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More Than a Claim of Faith:
If Darwin Ran the Writing Center

Elizabeth H. Boquet

"You are an ape. More to the point, you are an AFRICAN ape."

Team-teaching an honors course called "Minds and Bodies" with my colleague Malcolm, an evolutionary biologist.

"You ARE an African ape."

This line is, without a doubt, the most frequently repeated quote of the semester.

"You are an African APE."

His intonation varies, his emphasis shifts, each time anticipating a different perceived objection, responding to an unarticulated prejudice: Ok, I may be an ape, but I'm not from Africa.

Or . . . Your origins may be in Africa, but mine are in the Bible.

YOU are an African ape.

Who? Me?

≈

A journaler. A chronicler. A copious, obsessive note-taker. A man of diverse intellectual interests and

strong Anglican faith (at least in the beginning). We know more about Darwin than we know about perhaps any man of comparable stature in history, primarily because he wrote. Constantly. Darwin was a man dedicated to his own writing process, to the role writing played in both recording his observations and shaping his thoughts. So we know Darwin as a writer.

We also know Darwin as a man committed to interdisciplinary research and collaborative inquiry. Though Darwin may be considered the Father of Evolution, he did not “discover” evolution. He recognized that his discoveries rested on the shoulders of great men, upon whose ideas he built his own evolutionary framework and with whom he engaged in spirited debates from Down House, his home outside of London, where he spent the last 45 years of his life, ill and rarely able to venture out. His home was, in many ways, the quintessential Burkean parlor to which Andrea Lunsford alludes when she describes a writing center that is full of talk and exchange.

It is not such a stretch, then, to imagine that Darwin would be intrigued, across time and across the Atlantic, by these places we have come to know in America as writing centers. Places where the evolutionary object in question is the text or even, perhaps, the writer.

Darwin was not the first scientist to explore the concept of evolution. He in fact credits his understanding of the subject to Charles Lyell, whose book *Principles of Geology* Darwin read on the famous *Beagle* voyage. Darwin has said of Lyell, “I always feel as if my books come half out of Lyell’s brain” (qtd. in Howard 4).

Lyell’s work in geology was instrumental in shifting that field from a speculative, philosophical model to a materialist model. Darwin followed suit in biology. Through meticulous note-taking, data-gathering, and

wide-ranging interests (Thomas Malthus, the Anglican theologian, for example, was deeply influential at this time), Darwin reached the following conclusion shortly after returning from the *Beagle*:

I can entertain no doubt, after the most deliberate study and dispassionate judgement of which I am capable, that the view which most naturalists entertain, and which I formerly entertained—namely, that each species has been independently created—is erroneous. I am fully convinced that species are not immutable, but that those belonging to what are called the same genera are lineal descendants of some other and generally extinct species, in the same manner as the acknowledged varieties of any one species are the descendants of that species. (6)¹

“I can entertain no doubt. . .” And yet, Darwin sat on his (r)evolutionary idea for 20 full years before he published it, waiting (some say) for the world to catch up. It didn’t.

Darwin was keenly aware of his audience, judging (correctly, as it turns out) that they would not welcome his claims concerning the interrelatedness of species.

Malcolm, my co-teacher, too takes care in issuing his claims, in a room full of undergraduates who have chosen a Jesuit campus for their collegiate experience.

“So, you believe in evolution?” a heavy-lidded skeptic from the corner of the room pipes up on the second day of class. Tony is a walking contradiction, with his Yankees cap and his long black trench coat.

¹Though Darwin reached these conclusions during his voyage on the *Beagle*, which took place between 1831 and 1836, he did not publish these conclusions in *On the Origin of Species* until 1859.

"I don't BELIEVE in evolution," Malcolm replies. "I have been, and continue to be, persuaded by the evidence." The accumulation of evidence, Malcolm notes, is not the same as the construction of a system of belief. Those of us in writing centers may claim research traditions on which our practice rests: Kenneth Bruffee, Stephen North, Muriel Harris. Vygotsky, Bakhtin, maybe even Roland Barthes. Darwin would consider the work of these respected theorists a system of belief, not a body of evidence.

In "The Scientific Method: My God Problem — and Theirs," Natalie Angier, the Pulitzer Prize winning science writer for the *New York Times*, notes a recurring theme in her conversations with scientists nationwide:

Whether they are biologists, geologists, physicists, chemists, astronomers, or engineers, virtually all my sources topped their list of what they wish people understood about science with a plug for Darwin's dandy idea. "Would you please tell the public," they implored, "that evolution is for real? Would you please explain that the evidence for it is overwhelming, and that an appreciation of evolution serves as the bedrock of our understanding of all life on this planet?" (131)

And yet, the debate between evolution and creationism rages on.

We delight, in writing centers, in recounting our creation myths. Darwin himself might wonder whether writing centers sprung, like Athena, from the head of Stephen North, our very own Zeus; North's "Idea of a Writing Center," Meyer and Smith's *The Practical Tutor*, Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring," our sacred texts.

From the moment of its publication in 1859, *Origin of Species* provoked heated debates between science and scripture. As Jonathan Howard writes in his *Darwin: A Very Short Introduction*,

The creation story in *Genesis* established an account for the origin of living things. Animals and plants were created in their several kinds, and then persisted unchanged into the present by the power of reproduction. There were thus two formative principles for living things: the miraculous creative cause operating at the species level and the secondary cause of reproduction operating through individual members of a species. The core of Darwin's achievement in the *Origin of Species* was to challenge successfully this dualistic view of the origin of living things, and to replace it by the single definitely known and observable formative principle, reproduction. (14-15)

The story of the firestorm surrounding the publication of *Origin of Species* is largely a cautionary tale about the intransigent nature of our most cherished beliefs.

