



# Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

---

TITLE: Book Review: *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*

AUTHOR(S): Reviewed by Emily Harbin

VOLUME/ISSUE: *SDC* 23(1)

PAGES: 63–68

PUBLISHED: Spring, 2019

---



*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* (*SDC*) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published twice per year by the [Southeastern Writing Center Association](http://www.southeasternwritingcenter.org) (SWCA, [www.southeasternwritingcenter.org](http://www.southeasternwritingcenter.org)). As a forum for practitioners in writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers, *SDC* publishes articles from administrators, consultants, and other scholars concerned with issues related to training, consulting, labor, administration, theory, and innovative practices.

Feel free to send queries, ideas, and proposals to us at [southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com](mailto:southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com).

© by Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA). You are free to make copies of and distribute this file for research, teaching, and training purposes as long as you keep this cover page attached.

# ***Book Review***

Denny, Harry, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari, Eds. *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*. UP Colorado, 2018.

ISBN: 978-1-60732-782-0

Pages: 267

Price: \$34.95

Emily Harbin

This is an ambitious book. Eighteen essays address race, ethnicity, multilingualism, gender, sexuality, faith, class, learning differences, and the intersections of these identities. In the introduction, the editors call for readers to “completely rethink the way we understand writing center work in order to best serve the individuals who enter our spaces” (9). They envision a future in which writing centers are spaces of social activism. The book is positioned at the nexus of several trends in writing center scholarship – working for social justice, respecting linguistic diversity, and reimagining the work of writing centers. It is deeply influenced by Harry Denny’s *Facing the Center*, especially his theoretical framework connecting personal narrative, identity movements, rhetorical studies, and writing centers. While directors will not find much practical advice here, it is a rich resource for tutor training and self-reflection.

The title works on multiple levels, extending the metaphor of “coming out” beyond its association with the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>1</sup> Many of the contributors describe a moment of hesitation before disclosing a facet of their intersectional identities, whether this takes the form of switching into a shared language during a writing conference, revealing their faith or class origin, or simply admitting to moments of uncertainty and fear. The collection also works to collapse the binary between the personal

---

<sup>1</sup> For an extended explanation of what Writing Centers can learn from queer theory, see Harry Denny’s “Queering the Writing Center.” *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010, pp. 95-124. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43442335>.

and political, implying that we are always simultaneously a unique person and a product of the ideology and politics that shaped us. Each of the book's six sections is followed by a review that provides context, elevates the content of the essays, and offers helpful theoretical underpinning. Readers can easily choose any point of entry based on their interests. Overall, I found the sections on faith and class to be particularly innovative and welcome, the sections on race and gender and sexuality to be strong and thought-provoking, and the sections on multilingualism and (dis)ability to be good, but underdeveloped.

The book begins with several fine essays about race. The standout essay is "Black Male Bodies in the Center," in which Richard Sévère fills a gap in writing center scholarship by discussing the ways black male bodies are coded by society and perceived in writing centers.<sup>2</sup> He deftly weaves together race theory, experiences of tutors, and engagement with writing center scholarship. The description of strategies black males use to perform a non-threatening identity was especially eye-opening. Talisha Haliwanger Morrison, Allia Abdulla-Matta, and Alexandria Lockett all explore the alienation of black females in the predominately-white spaces of academia. Morrison's narrative of a problematic conference with a male, Asian, international student working on a proposal for an app for Black women with natural hair is a great conversation starter. Abdulla-Matta describes the mistrust she faces as a black female academic and how she brings lessons from the intersectional foregrounding she did in a team-taught composition class into the writing center. Lockett combats the perception of surveillance by capturing the tutor's experience in narrative form and promoting appropriate touch as a way to foster connection. Finally, Rochell Isaac relates the problems she encountered with disengaged students as a writing center tutor and reflects on transformative theories of education that she seeks to bring into her composition pedagogy.

Although I had hoped for more essays in this section, the two pieces in "Part II: Multilingualism," relate well to each other. Both Nancy Alvarez

---

<sup>2</sup> For another example of a male African-American's experience working in the writing center and teaching writing, see Jason B. Esters, "On the Edge: Black Maleness, Degrees of Racism, and Community on the Boundaries of the Writing Center" in *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. Edited by Karen Rowan and Laura Greenfield, Utah State University Press, 2011, pp. 290-99.

and Tammy Conard-Salvo describe tutoring in two different languages and raise concerns about the assumptions about good writing promoted by a monolingualistic tutoring staff. Alvarez's piece defends the language rights of multilingual students and brings attention to the problems of linguistic colonization and assimilation. Conard-Salvo's tone is more personal, disclosing and analyzing her identity as mixed-race Korean-American and reflecting on her experiences as both a tutor and administrator.

"Part III: Gender and Sexuality" contains several compelling essays linked by reflections on privilege, surveillance, and the performance of identity. Anna Sicari combines a narrative of feeling policed by a female writing center director with a broader analysis of the state of the field. She argues that because writing center scholarship often focuses on personal experience and collaboration, it is feminized by the academy and regarded as of secondary importance. She then argues for subverting this position by using the feminist pedagogies of collaboration, mentorship, and acceptance in the writing center. Harry Denny engages the reader by sharing his experience of having a complaint filed against him by a gay male coworker. According to Denny, this spurred an awakening to how his actions could signify in unintended ways. He argues that writing centers cannot be completely safe spaces because society itself is unsafe. However, Denny sees crisis as opportunity; mass shootings, such as the attack at the Orlando Pulse nightclub, are "deeply pedagogical" (120). Like Sicari, Denny is influenced by Glenn and Ratcliffe (2011) and recommends rhetorical listening as a powerful strategy for promoting openness and change. Other actions Denny endorses include examining our prejudices about English Language Learners and creating an anti-racist, social justice mission statement. Robert Mundy rounds out this section describing a conference with a male student writing a personal statement for graduate school and his realization of the way they both had constructed an "I got it" persona of masculine authority. Mundy concludes with a call for reflection and empathy for men struggling to construct and perform their masculine selves.

