer, all three would pass documents back and forth with comments attached using either email or inbox messaging, critiquing completely asynchronously, aside from perhaps a using a chat function on whatever platform was.

For the most part, all three participants reported working with "strangers" on the internet--though obviously, these were all writers within one of their fandoms/affinity groups. Keshia had only beta'd for people she had never met in real life, but her only beta reader was her pen pal. Jane only worked with those she didn't know. Meredith was the exception, as she reported sometimes working with her real-life friends, or people that

she had developed a rapport with on tumblr.com in specific, with her "mutuals" (slang for users that follow each other's tumblr blogs). Much of this is seen in writing center work, especially at a university the size of UNL, so unless pre-meditated, it is rare to consult and collaborate with a friend or classmate within the center that all three mutually worked in.

Meredith: Control, Power, & Community Standards

Of the three interviews, Meredith was the youngest writer and the newest to writing center scholarship. This also means that she has a newer perspective on beta reading practices--she primarily worked on newer platforms to communicate and generate fandom content. With using tumblr and *Archive of Our Own* (AO3) comes different modes of communication than with the chosen platform of the other two interviewees--tumblr, in particular, has a chat function that means exchange can be synchronous, and AO3 uses a system called "kudos" that is very similar to Facebook likes, indicating that the reader enjoyed the story.

Meredith's interview revealed deep concerns about power and control when working one-on-one with writers, echoing the theories in Andrea Lunsford's "Control, Collaboration, and the Idea of a Writing Center." Meredith reported feeling pressure to be in charge during writing center sessions. Furthermore, Meredith's interview confirmed that beta-reading can be either a garret or a storehouse, depending on what the writer specifies as a compositional need to their "knowledgeable peer," their beta reader (Bruffee 271).

Throughout her interview, Meredith referred to the idea of "structure" in the writing center being the main difference from her experiences beta reading, but to her,

this does not mean a literal structure, but more of a set of rituals of how to behave in the

center. After all, of the three interviewees, Meredith had actually beta'd for her friends,

and felt that the peers she worked with in the center were strangers who deserved some

politeness. Furthermore, she complicated this notion of structure by also bringing up

community standards--the university has standards for writing, and many affinity groups

have standards for writing. The very nature of collaboration and feedback that she had

observed made it seem that she felt the center was Lunsford's storehouse and her affinity

groups were the garret.

    While true collaboration is seen in both the writing center and in beta reading,

there is also a difference in hierarchy of power. Meredith felt that while beta reading, she

tended "to defer to the author for what they're looking for--sometimes they want a quick

grammar check," sometimes stylistic changes, and sometimes they want a sounding

board for believability (5:02). Here, there is an easy connection to Lunsford's theory of

the garret center, which ". . . seem to invest power and control in the individual student

knower" (96). These experiences, she also felt, were the first step in recognizing flaws in

her own writing--conventions she didn't like, tropes that irked her, improper

characterization. While she believed there were many similarities in what she does as a

beta reader and what she does as a writing consultant, Meredith also described the teacher

role she often has to play in the center, along with the communication skills that she

needed to cultivate to be a successful consultant-- "I have a very fast-moving mind, and I

had to learn to slow down, to explain things that make sense to me, but not a freshman in

the program or someone new to living in America or something like that" (6:00-6:14). It

was very clear to me that Meredith felt uncomfortable operating as a storehouse in the

center, because she felt that it put her in a position of power and control. Beta reading, which is asynchronous, allows Meredith to parse out her critiques, record them in writing, and perform more as a garret model, which was easier for her as it balanced the control and power between her and the writer. Slowing down, as she put it, during the asynchronous work of beta reading made her feel that she was contributing more thought and giving better critique.

