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Review: *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*
edited by Harry Denny, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari

In the intimate spaces of writing centers, how do we advocate for students—as well as tutors and directors—who closet or guard private struggles, particularly when they feel less than safe revealing who they are amid larger public controversies? This is a central question Harry Denny, Robert Mundy, Liliana M. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari dare to ask in their edited collection *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*—a groundbreaking read that should push us, as a field, to more viscerally and intersectionally engage the bodies that enter our spaces.

Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère, and Sicari organize their collection around six parts, titled “Race,” “Multilingualism,” “Gender and Sexuality,” “Religion,” “Class,” and “(Dis)ability.” However, they carefully urge readers against siloing identity categories; instead, through interchapter reviews of each section, the editors of this book encourage readers to consider how multiple identities intersect. As readers may know, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term “intersectionality” to argue against viewing identity factors



as mutually exclusive. In line with Crenshaw's theory, the editors explore intersections among diverse identities and experiences. In doing so, the editors begin their introduction by echoing an assertion made by Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace (2009), who have claimed writing studies has done little to explore multiple intersections of identity. Seeking to fill this gap, the collection unrolls from there, providing deeply intersecting and messy narratives from all eighteen contributors. As Michele Eodice puts it in her "Afterword" to the collection,

Many current academic publications include the term *intersectionality*, but far too few academic publications demonstrate how intersectionality possesses the power to explain what the fuck is really going on. (p. 246)

For Eodice, and for me, this book really does possess such power.

Nevertheless, my critique of this text, which I will return to, is this: I wonder whether intersectionality, alone, is enough to fully theorize the deeply unique and *affective* nature of writing centers and the larger external forces that impact them. I like Jasbir Puar's (2011) definition of affect as "an intensification of the body's relation to itself" (Re-Reading Intersectionality as Assemblage section, para. 4). The chills, sweats, and trembles in our stomachs—or worse, the tears we taste when shamed or the bruises we feel when abused—these feelings exemplify such unstable intensifications. These feelings exemplify affects triggered not only by others but also by public and nationalist forces. These feelings exemplify this book.

As a writing center director who has attempted to foreground identity theory in my own tutor education, I find all eighteen contributors' chapters incredibly important and useful. They are deeply intersectional and intersect with one another. That said, I organize my thoughts around six key themes or forces—touch, environment, trauma, nationalism, history, and institutional normativity—that intersect with the diverse axis of embodied difference of its contributors and the field of writing center studies. I discuss each force in relation to a specific piece, but readers will see them resonate across chapters I am unable to address in the space of this review.

Affect fills this book from the start. In "A Touching Place: Womanist Approaches to the Center" (from Part I: Race), Alexandria Lockett explores how touch as an embodied act (e.g., hugging, holding hands, or even complimenting one another) can act as a meaning-making strategy in tutoring sessions. On one level, Lockett takes issue with how professional norms or best practices in writing centers fail to account for narratives of touch so germane to Black feminism or womanism. She asserts that communication in general, not just tutoring, operates as a "leaky" (p. 34) process in which physical gestures and bodily expressions contribute to how we understand intersecting identities like race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, or ability. Yet, she goes a step further

to describe writing as an intimate, desire-driven, even sexually performative act she suggests should influence our pedagogical work as tutors.

Whereas Lockett foregrounds touch, Nancy Alvarez, in “On Letting the Brown Bodies Speak (and Write)” (from Part II: Multilingualism), suggests the look and feel of one’s environment, including professional standards, should contribute to understandings of race and multilingualism. At a fundamental level, Lockett argues for bilingual tutoring as a professionally sound practice in agreement with the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) 1974 position statement Students’ Right to their Own Language. Nevertheless, as Alvarez points out, given the fact that this statement comes written in English only, it is not meant to protect multilingual writers and brown bodies.

Related to environmental factors, Harry Denny’s “Of Queers, Jeers, and Fears: Writing Centers as (Im)Possible Safe Spaces” (from Part III: Gender and Sexuality) posits the idea that trauma, particularly “collective traumas” (p. 120) such as the 2016 Pulse Night Club Shooting, represent utterly pedagogical moments, ones that remind us

that despite our social and cultural progress, a small minority still view queer folks as a threat that needs elimination . . . that violence against queers is political fodder for appropriation to advance nativist mindsets (that the attack wasn’t against/about gay people but against America and democracy, that it advances some anti-Muslim movement). (p. 120)

As Denny’s chapter articulates, we must view these public spectacles as part and parcel of writing center work, as spectacles that infiltrate our work as much as personal instances of discrimination and shame.

