

BOOK REVIEWS

Noise from the Writing Center by Elizabeth H. Boquet. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2002.

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I bought my first electric amplifier fifteen years ago, a little, silverface, Fender Champ, all tube-driven. As a beginning harmonica player with a penchant for blues, I needed a cheap, portable amp, and a visit to my local music shop turned up just what I wanted: a used, slightly beat up tube amp. The same money could have gotten me a brand new, solid-state amplifier, one with more power and even some neat effects like reverb and vibrato, but that's not what I wanted. Solid-state amps, which use electronic components to amplify sound, have remarkable fidelity, reproducing sounds exactly as they come into the amp; but the hard-driving Chicago blues sound I love comes from older equipment—vacuum-tube amps, which, when played at a high volume, distort the input, resulting in a warm, rich tone and layers of sound unattainable with higher fidelity equipment.

Elizabeth Boquet, who directs the writing center and teaches English at Fairfield University, shares my affinity for distortion. In *Noise from the Writing Center*, Boquet explores noise—particularly distortion—as a trope through which we can consider the work of tutoring and teaching writing. As I read this book, I wondered, “What noises does my writing center make? How about my teaching—what are the noises in, and from, my writing classroom?” And, most importantly, “What do these noises tell me about how I teach and tutor writing?”

In her first chapter, “Tutoring as (Hard) Labor,” Boquet considers the metaphors we use to name our centers and the ways we describe what we do in them. Drawing on writing center work by Peter Carino and Michael Pemberton and on critical theory by Michel Foucault, she explores the implications behind the names “writing clinic,” “writing laboratory,” and “writing center.” Each of these metaphors fails to fully account for all that happens in a writing center, she claims, noting that a “self-conscious attention to the relationship between the signified and the signifier was absent until recently” (11). Even now, she suggests, these terms can't hold: “clinics” medicalize students and their writing problems, “labs” scientize and sterilize them, and “centers” suggest a constancy and stability belied by a few hours spent in one. Prompted by Susan Miller's “Sad Women in the Basement” (from *Textual Carnivals*), Boquet offers a new metaphor that might more accurately describe what goes on in writing centers,

the feminized basement-dwellers of composition/rhetoric: writing center work as *labor*. Through this metaphor, Boquet discusses what it means to be feminized, what it means that women do some kinds of work—"the cleaning up of the grammar, the kiss-the-red-ink-and-make-it-better" work—while men do the "real work" of the academy, "engag[ing] with interesting ideas, mentor[ing] the 'smart' students, do[ing] their own writing" (14). Writing centers too often function as "academic cleaning centers" in which the dirty work—the hard labor of teaching writing—happens behind closed doors, out of sight, out of mind. Boquet talks of the messiness of our work, punning on "labor" as childbirth but noting that "the only metaphor that comes close to approaching the labor-and-delivery model of writing center work—the midwife metaphor—presents a sanitized, romanticized version of goings-on" (19). "Where is the noise?!" she asks, her large font disturbing the peace that many in our institutions expect from writing centers.

Boquet's first chapter can profitably be read as a history, but maybe more so as a historiography, of writing centers. What we call ourselves matters, Boquet asserts, because the name of a place sanctions the work that can happen there. When we tell a history of a writing "clinic," "lab," or "center," we're authorizing certain kinds of stories and silencing others. We often dismiss these other stories—the ones that interfere with our re/presentations of our work—as "noise," as a sort of auditory interference, as static in the signal. "Noise," however, does not always *disrupt* a clear performance; sometimes, as in the screaming guitar solos of Jimi Hendrix or in the wailing sound of Little Walter's Chicago blues harmonica, the noise—the distortion and feedback of a sound pushed beyond its usual amplification—*enhances* a performance, adding aural layers and richness absent in conventional recordings.

In her second chapter, "Channeling Jimi Hendrix, or Ghosts in the Feedback Machine," Boquet pushes us to consider the usefulness of the "noise" metaphor for writing center work. Too often, she suggests, we make the sort of music that we think our institutions want to hear; our writing center reports, for instance, are filled with "sums, totals, and percentages. We're counting heads, but not people, and we don't work with heads" (43). Boquet claims that traditional ways of thinking about writing center work "fetishize the numbers of students . . . rather than what happened" with those students during their consultations (43). For her, our head-counting misses the point, and our calls for better kinds of outcomes research "threaten to merely reduplicate the noise of the institution . . . [serving] simply to return the noise back to the institution, unchanged" (47), without the richness of harmonic distortion. She tells, for instance, the story of Angela, a basketball player who, after repeated sessions with a tutor—sessions through which Angela changed her attitude and writing performance dramatically—left the university to attend another with a better

basketball program. Angela's story is not the kind we usually represent in our reports; after all, it's a story of attrition, of institutional loss, of static and disruption. Boquet asserts that these stories, too, are important in understanding the work of writing centers and institutions; she encourages us to pay attention to this kind of noise. She's suspicious of tidy research, of reports and numbers that are only "success stories," and she punctuates her book with devastating, personally revealing stories that expose her own failures and the failures of our writing centers—the stories we don't tell in public, the noise we often filter out of our performances.