Writing center protocol, Meredith believed, meant that she could also point out other items to fix, even though she is given an idea of what the writer wants to go over--here is where she engages the writing center as storehouse the most. She felt that in writing center studies, there is an inherent flaw in the indirect questioning that most consultants are trained to do. Meredith felt that she needed to temper her critiques in the center, because she "couldn't tell a stranger" that something just wasn't working for her like she'd tell a friend while beta reading (7:50). This was the first, and would not be the last, instance where Meredith expressed discomfort with being Lunsford's storehouse model, in which ". . . control resides in the tutor or center staff, the possessors of information, the currency of the Academy" (96). When beta reading, Meredith said, "I literally have the ability to say: 'I think this is bad, *but* here is how I think you could fix it by doing *this* instead,'" which merges the binary of direct and indirect techniques consultants are often taught to use (skewing strongly toward indirect), into suggestion and collaboration that is prized in the garret model of writing centers (19:39). This, I think, would be useful in the center, as it is still improving the writer, giving them a model to imitate, and is also an exchange of knowledge. Overall, Meredith felt that

working in the writing center *had* changed how she read, wrote, and analyzed any kind of writing, fan fiction included, because she spent more time considering the writing choices and experiences made in a piece.

An observation, though, that Meredith made in her interview that opened my eyes was on the very nature of feedback on writing at large. "Some communities are really not open to critique that's not requested, whereas some communities assume that anything public is open to critique" which I had not considered, in that in my own experiences, gathering reviews, likes, and kudos were all desired by writers posting fan fiction (10:42). Community standards, as scholar Brittany Kelley points out, do exist, and are the easiest parallel to grades within fan writing communities, if making a direct comparison to the writing center. In Meredith's mind, though, it was not always appropriate to leave feedback on fan fictions that involved lower-order concerns like grammar and spelling issues, mirroring my own experiences at MuggleNet Fan Fiction, where submissions were moderated for this very reason.

In comparing the work she was asked to do by writers in both discourse communities, Meredith had a few commonalities. She felt that both asked her do significant work with grammar, but the difference was that she would just fix mistakes in fan fiction, versus teach proper grammar in the center. She also related to me that she was, in the *Sanders Sides* fandom, Andrea Lunsford's storehouse for the character Logan, who was "an entirely logical being, a little bit sorta like Data from *Star Trek* [*The Next Generation*]," and is continually approached and asked for advice about how to characterize him, something more higher-order in concerns (15:05). However, it was

clear to me by the end of the interview that Meredith is also able to function as the garret

model of a writing center within the *Sanders Sides* fandom, as she regularly will offer to

beta on a micro-level in order to answer these questions about Logan.

     Our conversation turned to the middle-range concerns about writing, in particular

that writers in both communities asked her about the mysterious concept of "flow",

saying "I still don't know exactly what it means! I think when people say that, they want

to know if the writing is jumpy or confusing," but the concept of flow just gets tossed

around. She felt that it was likely something to do with organization, logic, and transition,

and good flow meant the reader could just *read*. Flow gets tossed around *so* much, as

Meredith put it, as a vague term for critique. Flow, we agreed, was a concept one could

write books upon books about, and flow was the thing that both communities asked her

about the most.

     This is interesting to me, because I agree with Meredith's assertion about the term

"flow" as something writers often throw out as a request for critique. "I think they say

this word, because they [writers across the board] don't have the language to express their

actual concerns," and this term can mean many things at once (17:45). As a take-away,

what can instructors of writing, or writing centers, do in order to help make this concept

more concrete, or what language can writers be given to replace this term for more

clarity? How can we get to the bottom of what this term means?

     Considering that beta readers are a fluid authority would be one initial way to

look at what can be learned from Meredith's interview and applied to the writing center.

Meredith's frustrations with the power dynamics in the writing center would certainly be

soothed if implementing the Burkean Parlor model, which Lunsford concludes might be the best in "Control, Collaboration, and the Idea of a Writing Center". Consider the fact that: "A collaborative environment must also be one in which goals are clearly defined and in which the jobs at hand engage everyone fairly equally, from the student clients to work-study students to peer tutors and professional staff" (Lunsford 95). Proper collaboration, then, requires a certain lack of hierarchy and authority, but this is not to say that there is no hierarchy or authority in the writing center or in beta reading.

