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Review: *Writing Centers and the
New Racism: A Call for Sustainable
Dialogue and Change*
Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan, eds.

by Harry Denny

About the Author

Harry Denny is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the University Writing Center at St. John's University in New York City. He does research on rhetoric, identity politics, composition, and writing center studies. Currently, he is at work on a new book project on contemporary civil rights rhetoric and identity movements.

In innumerable ways, the writing centers at St. John's University, where I am the director, epitomize the very diversity that many of our peers around the country yearn for: the consultant staff comes very close to looking like the student writers we collaborate with, even as we strive to broaden the academic perspectives from which consultants operate. We're even multilingual, but only as a by-product of our urban location, a New York nexus for immigrant and international students alike. On the surface, by all appearances, we should be at the forefront of critical conversations on the socio-cultural issues that impact higher education in the United States. Yet too often we're stuck, utterly unable to question and challenge the ways that our diversity plays out in material and ideological ways in the everyday practice of a writing center.

Fortunately, Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan's recent edited collection, *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*, urges us toward thought, deliberation, and action. This book will take its place among the "must reads" for directors and

consultants alike, not because it answers all the lingering questions of the politics and practice of race and racism pulsing through our centers, but because this text transcends the pragmatics of tutor training manuals, fills in the gaps of monographs inflected with critical pedagogy, and offers invaluable glimpse into lived experiences and authentic lessons. *Writing Centers and the New Racism* emerges in the context of two intertwined moments that signify richly in our collective professional history: Victor Villanueva's landmark keynote presentation at the 2005 International Writing Centers Association conference in Minneapolis and a subsequent conversation thread about it on WCenter, our field's unofficial listserv. In their introduction, Greenfield and Rowan detail both moments quite well (I say this as one of the virtual participants in the listserv discussion) and use them to create a fair frame for the book's structure. The editors argue that the response on the listserv to Villaneuva's speech was emblematic of our field's inability to sustain a conversation about race (or, I'd add, about any critical component of our performed identities). The book is organized into four sections around fourteen chapters on theory, practice, case studies, and personal narratives, though, as I'll note below, the structure and content pose important limitations. Four of these chapters strike me as so powerful, so important that they're now part of the resources that the staff in my writing centers reads to spur our ongoing conversations around identity, politics, and critical activism/citizenship.

Vershawn Ashanti Young's essay, "Should Writers Use They Own English?" takes on the recurrent debates around Standard English in composition studies, writing centers, and the academy beyond. Young's own language use in the essay performs the very argument that he wants readers to take away: meshing the codes all of us have access to adds linguistic richness to our "standard" English, and doing so recognizes the range of registers, audiences, contexts, and histories that inform all our languages, dialects, and vernaculars. His concept of code meshing isn't new to this essay; Young has long been at the forefront of amplifying it, taking the field to a more sophisticated space than the notion of code switching, where writers and speakers (usually those symbolically, ideologically, and materially marginalized) are asked to swap out codes depending on proximity for

codes of power (read: “standard” and “dominant”). For my staff, this chapter is critical for prompting a discussion of what counts and who determines “standard English,” to what end, and who gets privileged by its invocation (and how). As Young points out well, the question isn’t whether a dominant version of English exists or whether to teach to it (or not), but to how best to begin conversations about its linguistic and socio-cultural politics.

Jason Esters’ essay, “On the Edges: Black Maleness, Degrees of Racism, and Community on the Boundaries of the Writing Center,” takes up the politics of race in a different, more personal way. Esters reflects on moments during his early career as a writing center academic, one when he was rendered in/visible as just another black man on the streets of Philadelphia and another in which he guest presented in a classroom. Regarding the first occasion, Esters explores the incongruity of the writing center being at once a warm, inviting community, yet not being recognized by its director in passing on the streets, a different context where wider aspects of the politics of race play out independent of the “safe” environment of that working/learning space at the university. He also recounts the time a professor shared a response paper from an African American male student following Esters’ presentation about writing in a society and race course. The student wrote about how he made racial assumptions about the speaker (Esters) before he arrived, that he assumed he was white and young, not the black man as “writing genius” as his professor had set up Esters to be. The student learned that he needed to work on erasing negative stereotypes that stood in the way of his own self-actualization. Esters took away a renewed awareness of the pressures and complex marginalization that he faces as an under-represented figure in a field and in the academy. The chapter is deeply instructive because it helps create a space to talk about the race and racism of representation and privilege that can take place within my own writing centers, and across our university and higher education. Esters’ work here opens up conversation about lived experiences with the difficult dynamic of being “model minorities,” as Eric Liu would term it, but also the fear of living to form as a negative stereotype.