"Noise in the system," Boquet writes, "is considered extremely inefficient. It is disruptive, an interference in the clear, harmonious, well-ordered transmission of information. It is something (usually) to be *gotten rid of*." Yet in excluding the contributions of noise—in discounting the possibility that it might play a useful role in our institutions—"we are constructing a theory of dialogue that *depends upon . . . exclusion*" (51). We are, in other words, filtering certain voices, certain ideas and perspectives out of the conversation. Throughout the book, Boquet maintains that writing centers work amid the static of the academy, surrounded by the kinds of noises our institutions try to suppress: the students who don't resonate in ways we want or expect them to, discordant institutional policies, and jarring or cacophonous practices. Really, though, she's asking, don't writing centers serve to *amplify sounds already present* in our institutions? And what do we (and they) lose when we silence them—when we insist on pure melody, with neither harmony nor discord? Packing such students off to the writing center "might actually turn up the volume on the kinds of demands that students make on institutions of higher learning and might send institutional dictates and mandates screeching and squealing back to their source" (67).

Here, then, Boquet turns her focus to the noises she hears in her writing center. Talking about her writing center tutors' consultations, she notes that she's often able to predict how a session will be structured: the student writer will read her paper aloud, the tutor will ask what the writer wants to accomplish on that day, then, depending on the tutor, there will be discussion of thesis, development, or audience and purpose. Boquet asks, "Where is the pleasure [in such a session]? Where is the fun? Where is the place where writer and respondent can enter into a groove for that session?" (71). Following Gilles Deleuze and Trinh Minh-Ha, she suggests a strategy of repetition, one that would encourage the kind of riffing and free play that marks Hendrix's best improvisations; yet she does not show how such a strategy might play out in a consultation. Here I want Boquet's firmer direction, even though "direction" works against the improvisation she calls for. I want her to suggest new strategies I can employ, ways to break out of the Rogerian practice that is such a

strong part of writing center dogma, even as I recognize that she's challenging me to explore the mutation that unguided variation offers—possibilities of much better practice than I might think possible. And I appreciate that she does not deliver what I want, that she insists I find my own groove, even though I'm frustrated by it. As a writing teacher, I embrace this frustration when I see it in my students—I even cultivate it, by refusing to give my students the explicit direction they crave, the rules that might make them feel more comfortable as writers but that would limit their writing to the possibilities I can imagine. I recognize Boquet's move, her desire here, and although it frustrates me as a reader (okay, Beth, but HOW DO I TUTOR LIKE THIS?!), I think her move is a good one. She's seeking a "higher-risk, higher-yield model for writing center work" (80), encouraging us to "operate on the edge of [our] expertise," to find the "groove for [a tutoring] session," to seek a "place where, together, we will really feel like we're jammin' . . ." (81)—and she recognizes that we must each develop our own practices, the riffs that work best for us, as we build up our own tutoring chops.

Chapter Three, "Toward a Performative Pedagogy in the Writing Center," takes us as close as we might get to a model of a writing center that explores the creative possibilities of noise. In it, Boquet describes a summer she spent as an observer at Rhode Island College's tutor training program. The summer training—eight weeks of meetings, with assigned reading and writing—and the center's practice of requiring tutors to write weekly in a common tutor journal—show a center with a strong sense of community and purpose. The Rhode Island tutors play word games, they write stories collaboratively, and they build their writing center community organically, a community with a clear set of values, beliefs, and theories about writing and tutoring and one in which the tutors feel free to experiment with tutoring methods. Boquet presents many of the important ideas of this chapter through the words of tutors, gathered through interviews, letters, journal entries, and videotapes of the summer training meetings. Student voices function in her book as meaning makers, as contributions intended to build up Boquet's argument, not just to supplement it or to serve as objects of demonstration or study. Boquet realizes that the most important work in writing centers happens between tutors and writers, and she welcomes their voices to the stage. Through their own words we see tutors jamming with language in improvisations which articulate compelling tutoring philosophies that extend beyond their relationships with students and into the ways that they, and the writers who come for their help, interact with language and might use language to shape their interaction with the wider world, as well as to shape that world itself.

Noise from the Writing Center plays, in many ways, like a live album: its pages are crossed with Boquet's reworkings, her reconsiderations, with her

talk about the process of putting this book together. She admits faults—that the book doesn't wrap itself up neatly, that some parts leave the reader wanting more. Yet I suggest that we consider the alternative meaning of faults: as evidence of geomorphology, as sites of past and probable future rupture, as contact zones. Boquet's writing makes noises which are usually engineered out in the remixing process, yet here they show her enacting what she calls for. Her writing style captures the dynamism and excitement and possibility of improvisation. This is a risk worth taking, and its benefits outweigh the occasional static it creates.

I hope that Boquet's "noise" will seep out around the doors that separate our writing centers from the rest of our institutions. I hope this book will find an audience among those of us who teach writing and direct writing programs as well as those of us who work in writing centers. Boquet's discussion focuses on writing centers, but it addresses issues with much broader implications; she wants the writing center to "function as an apparatus of educational transformation" (84), and she offers a theoretical model of writing center work that is easily retuned for other institutional settings.

About five years after I bought my Champ, as I played a set at a Portland, Maine blues club's open mic show, I had the sort of transcendental experience that occasionally visits all performers, writers included. During my solo, as I jammed along over the house band's blues shuffle groove—just for a second—I disappeared. There was no me, no conscious shaping of the music; there was just the music coming through me. As with other Zen-like experiences, once I noticed it, it left, and I was again standing on stage. I passed the lead back to the guitar player just in time to notice that my sound had fallen off. A quick look at my amp showed me why: it was smoking. My solo, performed at full volume in order to gain maximum distortion, had melted one of the capacitors.

The best musical improvisations, Boquet writes, "work because they are always on the verge of dissonance. They are always just about to fail" (76). One night in Portland, my improvisation did fail; yet in the process, I found a new musical level and a relationship with my instrument and its discourse I had never before experienced. *Noise from the Writing Center* reminds me that such moments are possible in my teaching and tutoring and directing as well, if only I will risk turning up the volume and experimenting with the noise.

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