As Meredith expressed, she feels that the title of "peer consultant" means "teacher" to many of the writers she works with in the center, so her job entitled too much power which did not happen to her while beta-ing. Lunsford asks of writing centers to understand that, the tasks at hand that they perform, "high-order problem defining and solving; division of labor tasks, in which the job is simply too big for any one person; and division of expertise tasks," might mean that they move back forth between these her two models of writing center operations, the storehouse (dispensing knowledge and skills) and the garret (empowering writers with their own voices, because writers always have interior knowledge) but ultimately, she finds that getting to either environment is difficult (95). With writers passing in and out of the center, Lunsford finds, there needs to be a negotiating factor in the center, which is seen more in the experiences of Jane and Keshia.

<u>Jane: Politeness Strategies & Hierarchy of Knowledge</u>

I found in Jane's interview the challenges of the dynamics of affinities groups, which are highly based on in-group fame as a power-asserting schema between writers, thus complicating how we view peer tutoring. Being in the smallest and most-interconnected of the affinity groups, Jane's experiences largely mirrored Rhiannon L.

Bury's theories about politeness strategies, and how to negotiate tension and challenges in affinity groups. This is at work in both of Jane's beta reading memories. A famous writer Jane beta read for chose to ignore Jane's suggestions but acted rather aggressively, and Jane deliberated on how to assert her intellectual expertise over her own beta reader's knowledge politely.

Jane's own observations on consulting in the writing center distinctly disagreed with Meredith's. Whereas Meredith felt that she *had* to be more polite and indirect in the center, Jane believed that "the way of communicating [in the center versus while beta reading] is different because there is more of a mindset of revision with writing center work that I *don't* think there is in fan fiction, in my experience," and she felt that a consultant could certainly be more directive in the center, because the title of "peer consultant" implied expertise and power--Jane definitely subscribed to Lunsford's storehouse model of the writing center (7:31-7:49). So even though Jane and Meredith both felt that good beta reading and good consulting came with intimate relationships, there was a difference in where they had found intimate relationships. However, Meredith's relative inexperience in the center may also be why she feels the need to be more polite with writers who come to the center, as Jane had been consulting much longer than she had, in addition to working as an instructor in the UNL English Department.

Being in the smallest and most niche fandom of these three beta readers-cum-writing consultants, Jane recounted the community dynamics between her and other "Cherik" fans based on power and knowledge. Given that it's such a small fandom, Jane

admitted to not "networking" much within the affinity group, but if there was a call for a beta reader, she would volunteer with enthusiasm (3:26-3:30). Her most memorable experience, unlike for Meredith and Keshia, was actually one that bothered her, and that she felt went poorly. She recounted:

> I beta'd back in . . . 2011 [when the Cherik fandom was in its "heyday"] for a woman who was very big in the fandom, and I am...was very small (not that I'm big now), and she...well, what I distinctly remember was they were ghosts, Charles and Erik are ghosts, and Raven, who is Mystique in the *X-Men* universe is alive, and can see them and interact with them, but . . . Erik had had died like the 1920's and was, like, a detective or something, and Charles had died in, like, the 1700's. And the author really wanted Charles to be afraid of plague doctor masks? . . . She wrote to me, 'Charles got the plague and died,' and I said, 'There was no plague in the 1700's!' And I told her that, but she said, 'I don't agree, I'm gonna ignore that!' (3:54-5:20)

For Jane, who has some obvious academic interests in historical accuracy with her focus in Gothic literature, she felt that her suggestion was "brushed off" because of her relative unknown status in the fandom, as the author was very popular in the affinity group (5:21). Jane had felt, also, that because of this power imbalance, she made many tentative and indirect tutoring moves to make changes and suggestions, and the continued rejection of her beta reading made her quite frustrated. The fame of the writer in question trumped and invalidated her own expertise in English studies, she believed.