In “Rethorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race,” Nancy Grimm almost seems to channel

Esters in challenging readers to check their assumptions at every turn and to inventory the dynamics of privilege we each perform, dynamics that are embedded in our theories and everyday practices. In this essay, she takes on three hegemonic mantras, reveals their ideological underpinnings, and challenges us to do better/conceive better ways of thinking and doing. The first motto, “A Good Tutor Makes the Student Do All the Work” (83), reinscribes a faulty notion of individualism that posits that somehow all writers exist in silos while manufacturing brilliance, when the reality is that all learning and knowledge flows from social, collective, and collaborative experiences. A second, “The Ultimate Goal of a Tutorial is an Independent Writer” (89), privileges certain kinds of learners with different experiences and education capital over others, when our mission ought to always be meeting writers where they are, not where we’d hope them to be or think they ought to be. The final slogan, “Our Aim Is to Make Better Writers, Not Better Writing” (87), challenges the famous North axiom that blunts misguided expectations of writing center practitioners by pointing out that it once again makes the individual the source of correction. Grimm points out that this motto does nothing to educate our constituencies about the need for multilinguistic diversity and the range of Englishes possible for a variety of contexts. This essay is particularly useful not just in dialogue with the others, but to challenge staff to critically interrogate our received wisdom from “master” texts in the field.

One last chapter stands out for its relevance and utility to facilitate teachable moments. Anne Ellen Geller, Frankie Condon, and Meg Carroll co-author “Bold: The Everyday Writing Center and the Production of New Knowledge in Antiracist Theory and Practice” and amplify and extend a similar chapter from *The Everyday Writing Center*, the landmark text that they wrote with Beth Boquet and Michele Eodice. Here, the nexus of storytelling, valuing writing centers as communities of practice, and theorizing yields powerful insight, particularly for the practices of race and racism as they arise in sessions and classrooms. The co-authors unpack and make useful, as powerful teaching tools, Barthes’ concept of *punctum* and Elspeth Probyn’s notion of shame. *Punctum*, Geller, Condon, and Carroll tell us, is a moment that breaks “through our notion of the normal and

the civil,” often making way for shame to be named and explored (108). In this sense, shame is viewed as productive and generative, so long as it is not greeted with silence or denial. Their discussion poses rich possibility for a staff to collectively take up, tell the story of, and break the silence of moments of everyday racism (or any other form of oppression for that matter) and dig into them, not for the salacious value of individualizing them (making person X the object of ridicule and derision), but instead for the possibility of coming to know and understand the history, systemic roots, and institutional dimensions of moments of racism and oppression.

The other chapters in *Writing Centers and the New Racism* are strong but resonate less cogently. Taken as a whole, I felt as though the text simplified the nature and dynamics of race and racism, as ostensibly a historical/systemic/institutional tension between black and white people in ways that just don't do justice to the lived realities throughout the country. Moreover, the collection belies its own theoretical framing: race as an inclusive dynamic. The editors, in their own introduction, anticipate this flaw by addressing it as presented by one of their blind reviewers:

We recognize that while the collection is multifocal, it is not comprehensive in its representation of all scholars, all views, or all experiences of race and racism. . . . We suspect a similar critique could be made of the text with respect to any number of racial groups. Given our contemporary context, a compelling case could be made that the omission of extended discussion about a certain racial group . . . fundamentally alters how we might theorize or come to understand institutionalized racism. . . . To broaden our scope so widely would undoubtedly result in the sort of synecdoche we are criticizing. (10)

That's a slippery argument and not nearly as cogent as the criticism they lodge toward the field and its scholars in particular for failing to sustain a focused conversation. Given that Greenfield and Rowan are spurred toward producing this collection through the words and actions of one of our most important critical race theorists, they don't choose to follow his own example: he is a scholar who never represents race and racism through blinders, who is multiracial/multiethnic in all his work. I worry that the mainly narrow content of

this text goes down a well-trodden path — that race in the US is a black/white phenomenon, that its most intense, long-standing experience and history are reducible or made one-dimensional. I wonder, particularly as a white man, with all the privilege that I perform and possess, how do I to face my own students, students of color, whose experiences don't necessarily dovetail with the ones presented here, and say, "Here's our book on the subject." What lessons should a young Latina take away, someone from a First Nations or tribal community, or another from any number of Asian or Asian American nationalities or ethnicities, not to mention those who identify as multiracial/multiethnic? Most critical to consider, as Nancy Grimm points out in her essay, are those writing centers, those campuses, that are thoroughly white, where thinking complexly about race, ethnicity and oppression are infrequent, external, and abstract: does the failure to uncover the nuance re-inscribe the familiar and the hegemonic? And most pointedly, do we construct a sustainable anti-racist activist agenda by starting a conversation with a conceptual sleight of hand?

Despite its limitations, I hope *Writing Centers and the New Racism* inspires more research and publications that will continue to disrupt our silence about the insidious dynamics and ideological roots to oppression in society, our institutions, our writing centers and ourselves. Perhaps critical attention to this important work will bring further attention to the need for better leadership, vision, and direction. Anti-racism scholarship, along with a wider agenda around anti-oppression, inequitable access and experiences with education, and critical pedagogy and practice, will push us all to become better and more responsive to our communities and their needs and practices.

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