

Book Review

Emotional Identity and Dexterity: A Review of *The Things We Carry*

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Adams Wooten, Courtney, Jacob Babb, Kristi Murray Costello, and Kate Navickas, editors. *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*. Utah State UP, 2020. 350 pages.

Last winter break, I found a long-awaited sense of shelter in the pages of *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*. In the academic year prior, I lost a close friend and colleague, subsequently assumed a new WPA role, gave birth to my second child a month later, and then responded to the pandemic's switch to emergency remote teaching and learning. Needing respite from the storms of work and life, my intention was to read *The Things We Carry* to feel less alone, to connect with other WPAs whom I knew I would not be seeing at our annual conference any time soon. On top of this desire for connection and support, I picked up this book hoping to find peer-reviewed validation for the daily emotional labor I have never had the courage to list as a legitimate bullet point in my periodic performance review materials. What I found was more than calming assurance and professional affirmation to hang my hat on. Across all fifteen chapters and corresponding strategy sheets, this well-curated collection expands overlooked and sometimes suppressed aspects of the WPA's identity. With the sociological lens of emotional labor as a guiding light and other related theoretical lenses illuminating new paths forward, *The Things We Carry* takes us on a tour of the WPA emotional dimensionality—the parts we share, the parts we hide, and the parts that some of us, especially jWPAs, don't know well enough yet.

Beginning with a timely reflection on the impacts of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests, the preface draws on the collective goal of the twenty-three featured authors as being one that is needed now more than ever. Adams Wooten, Babb, Costello, and Navickas position more recent events in connection to the larger theoretical conversations about emotional labor that are well underway in other fields of study, but that WPA scholarship has been slow (or perhaps too emotionally

inundated) to unpack. With these new hardships come opportunities to question existing systems in thoughtful ways. In the Introduction, Costello and Babb recount MSNBC news anchor Rachel Maddow's very public emotional breakdown in reporting on the internment of infants and children in juvenile detention centers in South Texas. They unpack why Maddow's visible display of emotions shocked viewers (and even Maddow herself) and how this televised moment provides an interesting point of comparison for when we, as WPAs, feel dispossessed of our right to display raw, unadulterated emotion.

In three distinct sections, the emotional dexterity of the WPA is plotted out in terms of identity at work, within larger community networks, and more intimately within themselves. The first five chapters nested into section one revolve around the preservation of work identities, "examin[ing] the emotional labor of different WPA contexts and discourses and offer[ing] strategies for making that emotional labor more visible and productive" (11). Perhaps somewhat of a tongue-in-cheek title, "Don't Worry, Be Happy: How to Flourish as a WPA" by Carrie S. Leverenz is the first chapter in this section and one sincerely endeavoring toward helping WPAs use positive psychology to strengthen positive feelings that often take a backseat to negative feelings and realities associated with administrative work. With personal narrative and interdisciplinary research, she sets the stage for us to understand why we as academics are so overly critical of ourselves, and with all of Leverenz's signature frankness in tone, she concludes by telling us that in order to find happiness we "have to work at it" (35). For me, this first chapter was particularly meaningful, as I see myself in these pages, quite literally, having been one of the three pregnant graduate instructors who caused Leverenz additional stress in her first semester returning to WPA work. Now in my role as Director of an FYC program, I have graduate teaching assistants confiding in me about their family planning timelines and asking how they can harmoniously balance having a new baby with their 2/2 teaching loads and dissertation writing schedules—a conversation rife with opportunity for more scholarly conversation and support.

The next two chapters offer perspectives that are unique to specific institutions and positions woven with strands of wisdom that any WPA can appreciate. In "You Lost Me at 'Administrator': Vulnerability and Transformation in WPA Work at the Two-Year College," Anthony Warnke, Kirsten Higgins, Marcie Sims, and Ian Sherman unveil the relentless demands community college faculty face when heavier teaching loads come to bear on their scholarly and activist-oriented endeavors. And yet, Warnke et al. reveal an internal challenge specific to two-year college WPAs, whose faculty colleagues can resist the official ordination of a writing program for