This experience shaped Jane's belief that beta readers and writing center consultants should have good communication skills. They should be capable of ". . . both being a cheerleader and making sure that stuff sounds good and is accurate to a point" and also emphasized that "trust has to be built between the author and the beta reader," which she felt should be transferred to being a writer center consultant as well (5:50-6:09). When considering the interaction that Jane described in her most memorable beta reading experience, I was also vividly reminded of a consultation in the writing center gone poorly--every suggestion I made resulted in the writer literally replying, "I don't like that," with gritted teeth. Jane further recounted someone beta reading for her as having inferior knowledge of the Gothic genre that she interwove into a Cherik story, and how she strategized to tell the beta, a sixteen-year-old girl, that her suggestions regarding Gothic genre was not what she wanted out of a beta.

In trying to apply Jane's interview as a pedagogical tool for the writing center, I considered her recollections a lesson in the delicate relations and struggles of beta-reading. Through her second memory, I feel deep connection to the politeness strategies of *Cyberspaces of Their Own*. The David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade made a conscious effort to use politeness strategies in reviewing and revising each other's work and forum posts, avoiding *flaming*, which Bury defines as "vicious online combat" that is distinctly coded as male (Bury 134). Bury's connection to etiquette manuals is at work here, because ". . . Just as 'ladies' were supposed to dress modestly . . .they would have been expected to speak modestly so as not to draw unwarranted attention to their intellect" (Bury 132). The famous writer Jane recounted certainly fits into the definition

of flaming, and thus highlights the power tension at work in affinity groups. As the older and more experienced writer, Jane also was not comfortable with the idea of sixteen-year-old reading her work, because it was horror-driven, but also because the young beta reader did not also defer to Jane's requests for feedback.

The trouble at hand in both of Jane's memories is a lack of understanding of how feedback can work, and this is the trouble within affinity groups, which also put value on a writer's popularity within a community. Jane's affinity group, unlike Meredith's, does not acknowledge that "novice and expert roles are not fixed, but rather shift between actions and activities," and this highlights the human aspect of negotiating power (Black 44). Navigating affinity groups has its challenges, just as navigating the writing center does, and with Jane's two beta memories, it is clear that her strategy to navigate this is similar to Bury's findings of simply avoiding conflict through being polite. Learning from Jane's experiences also highlights the importance of consulting as an exchange.

Keshia: Support, Community, & Negotiation

Keshia's interview revealed a further understanding of community, and accomplishing writing and revision. As the writer with the most diverse set of affinity groups, fan fiction and beta reading provided her with many communities that supported Keshia's literacy practices. Keshia's experiences model that there is clearly pure peer collaboration and tutoring going on in fandom writing, both in Kenneth Bruffee's model, and in Lunsford's garret model of the writing center. Keshia's writing was further supported by her community outside of beta readers with acknowledgement and being a knowledgeable peer.

Despite never using a beta reader aside from her pen pal, Keshia described her most memorable experience as a beta reader with a three-volume rewrite of the *Harry Potter* series, which she beta'd for four and a half years:

> What was really interesting is how much it was, like, a collaborative relationship by the end of it, they would actively be like, 'what do you think this character should do next, because I'm all out of ideas,' so I wasn't *writing* stuff for this, but I was not just editing their works, but actively giving them ideas. (3:46-4:04)

Once each volume of the fan fiction was completed, the writer would send Keshia a care package in thanks, showing "the gift-giving economy of fan fiction," in which there is a literal exchange between writer and beta (Kelley 50). This exchange can be a role reversal, where the initial beta reader's writing is beta'd by the initial writer, or can be a literal gift, as Keshia described. This deep collaboration is also an effective example of Lunsford's garret model, because it balances power, and this is continued with some of Keshia's more unusual practices in beta reading.

