

Denny, Harry, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari, eds. *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*. Utah State University Press, 2019. 280 pages. \$27.95 eBook/\$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-60732-782-0.

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There's a moment in Tammy Conard Salvo's "Naneun Hangu Samal-Ibnida: Writing Centers and the Mixed-Raced Experience," her contribution to the recent edited collection, *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, that demonstrates how of-the-moment this collection is. Exploring the challenges of navigating the world as a person of mixed race, of feeling "othered" in all communities she inhabits, she writes honestly and openly about her prior decisions to keep identity politics out of her professional life and, specifically, out of her work as a writing center administrator. She describes the complications of choosing photos with which to represent herself online, torn between appearing too serious or being accused of having her eyes closed, a physiological manifestation of the Korean portion of her mixed racedness. "I called the one person I thought would understand, my sister," Conard Salvo writes. "I thought she would sympathize and commiserate, but she gave me no solace or comfort because her own exhaustion—the entire country's exhaustion—with identity issues has boiled over into anger over political correctness and the constant state of offense in which everyone is mired" (98).

The comment is one of several moments throughout Harry Denny, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari's book, in which readers are grounded—some might say brusquely dropped—in the present-day reality of American politics. As a reader, this timeliness gave me pause; I wondered if this collection will feel as fresh and exigent a decade from now or if it will take on the interest of a valuable fossil. Will we assign the text to consultants for insights into still-pressing questions or as an historical artifact of a particular political moment?

But then I realized the question is moot, because, not three weeks after finishing reading the book, I assigned Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison's "Being Seen and Not Seen: A Black Female Body in the Writing Center" as reading for my annual pedagogy seminar—an intensive workshop for undergraduates, graduate students, and professional tutors. The article sparked a lively and engaged discussion about issues of race, but also, and even more so, about how tutors make decisions to bring their personal identities into sessions with writers, about what sense of personal and emotional safety they risk, and when those risks are worth it and when they might not be. My students and colleagues talked about how to approach writers with an openness to shared humanity, an optimism about the potential for change and growth, and also a clear-eyed sense of the inequities built into the social fabric in which tutors and writers operate. "Who cares if this lasts," I thought, "we need this now!"

And it is precisely because we need this now that the collection is such an important addition to any writing center's shelves—even if some of the essays are less inspiring than others, even if some identity questions are less-than-adequately represented within the covers. The editors acknowledge these failings, especially when it comes to the section on "(dis)ability," a section with only one contributor, a fact that "only highlights the need for the field to do more research on students with disabilities" (237). But in a project of such ambitious scope, with pieces on race, multilingualism, religion, class, and of course, (dis)ability, there are bound to be areas that are less fully realized. Overall, these essays consider various questions of identity sensitively and with attention to current scholarly conversations, and the interweaving of thoughtful editors' review essays contextualizing each section fills in any gaps.

In the best possible way, one might say this is Harry Denny's book. His first book, *Facing the Center: Towards an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, is cited in a large percentage of the articles, a fact that is appropriate and not at all surprising given the paucity of scholarship on these topics in writing centers. But also, a glance at the author bios reveals strong professional links between Denny and many of the contributors (a third of the essays were written by his

current or former students), and several authors explicitly describe learning from Denny's mentoring style and teaching in their own deployments of identity politics in their work.

I raise this lineage not to suggest that the editors cast their contributor net too narrowly, but rather to note that if Harry Denny can find three of his student tutors to contribute essays on religion in writing centers (concerning Christian, Jewish, and Muslim identities within writing center settings), then each of us should also be able to find three tutors to fill the religion section—and if we can't, then either we're hiring badly or not looking hard enough, and this collection reminds us exactly why we should change both of those things as quickly as possible. It also reminds us why we should be reading and assigning these essays to our tutoring staff so as to expand our possible identity conversations beyond whatever confines our institutional demographics might impose upon our staff makeup or hiring possibilities.

I found myself reading and noting the ways that *Out in the Center* highlighted previously overlooked elements of my own positionality as a writing center director. When I was asked to review this text, my first response was, "You want *me*? I'm cisgendered, straight, white, and not a first-generation university student—surely I'm not the appropriate reviewer here." I have often enjoyed the privilege of having my identities be treated as normative in professional settings. But then, as I reflected on the essays in this collection, I realized that for years my out-of-office messages have identified the Jewish holidays I'm observing—precisely because I wanted to make my students feel less guilty about taking time away for their own religious observances. And for the past two years that I closed my office door at least once each day to pump breast milk for my daughter, I would place a sign on the door that read, "If you see this sign, it means I'm pumping milk for my baby. I will be happy to help you by phone or email until I reopen the door." Several people asked if I might not prefer a sign to simply say I was "in a meeting," but that would reinforce the invisibility of the labor of parenting, specifically for working mothers with young children. And how would my "in a meeting" sign help graduate students argue for

better parental leaves or help administrative assistants without an office door argue for better arrangements than trekking across campus to a hard-to-reserve pumping room, using break time to do so?