The fourth section on religion is original and much needed, although I would have liked to see a wider range of religious experiences represented. Sami Korgan and Ella Leviyeva, both former tutors at St. John's University, discuss their choices to "come out" or not as Christian

and Jewish, respectively, at a Catholic faith-based institution. Korgan raises the question of whether loving, liberal spaces may still be excluding Republicans and conservative Christians. Leviyeva discusses the concept of passing and describes how she strategically chooses to reveal her identity to students of similar backgrounds, feeling most at home with other international students. Finally, Hadi Banat's essay is a rich exploration of both her own intersectional identity as a Muslim Palestinian in Lebanon and her experiences tutoring in different writing centers in Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. One notable section narrates an exchange with a male student in the United Arab Emirates, where homosexuality is highly discouraged, who came out to Banat as both gay and on drugs.

The fifth section on class is gripping and essential. The authors explore the pressure to stay "in the closet," hiding a working-class background or financial struggles. Elizabeth Weaver and Liliana Naydan expose the dilemma of contingent academics. Sometimes earning so little as to qualify for food stamps, yet with the appearance of a kind of social capital, the adjunct or contingent faculty worker is in academic and social limbo. Both Weaver and Naydan point out that women may be pushed into these careers for the "flexibility" they offer for working mothers, yet as Weaver points out, they will not make enough to pay for daycare (184). Beth Towle uses her description of her mother's labor cleaning "Other People's Houses" as a metaphor for academic labor as an outsider. Towle insightfully notes "the assumption made by academics and public alike is that to be working class is to want always to not be working class, that a person should be embarrassed by their low socioeconomic status in order to be motivated to move to a higher class" (198). Anna Rita Napoleone was influenced by Donna LeCourt's discussion of performing working-class identity (2006) and has collaborated with her to compare their choices to alter (or not) performative signifiers of class identity, such as accent and dress (LeCourt and Napoleone 2011). In this essay, Napoleone argues that the structures of academia are complicit in enforcing class prejudices, encouraging white professionals to hide their class and linguistic differences and to impose classed literacies on students.

The final section on learning differences was the most underdeveloped, with a single essay written by Tim Zmudka describing his learning differences (childhood speech and language impairments and adult

ADHD) and explaining how these differences have affected his tutoring and writing. While this is a good essay for tutor training, I had hoped for considerably more engagement in the book with what it means to be and/or tutor a neuroatypical person. Other than this essay and a brief nod to students with other learning differences in the review of this section, this book does not adequately address neurodiversity, which seems strange given the ambitious, inclusive mission of the book.

The authors conclude with a call for those who work in writing centers to be deeply self-reflective about their own identities and practices. They advocate for a serious and sustained effort to mentor diverse young scholars and to recruit people from underrepresented populations as directors. They also urge scholars concerned about the marginalization of the field to move beyond talking about the problem and to work to create “a climate of change and hope” (242). This progress forward, they suggest, will come through pursuing transformative teaching processes and deeply engaging with scholarship.

The goals of this book are too high; no single volume could cover all the diversity that exists or completely transform writing center work. However, ambitious goals sometimes move the needle further toward change. As a reader, I did feel somewhat transformed, more reflective, and more educated about embodied experiences not my own. Several of the essays are excellent material for tutor training or continuing education activities. For directors at Southern institutions, our students’ intersectional identities may have a different mixture than the majority of those described in the book. Only one contributor, Alexandria Lockett, is currently working at a Southern school, Spelman College. However, if inclusivity and diversity are truly our goals, we have to find ways to welcome all students into our centers, even those for whom the words “identity politics” have negative connotations. In fact, I would argue that those of us working in Red States have the most frequent opportunities for deep listening and connection across political divides. I only wish that the authors had given some concrete advice about *how* this kind of important pedagogical work could be integrated into a timed writing consultation.

## Works Cited and Consulted

Denny, Harry C. *Facing the Center : Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*. Utah State University Press, 2010.

Denny, Harry C. "Queering the Writing Center." *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010, pp. 95-124. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/434423](http://www.jstor.org/stable/434423) 35

Esters, Jason B. "On the Edge: Black Maleness, Degrees of Racism, and Community on the Boundaries of the Writing Center." *Writing Centers and the New Racism : A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. Edited by Karen Rowan and Laura Greenfield, Utah State University Press, 2011, pp. 290-99.

Glenn, Cheryl, and Krista Ratcliffe. *Silence and Listening As Rhetorical Arts*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.

LeCourt, Donna. "Performing Working-Class Identity in Composition: Toward a Pedagogy of Textual Practice." *College English*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2006, pp. 30–51. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25472187](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472187)

LeCourt, Donna and Anna Rita Napoleone. "Teachers with(out) Class." *Pedagogy*, vol. 11, no. 1, Winter 2011, pp. 81–108.