Keshia also described a "bad habit" to me about her beta-ing practices. Typically, beta readers and writers advertise if they're looking to beta something, or if they are searching for a beta (as Jane demonstrated), then make a decision via personal correspondence and start exchanging drafts. As learned from Karpovich, the beta is then always acknowledged in an author's note, so if there isn't a beta thanked in a note, then the reader can assume a piece doesn't have a beta reader. So, if Keshia read an un-beta'd fan fiction and liked it, but felt it needed help, she would turn the protocol of the writing

center, and of typical beta reading, on its head. She would get in contact with the writer, offer to beta read for them, and then work with them for a short time to improve a story and make changes--this is not necessarily a truly bad habit, but this did leave her open to encounters with the unwilling writer that scholarship within the field describes, but it was rare that writers turned down her offer (4:51). This, I suspect, is largely because of how valued beta reading is as a practice and institution in fan fiction, as Karpovich argues. She also recounted that this method of going about beta reading meant she could be working with many writers at once, as well, but only for one-off corrections. This, again, turns the model of the writing center on its head, and isn't comparable to consulting--Keshia described these experiences as "cold", but felt that it helped her own writing improve.

When asked why she felt drawn to beta reading, Keshia recounted her love of the stories that she was engaging with through fan fiction and really wanting to be involved with a community. This, for her, "was a way to make connections and friends," and she had only beta read through the online communities on fanfiction.net, as opposed to Meredith, who had beta'd for her real life friends, and Jane, who had used tumblr sparingly in addition to fanfiction.net. In the same idea, writing centers can be seen as affinity groups of readers, writers, and responders, but the pressure of academic work does not leave much room for Keshia's practice of offering her beta services--in the center, the writer must seek out help specifically, and often needs to come to another physical space to accomplish this.

Connecting with scholarship, Keshia's four-and-a-half year, deep collaboration also points to Shamoon & Burns' support of directive tutoring. This situation allowed

". . . both student *and* tutor to be the subject of the tutoring session (while nondirective

tutoring allows only the student's work to be the center of the tutoring session)" thus

engaging Keshia to practice writing and understand her preferences (145). The directive

tutoring that Keshia subscribed to also, as Shamoon & Burns put it, "lays bare crucial

rhetorical processes that otherwise remain hidden or are delivered as tacit knowledge

throughout the academy" because each fan writer and beta reader starts to engage in

process writing, recognizing the drafting process, audience, and the rhetorical strategies

that are being put in place. However, Keshia's experiences also speak to the long

relationships and the acknowledgement practices that develop in writing partnerships that

Karpovich has studied--her practice of beta reading also further plays into the two-way

exchange between knowledgeable peers that Bruffee finds the most helpful, and the

knowledge that writing is never done by just one person, as Micciche finds.

Discussion & Conclusion

I am going to answer my initial question of "how can we learn from beta reading to inform work in the writing center?" with more questions. Dear reader, please use these questions to consider possibilities, or ask more, rather than answer these queries directly. As a practice, beta reading engages with a very different type of writing than what is encountered in writing centers--fan fiction is a remix culture, a writing practice largely about the *what-ifs* and *why-nots* about a canon of work. It is only my nature, anyways, as a recovering fan writer, to continue that practice in this thesis, the most important of my writing projects.

The first conclusion I came to after processing my interview information were observations regarding gender in online affinity group spaces. These findings coincided with the observations about writing center work that Lori Salem and Harry Denny have made about gender in that physical space. All three interviewees acknowledged that there is a lack of male readership and fannish interaction in fandom writing communities--most fandoms are female-oriented, led, and driven.