I say this not to valorize my choices, but to point to the ways in which I found unexpected identities of mine also present in *Out in the Center* and to the ways it might help other writing center directors, teachers, and students think more broadly about what identities they might choose to “out” in various educational settings. In the next offering of my consultant pedagogy class, I am assigning Sami Korgan’s essay “On Guard!” and Ella Leviyeva’s “Coming Out as Jewish at a Catholic University” alongside readings on racial literacy. Both Korgan and Leviyeva’s essays provide well-written personal reflections on evolving religious identities (Christian and Jewish, respectively) during the college years. I expect my undergraduate writing consultants will find the essays relatable and that the topics addressed will hit home for some. These are also essays that complicate the often-dichotomous understanding of religion in contemporary discourse, and, as such, they might also make interesting points of departure for discussion among high schoolers and their teachers. In putting together my syllabus, I struggled with not also assigning Hadi Banat’s “Floating on Quicksand: Negotiating Academe While Tutoring as a Muslim,” a nuanced reflection on navigating the complicated religious and national identities of a Palestinian Muslim in Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, both in the classroom and in the writing center. Banat addresses the difficulty of not fitting in easily in expat communities in any location, as well as the politically loaded nature of being Muslim in the United States right now. The essay would make an excellent addition to any pedagogy reading group for teachers interested in finely tuned insights into the complexity of the identities with which their students and colleagues may be struggling. Overall, the religion section is prompting me to introduce the topic with my student staff as part of our larger conversations surrounding diversity and inclusion, something I had heretofore been hesitant to do.

And at some point this semester I will have my entire staff read Richard Sévère's "Black Male Bodies in the Center," for its frank portrayal of how hard it is to navigate the cultural assumptions surrounding black male bodies, especially within writing centers where questions of power and authority are already fraught. As Sévère reminds us, "in writing center practice . . . physicality—one's immutable traits—is the first point of reference that unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, sets the tone for our interactions. And thus how we go about the work of the center is inherently rooted in a discourse that intersects with perceptions associated with race and gender" (46). If this quote—and this collection—argue nothing else, it is that addressing these topics is fundamental rather than tangential to the work of writing centers. Harry Denny's essay, "Of Queers, Jeers, and Fears: Writing Centers as (Im)Possible Safe Spaces," located in the center of the collection, grounds the risks of the work in personal narratives that map out, in chilling detail, how easy it can be to end up, as he puts it, "on the wrong side of a game of identity politics" (115). Denny's essay pulls no punches in both articulating the risks (personal and collective) of advocating for change and social justice through considering identity in writing center work and in reminding us that we should take up the challenge regardless:

Writing centers, of course, don't exist in a vacuum; the wider world seeps in, whether through the mindsets of those working there, the assignments writers bring with them, or interaction that forces interpersonal dynamics that might not otherwise happen. Some might argue our business is exclusive to the teaching and mentoring of writers, that we ought to save the world on our own time, as Stanley Fish (2003) once claimed. The reality is that writers and writing exist in a social world involving communicative transactions among people who represent complex dynamics, histories, and identities. The interaction intrinsic to the everyday teaching and learning in writing centers requires negotiation, and that negotiation

invites conflict that must be owned and mitigated, if possible.
(121)

Denny's words point to the value this collection holds for teachers and students of all kinds, within and without writing centers. Writing conferences between classroom teachers and students (at any level) are never just about the text any more than those that occur in the writing center. Certainly those working outside a center may choose to skip certain essays or work to translate them to external contexts. Some, such as Alexandria Lockett's "A Touching Place: Womanist Approaches to the Center," Nancy Alvarez's "On Letting the Brown Bodies Speak (and Write)," and Anna Rita Napoleone's "Class Division, Class Affect, and the Role of the Writing Center in Literacy Practices," while thought-provoking and engaging, are truly aimed at a writing center audience. Others, such as Anna Sicari's "Everyday Truths: Reflections from a Woman Writing Center Professional," which takes up the challenges of leading-while-female in academia, considering the challenges through lenses of personal reflection, Adrienne Rich, and still more contemporary political vignettes, will resonate with women in leadership positions across educational settings. Also, in the section on Gender and Sexuality, Robert Mundy's "The Politics of 'I Got It': Intersections, Performances, and Rhetorics of Masculinities in the Center" is a nuanced consideration of the intersections of maleness and class in academia. It took me two readings to appreciate the complexity of the argument, but I was glad I returned to it—as a woman in the academy, it was an important reminder that identity politics are fraught in different but no less complicated ways for my male colleagues and students. Similarly, Liliana Naydan's "Academic Classism and Writing Center Worker Identity," provides intellectual fodder for any academics concerned with questions of class and labor broadly understood. While the essay speaks specifically to the challenges of occupying a writing center leadership position (one that, by its definition involves managerial labor and the expenditure of funds) as a contingent faculty member without institutional authority or budgetary control, its cautionary tale can be appreciated by multiple

audiences—I would argue, in fact, that it should be required reading for graduate students about to enter the academic job market. So should Beth Towle’s “Other People’s Houses: Identity and Service in Writing Center Work,” a lyrical personal essay reflecting on writing center work as service work. The piece eloquently articulates what it feels like to be a first-generation graduate student choosing to enter academia as a long-term career and identity. Perhaps this essay should be required reading for upper administration as well.

Where the collection grounds itself most firmly in writing center studies is in the editors’ review essays at the end of each section. Here writing center professionals will find other sources to consider, suggestions for future research questions and research methodologies, and questions to pose in discussing these topics with tutors as part of ongoing tutor trainings. These are also the places where newer members of the field may look for some guidance as they decide how to incorporate these questions into their administrative and scholarly agendas and identities. For example, the Review essay on the “Gender and Sexuality” section asks writing center professionals to consider the following questions, among others:

What happens when we enforce dress codes in the writing center? Who are we excluding and what bodies are we further marginalizing? Are we empowering the women who are in our centers and preparing them for leadership? What does male leadership look like and how do we respond to it? . . . How have we been complicit in policing sexualities and genders in our centers? How do we create an inclusive pedagogy for all genders and sexualities? (142)

A first step towards an inclusive pedagogy would be working from this collection, because regardless of whether it ends up being timeless, it is certainly both timely and necessary.

Works Cited

- Denny, Harry C. *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring*. Utah State UP, 2010.
- Denny, Harry, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari, eds. *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*. Utah State UP, 2018.