fear of losing their instructional autonomy. No simple solution will absolve two-year college faculty, those who are or who aspire to be WPAs, of this burden, but these authors suggest that “The essential truth of a WPA affecting positive change in a two-year college writing program is that we have to learn to work effectively and gracefully both with and against the emotions evoked by change in our colleagues and ourselves” (Warnke et al. 46). In chapter 3, “The Emotional Labor of Becoming: Lessons from the Exiting Writing Center Director,” Kate Navickas presents a method grounded in her own experiences entering a new position for determining the negative, the positive, and the unknowns WPAs may face: conducting “emotional labor interviews” with the writing center director (WCD), or other administrator, who precede us (56). Not only do these interviews provide an opportunity to gauge the institutionally specific emotional demands of one’s inherited position, but they help create a clearer picture of how our own preconceived notions of disciplinary identity come to bear on our new realities as teacher-scholar-administrators. Navickas explains, “There is emotional labor around the identity of the WCD when the job doesn’t align with disciplinary narratives of work and one’s sense of what it should involve” (68). For administrators in non-tenure-line or staff positions, her words will ring true and offer possibilities for reimagining our emotional work within our new roles.

Like many WPAs who were trained to play (and write) by the rules, I was forced by the last two chapters in section one to ask unexpected questions of myself as a scholar and an administrator. In “Educating the Faculty Writer to ‘Dance with Resistance’: Rethinking Faculty Development as Institutional Transformation,” Janelle Adsit and Sue Doe critique Kerry Ann Rockquemore, a beloved authority on faculty writing support who founded the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD), for her programming that operates based on a deficit pedagogy model. Rockquemore, they contend, more or less blames faculty for not finding enough time to write; instead, Adsit and Doe cite the increasingly unsustainable workloads placed on faculty and administrators, who are asked to teach and publish more than is reasonable. Adsit and Doe write that when we “internalize the metrics of productivity forwarded by groups like the NCFDD,” we merely reify the “rhetorics of success” that hold us down (77).

In the book’s next chapter, Amy Ferdinand Stolley analyzes survey research from 51 WPAs who self-identified as having engaged in emotional labor over their careers. I was stunned that as many as 70% of these participants discussed their emotional labor in professional documents as a way of teaching colleagues about the affective knowledge they employ to

serve both students and faculty (103). For those seeking a chapter that verifies and values WPA emotional work in promotion and tenure discussions, Stolley's contribution provides data to normalize this practice as well as strategies for self-inventorying individual circumstances.

I could relate to Kim Hensley Owens' chapter on "Handling Sexual Assault Reports as a WPA" because the crises of 2020 also brought a sharp rise in the number of Title IX cases reported by students enrolled in writing classes at my university. Owens situates readers within her heart-wrenching account of one fall semester in which she dealt with an appalling number of campus sexual assault cases, one occurring between two students enrolled in an FYC course. Her assessment of what unfolded and how she responded returns the focus to how emotional labor involves "surface acting" or what "people do when trying to convey one emotional state while feeling another [that] typically results in increased fatigue" (Owens 122). Her activist response—providing more sexual assault prevention resources—boosted awareness among her FYC teachers, who were better able to support students experiencing this type of trauma. Likewise, Kaitlin Clinnin's chapter unpacking her response to the 2017 Las Vegas Strip shootings makes a compelling argument for seeing WPAs as "programmatic crisis responders," on top of their growing list of invisible responsibilities. Clinnin provides a framework for processing what WPAs need to do beyond merely responding to immediate concerns, offering a model of "prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery process of crisis response" that's useful for new crises (Clinnin 134). Relatedly, chapter 8 by Carl Schlachte takes us through his experiences as an adjunct instructor at CUNY Brooklyn, where his contingent faculty status left him feeling unsure how to handle his classes when Hurricane Sandy made landfall. He advises WPAs on how to foster a program culture in which instructors of all ranks feel a sense of agency and confidence during disasters, rounding out a three-chapter stretch exploring trauma-informed care as it pertains to administrative work.