Keshia expressed that she had never beta-read for anyone that was male in her experiences--*Naruto*, her first affinity group, is predominantly male--and part of that was on purpose for her. Keshia recalled that "I was so young, and I was like twelve, thirteen, and still a little scared of boys, so I was not gonna ask an eighteen-year-old, teenage boy if I could beta-read his stuff," and she now knows that typically, men in all of her fandom writing communities don't react well to criticism, so she wasn't about to start beta reading for men because of this culture in her fandoms (14:00). Keshia recounted a time

in which she'd gotten a comment from a male reader about one of her stories, which said it had been an interesting concept, and her writing was enjoyable. However, he also said, condescendingly that "they just can't manage to get through it with all these grammatical mistakes that I'm doing, and spelling errors, and it just made it such a difficult read" (15:20). The reader offered to be her beta so that her story could actually be readable, but she turned him down because she felt his method of feedback was rude and would not help her improve--Rhiannon Bury's politeness strategies are at work here. Keshia felt that the behavior exhibited in this recollection was typical of men in fandom.

While this reader had employed similar methods to Keshia's own when beta reading--offering to beta read to help her improve--she was clearly upset with how he had spoken about her writing skills at the time. In the center, this behavior would be not be welcomed either, but gender dynamics also permeate the writing center, as it is a physical space where chat messages cannot be ignored or blocked, and faces and bodies perform gender. Affinity groups try to mitigate gender-based harassment through protocol, which matches the feminist ethos of the writing center, as Denny notes:

> . . . the moments when 'grrl power' comes to the rescue, and women turn inward and coalesce, intentionally excluding men, to develop networks of mutual support and response. In those moments, a community provides safety and shared history and experience. . ." (107-8)

In applying strategies from beta reading to gendered experiences in the center, the concept of a space being strengthened by its adherence to feminist teamwork would fit in perfectly in the writing center; the center, in fact, already does this through its use of

Bruffee's two-way exchange of knowledge. By continuing to value the collaboration and de-centered hierarchy of power that feminist writing center pedagogy utilizes, the embodiment of the two-way exchange of knowledgeable peers is key to apply, as shown by the lens of beta reading. The balance of Bruffee's two-way knowledge-making continues to give the peer consultant power and validity, just as it empowers the writer.

Jane's understanding of writing center work, from her interview, also has a lot to do with power--she feels that the term "peer consultant" implies higher skill and knowledge, but "beta reader" does not. She also had the most encounters with obstinance and disregard for her feedback while beta reading. She also felt that:

> Often times, I've seen a lot of women running writing centers, and our writing center course was mostly women. . . but anytime there is a man involved, there is a danger of 'oh, well, this is his project, or this is the authority figure,' but always there is the danger of 'how are we sure that we're being totally equal when we hire people.' (18:58-19:54)

While Jane's interview gives much insight into the tensions and challenges navigating affinity groups, given that she had aggravated incidents while beta reading for women, her comments on gender in the center are particularly interesting. While writing centers are for all writers, when there is a lack of male consultant presence in the center, does this make it a girls' club of some kind? Does this mean male writers go through the university sans collaboration?

While this inquiry into gendered power in the center and beta reading doesn't necessarily have an answer, I think it is worth it to ask "why" the center performs so

femininely? What could be done to continue the feminist possibilities of the center? Feminist repurposing of beta reading can be put to work in the center, and can be used in the composition classroom for the center's benefit by repurposing beta reading's community aspects, acknowledgement practices, and revision strategies.

My interview with Meredith further enlightened me to the first step in feminist repurposing: the fans that participate in fandom writing were either women or "femme non-binary people," and she asserted that, in her experience, fandoms tend to be female-centric (20:54). Most of the people she beta'd for, or who had beta'd for her were female, because the fandoms she has participated in are mostly comprised of women. Thus the pool of readers and responders were women, just through numbers. Meredith's second point about affinity groups and gender divisions enacts the first step of feminist repurposing, ". . . highlighting and critiquing existing conditions," (Stenberg 10). Meredith also noted, for example, that "there is no Huskers football fandom" even though sports certainly qualifies as a fandom, and is a fandom populated by men (21:19). Male-centric affinity groups just aren't called fandoms, which plays into a sort-of misogynist paradigm that the things men enjoy are standard and normal, whereas fandoms like *Harry Potter* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are feminized and therefore othered.