In writing centers, we have our own cherished beliefs, and we cling to them with the ardent fervor of religiosity. We have our commandments, our Bibles, our deadly sins: Help all writers, but not too much; pens off the paper, mouth shut, head nodding in encouragement; a question is better than a statement; the student's voice is better than the tutor's voice. All in a writing center that looks like (soothing decor), feels like (comfy couches), smells like (coffee brewing) home.

Darwin understood the appeal of faith. He in fact was on track to become an Anglican priest before he boarded the *Beagle*. But he possessed a scientist's demand for evidence.

Darwin was almost beaten to the historical punch by a man named Alfred Wallace. In 1858, a year before the publication of *Origin of Species*, Darwin received from Wallace an unpublished manuscript outlining in detailed terms the mechanism for biological evolution. Darwin's similar project at this time remained secreted away in a desk at Down House. In response, Darwin hurriedly cobbled together his notes into what has become one of the most famous books ever published. But he very nearly, shall we say, missed the boat.

Both men seem to have arrived at their conclusions genuinely and independently. And both went on to have long and illustrious careers — Wallace's, in fact, longer than Darwin's. Yet, we've all heard of Charles Darwin, and very few (if any) of us know of Alfred Wallace. Why?

Well, it seems Wallace ran into a bit of a stumbling block with his own theory. You see, he couldn't quite take it all the way to what Darwin clearly saw as its logical conclusion: that no transcendent being (call that being "God" if you'd like) was responsible for the special nature of humans. Wallace's position, according to Howard, was that "man was more perfect than he needed to be, particularly in mind, for any conceivable requirement of natural selection, and that 'a superior intelligence has guided the development of man in a definite direction, and for a special purpose, just as man guides the development of many animal and vegetable forms'" (78-79).

Wallace's appeal to the immaterial shocked and disappointed Darwin, who was unwilling to subscribe to

the Emeril Lagasse “Bam!” theory to explain away the unanswerable. Howard attributes the difference in the legacies of these two impressive scientists to “Darwin’s relentless pursuit of the idea through all its ramifications to the point where virtually everything . . . had been clarified” (114).

In his book *Darwin, His Daughter, and Human Evolution*, which chronicles Darwin’s life through the illness and death of one of his beloved children, Randall Keynes portrays Darwin as a man who occasionally despairs his loss of faith. Were we to subject our own worldviews about writing centers to such scrutiny, we might despair that loss as well. We might despair to learn, for example, that the cozy spaces we’ve worked so hard to create reflect a set of values — middle-class, white, American — that do not feel like home at all to many of the writers who most need our services. (See McKinney for more on this problem.) We might despair to learn that the increasing assessment pressures and the availability of technology that enables the outsourcing of writing center work may soon force us to admit that what North observed in 1984 — in an article much less frequently cited than his germinal “Idea” — is still true today: “[O]ur staple instructional method is one we know almost nothing about” (“Research” 28) and “Much more is known, to put it bluntly, about what people want to happen in and as a result of tutorials than about what does happen” (29).

In the early 80s, Stephen North (“Idea”) and others claimed the goal of tutors was to work themselves out of their jobs. We don’t talk like that anymore, maybe for good reason — because we’ve broadened, for example, our notions of what can happen in a tutorial or because we recognize the benefits of response for all writers. But maybe we no longer talk that way because our primary

interest has become the reproduction of our species — a worthy undertaking, from a Darwinian perspective, but not one that is without risk. During the opening session sponsored by the 2004 Watson Conference, Doug Hesse remarked that self-preservation is our/everyone's prime motivating factor. And that may be. But an overriding concern with self-preservation leads us to a misguided attempt to anticipate fitness.

Unlike our current rhetoric, our earlier language at least acknowledged the possibility of extinction for our species, a thought it seems we no longer entertain.

In the 21 years since North issued this call, we have nurtured our own “Bam!” theories of one-to-one instruction: If we advertise enough, if we keep a steady stream of students walking through our doors, then we must be doing what we say we're doing — and doing it well. Darwin would say this is not enough.

Fitness is not predictable. Evolution is non-progressive; it is not goal-directed. Hypotheses regarding future fitness are evolutionary believing games. We can try to ride the wave of the next great idea in higher education — maybe it's curriculum-based tutoring, maybe it's visual rhetoric and online writing services, maybe it's outreach and service-learning initiatives. These best guesses, which keep us mired in a speculative tradition, might be right. But they might not. Extinction is always an option. From an evolutionary perspective, our university universes don't care whether writing centers exist in higher education fifty years from now. How might we work differently if we worked with that statement in mind?²

If Darwin were to teach us anything about writing centers, he would probably urge us to adopt a materialist

model, complete with rich, thick descriptions of our own pedagogical Galapagos, out of which patterns and revelations will emerge. He would tell us to write them down, not lock them away in a desk and wait for our world to catch up. We must relinquish our faith, stop *believing* in writing centers and start convincing ourselves, and others, by the evidence.

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about accomplishing the task of educating the students who enroll in them, by whatever means necessary. There is no inherent rationale for writing centers doing this job rather than some other campus (or off-campus) entity.

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Elizabeth Boquet is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Fairfield University in Fairfield, CT. Her book *Noise from the Writing Center* was published by Utah State University in 2002, and her next book (co-authored with Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, and Meg Carroll) will be published by Utah State University Press in 2007. She is currently co-editor (with Neal Lerner) of *The Writing Center Journal*.