Later in the second section, Matthew T. Nelson, Sam DeGES, and Kathleen F. Weaver demonstrate how "significant emotional work is required for everyone working in a writing center," including tutors (162). With evidence from psychology, they show that tutors who started tutoring sessions feeling stressed remained stressed or experienced an increased level of stress while tutoring (166). They also provide some ideas for alleviating the stress and anxiety many tutors report, which is desperately needed given how little WPA scholarship has addressed the emotional weight these all-important associates have long shouldered. Finishing this section, Elizabeth Imafuji's chapter uncovers how she, as a solitary WPA, handled a student confession of pregnancy at her religiously affiliated institution,

where premarital sex violates a strict code of student conduct. This chapter, frequently cross-referenced by other chapters for good reason, helps readers consider how Kim Hensley Owens' practical actions can carry forward into moments when students need help navigating university bureaucracy; sometimes moments of surface acting find happy endings.

The final section begins with two of the arguably most kairotic chapters in the collection, given the urgency of efforts to increase diversity and equity. First, Sheila Carter-Tod's "Administrating While Black: Negotiating the Emotional Labor of an African American Female WPA." In the last five years or so, Carter-Tod and other Black WPAs have written about the marginalization they face as WPAs of color (Phelps et al. 15). She presents survey and interview research to unearth the micro- and macro-aggressions Black WPAs face at programmatic, departmental, and university levels. Carter-Tod points out that a simple list of strategies won't bring about necessary systemic change; all WPAs need to "promote inclusion as a way of negotiating emotional labor by creating and supporting initiatives that draw future and current Black female WPAs into a pipeline of support through recruitment and mentoring" (Carter-Tod 212). In chapter 12, conversations about WPAs' intersectional identities continue with Joseph Janangelo candidly sharing the workplace shaming he endured for years and the survival tactics that helped his career, albeit not necessarily his emotional well-being. Using multiple theoretical and even popular culture perspectives, he poses deeply contemplative questions pertaining to bullying, and he reminds us that "anger can be transformative" (Janangelo 225).

In "From Great to Good Enough: Recalibrating Expectations as WPA," Elizabeth Kleinfeld takes us unexpectedly into her public and private grieving process after the loss of one of the peer tutors she worked closely with in her writing center. Death is a difficult topic in any context, but it is especially challenging to process in smaller programmatic circumstances in which, whether comfortably acknowledging or not, a sense of family or friendship has formed. No WPA scholar I have encountered has written guidelines for how to deal with and publicly respond to the death of a tutor, teacher, or administrator in a program—understandably so, considering what a difficult and easily criticized undertaking that could become. Nevertheless, Kleinfeld, gives gentle guidance for administrators who are grieving or, inevitably, have grieved. In chapter 14, Christy I. Wenger extends her contemplative writing pedagogical expertise to the role of the WPA, taking self-care from being just another buzzword and arguing for "a relational understanding of emotional labor approached through mindfulness, one that keeps the WPA in focus but also understands her emotions ecologically as sources of agency, actionable tools, and not only a means of

control or workplace oppression” (Wenger 256). Courtney Adams Wooten’s “How to Be a Bad WPA” Wooten asks us to consider which “happiness scripts” help or hurt us, and she defines cruel optimism so that we might better understand what could divest us of our emotional bandwidth. She leaves us with a question as her parting thought: “What would happen if more of us—or all of us—decided to be bad WPAs *and to tell others about it?*” (Adams Wooten 282).

The concluding chapter positions us to trace back through the vulnerable, unfiltered truths these scholars have shared so that, going forward, WPAs will be better positioned to recognize emotional squall lines that threaten to wreak havoc on our lives at and outside of work. *The Things We Carry* does not leave the reader with injunctions for growth but no resources, of course. Strategy sheets that accompany the book’s chapters recapture key phrases, concepts, and recommendations so that readers can identify solutions in a pinch. These sheets suggest that the editors and the contributors who came together in these pages imagined a text that was more than a deeply intellectual contribution. *The Things We Carry* aims to be accessible to administrators at any point in their career, whether needing quick support or finding themselves feeling too overloaded or too emotionally drained. The book positions itself to be an authority on emotional labor in WPA circles; however, I suspect this work will encourage many more scholars to keep the conversation going for years to come.

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