Furthermore, Meredith felt that how society shapes women plays into how both communities value collaborative composition. "We are taught to rely on others [as women]," to seek help, to find an audience, and to work as team, in her mind, which is why she felt that fandom writing was so feminized, and she felt that the same was true of the writing center (25:30). In critiquing the existing conditions of university writing, the

second step of feminist repurposing can be completed in these two writing communities, because of who is doing the composing and process work of fan-fiction, and in the writing center.

Fan-fiction, as a writing community which values writing as a work in progress, sees writing as mutable, and encourages constructive criticism and peer interaction, repurposes and remixes popular canons of work. The teamwork that Meredith describes happening in the writing center is also at work in the beta reading process. Beta reading's standard of acknowledging collaboration is an insider look at the process, and changes the paradigm through acknowledgement--there is no writer that turns out a perfect piece by themselves. In this way, beta readers are improving the traditional editorial process, specifically in the university's sense of revisions, by using feminist repurposing's second step: "to reclaim what has been cast off or suppressed to be used for new ends," with my specific emphasis on using the editorial process for new ends (Stenberg 10). This sort of teamwork should be acknowledged in the university. Just because " [w]riting is supposed to be a private affair—creative writing in particular—that depends on a cloistered, never quite revealed, let alone discussed, contract between writer and reader," does not mean that writing is actually a solo endeavor (Micciche 19).

Due to the high occurrence of women in writing centers, given that Harry Denny's observation of "I'm accustomed to writing centers where graduate students, disproportionately women, take on the lion's share of the day-to-day operations" (90), I feel that Meredith's own assertion about being accustomed to help as women is very wise--but let's also consider that feminist composition practices promote collaboration

and discourage unnecessary competition. Being mindful of feminist pedagogy as going in ". . . one direction that held powerful, even utopian, possibilities of feminist theory re-imagining social space as more egalitarian, and other directions that served to marginalize and diminish the work of individuals, collectives and units" also connects to the third step in feminist repurposing (Denny 91).

With this third step of feminist repurposing locating "new possibilities for teaching and learning, for relating to one another, and for enacting cultural change," modeling off of beta reading's acknowledgement practices can continue undoing the stigma of the writing center as remedial (Stenberg 11). As observed with Keshia's habit of offering to beta read on stories she liked, and the myriad of requests Meredith gets about micro-beta-ing for characterization within her affinity group, beta reading is a valued practice. Many fandoms have famous pairs of writers and beta readers that work with each other, doing deep collaboration, as Keshia demonstrated, and these pairs are known to the greater community through author's notes and acknowledgement, aligning with Micciche's thought that ". . . writing is never entirely 'mine' or 'alone'—an inescapable lesson emergent in written acknowledgments. . ." (5). Thus, I pose these questions: what if undergraduate composition classrooms required more than just an author's note to the piece being turned in? What if acknowledgement of a peer reviewer or group, a writing center consultant, or even a friend's help on a paper were required? What if it were required to look at the acknowledgements of fellow classmates? My own beta reading experiences were certainly influenced by seeing a beta reader being thanked in a popular or skilled writer's notes on MNFF; this was a cool thing, to me. My own

hopes would be that by seeing skilled writers in a course acknowledging if they got help, particularly if it were from the writing center, the writing center would be seen to new writers as an important and vital place for them--that even good writers go there!

In pushing the idea of writers "going" to the center, my second point of inquiry into how writing centers can learn from beta reading has to do with literal place. Each interviewee described working exclusively online, efficiently and effectively, despite writing center lore that face-to-face, synchronous consulting is the best practice for writing center sessions. With beta reading as a model, it is clear to me that asynchronous, online-only response is not only feasible, but does in fact work. With these findings in mind from the interviews, paired with recent publications in the teaching of writing, I believe that directive, online, asynchronous writing consulting is feasible, achievable, and successful through the beta reading model, and could certainly be utilized and imitated by the writing center. Ruie Jane Pritchard and Donna Morrow studied a group of K-12 educators utilizing both online and face-to-face peer review, and found:

> Not surprisingly, given the percentages of participants who saw no difference in the two environments, many of the respondents advocated for a blended approach indicating that they recognized the advantages and constraints of both environments ("Both formats were useful to me. In person allowed us to have conversations with the author and each other. Online gave me more time formulate my response"). Participants also pointed out how the two environments complemented each other ("The

online helped us get acquainted so when we were face-to-face we were

ready to offer helpful suggestions in a safe environment"). (98)

Beta-reading is a practice that has been doing critical writing engagement alongside the

writing center for many years--since the seventies, as Karpovich notes. It is a legitimate

practice that produces thoughtful, nuanced writing, and encourages process and audience

engagement through the passing back and forth of drafts with comments. This is not to

say that writing centers should move to model entirely off of beta reading--there is is still

enormous reward and value in face-to-face consulting, and using Socratic questioning as

indirect tutoring. I understand the reasonable fear of becoming the fix-it shop that North

describes, but beta reading is comparable to the feedback one gets from a teacher, which

is entirely asynchronous. What would an online center look like if based around beta

reading protocol? How would it function?

When I ventured into online writing center work, it was conducted via Skype and

GoogleDocs, and I feel that Skype was the problem factor in it. Poor Internet connections

lagged conversations; malfunctioning microphones made it hard to understand the ELL

students I worked with, and for them to understand me; children moved in and out of the

webcam's view, needing their parents' attention. Other factors to consider in the use of

online center would be rural access--what if Internet providers did not provide the

bandwidth to support Skype or work together on Google Docs? What if verbal

communication were difficult to either person involved? How would one have a

conversation if computer access was only available to a writer at a public library? As

Kenneth Bruffee notes, "However displaced writing may seem in time and space from the

rest of a writer's community of readers and other writers, writing continues to be an act of conversational exchange," meaning that this is still meaningful exchange despite not being face-to-face, and beta reading practices do precisely this work through time displacement, by the recollections of my interviewees (91). After all, the critical exchange between professor and student in the university is completely asynchronous, unless conferencing, and this sort of asynchronous exchange is valued, so why not asynchronous tutoring?

If online consulting were modeled after beta reading, asynchronously working together, this means a document can be passed back and forth, as all of my interviewees reported doing. In order to apply beta reading to the center, this requires consultants to be trained to read writing independently as a beta reader does. The writing and work can be done when the consultant has time and when the writer has time, for minimal interruptions. A due date would need to be established, and there are practical details like compensating the consultant for their time to also consider, but this method of tutoring could in fact be more accessible to many different kinds of writers.

Based on my three interviews, I feel that studying writing practices occurring outside of academia provides the writing and composition field with meaningful strategies to make feedback better and more accessible. Studying beta reading has informed me that continuing to de-center power and encourage writers to understand that a consultant is a fellow peer, just a knowledgeable peer, means that consulting becomes easier. Upholding the value of the collaboration by modifying acknowledgement practices carries out feminist writing center pedagogy. This study further shows that reconsidering directive tutoring as feminist, by being directive but not domineering,

makes for efficient consulting. Repurposing the notion of asynchronous online practices of writing center consulting to mirror beta reading makes getting feedback more accessible, while being just as effective as face-to-face consulting. There are certainly tensions to affinity group writing, but beta reading proposes a fresh look to how writing is done between peers, by implementing the practices of beta reading in the writing center. Modeling off of beta reading using feminist repurposing would continue to improve writing center work.

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