Building from Denny’s discussion of the messier convergences among private matters and public spectacles, Hadi Banat’s “Floating on Quicksand: Negotiating Academe While Tutoring as a Muslim” (from Part IV: Religion) speaks to yet another larger affective force, nationalism, and how it should further confound our understandings of intersecting identities. Banat explores the difficulty in coming out as a non-Christian in the writing center, specifically as a Muslim, as well as the difficulty of speaking about religion in writing centers for fear of being perceived as less than liberal or progressive. Still, she suggests doing so is needed. As Banat puts it,

The exclusion of religion, however, cannot endure amid the current rhetoric that highlights President Trump’s administration’s stance in favor of the Muslim ban, in addition to the media’s persistent narratives on religious extremism, Islamophobia incidents, and terrorist bombings of religious sites in different parts of the world. (pp. 156–157)

Although Banat more immediately addresses religion as opposed to sexuality, both she and Denny suggest public spectacles—whether the Pulse massacre or yet another horrific nationalist move such as the Muslim ban—work on and through bodies. For Banat, media narratives and a lack of general knowledge

about the Middle East make it difficult to persist as a Palestinian Muslim who struggles to define herself and speak the truth of her historical roots without fear or judgement.

Similarly, Beth Towle's "Other People's Houses: Identity and Service in Writing Center Work" contends that the erasure of history, in her case working-class history, is encouraged by the system of higher education. A first-generation, working-class student, Towle describes how, despite her own success in buying into the rhetoric of higher education, she still struggles with the economic divide such rhetoric engenders and the ways a person who outs themselves as coming from a working-class background still runs the risk of being read as less than professional.

Finally, Tim Zmudka's "Embracing Learning Differences: Spreading the Word to Writing Centers and Beyond" (from Part V: [Dis]ability) considers how rhetoric shifts over time and in relation to institutional norms. Terms such as *mental retardation* have been replaced by *intellectual disability* over time, yet Zmudka remains hopeful that we can expect yet another more progressive shift: a world in which "*learning disability*" is replaced "with *learning difference (LD)*" (p. 222). At its core, his personal narrative questions why he went through the first two years of his college experience closeting his own learning difference, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Of course, it makes sense that he would, given how institutional forces call out certain bodies. In his words, "I didn't need to be interrogated by . . . additional diagnostic testing" (p. 230). Here, we can see again how larger forces, in this case institutional protocols, infiltrate our bodies and affect them in unstable ways.

In their conclusion, Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère, and Sicari stress that deeper reflection on identity and intersectional differences is needed, a reflection that can benefit ourselves as much as it can our centers. The editors also reiterate that the nature of outing oneself—or being outed—is a deeply "performative *act*" (p. 241) that blurs public and private aspects of our work. Ultimately, the editors call for developing a writing center curriculum that embraces the work of supporting writers as much as it does the work of creating sustainable change within institutions and throughout larger communities: this is a tall order, but one I side with this book's editors in calling for.

As this book unequivocally argues, we can do much more as a field to engage intersectional thinking. We can, and we must. Yet, as I have begun to suggest, in engaging this difficult work we could do more to critically theorize the affective dimensions of how differences intersect. To do so, we might more directly draw on affect theory as an additional critical modality to make meaning of the intimate and intersectional performances not unique to this book. In this sense, I want to offer, as one example of affect theory, Jasbir Puar's (2013) queer notion of assemblage theory. I was first drawn to Puar's (2013) work for the ways she theorizes sexuality (an axis of embodied difference

discussed in this collection) “not as identity, but as assemblages of sensations, affects, and forces” (p. 24). I sense such a definition could help us reconceive how all differences intersect in our centers. What if, as Puar (2013) suggests, we worked to understand *intersectionality as an assemblage*, particularly in the deeply affective spaces of writing centers? Doing so might enable us to more empathically account for identity and identity development as unstable and emotional processes of constant becoming. Further, assemblage theory, as a complement to intersectionality, might enable us to more fully account for unstable interplays among bodies and inanimate larger public forces beyond our control, such as the

convergence of geopolitical and historical forces, neoliberal interests in capitalist accumulation both cultural and material, biopolitical state practices of population control and affective investments in discourses of freedom, liberation, and rights. (p. 39)

These are the types of forces confronting readers of *Out in the Center*. Readers will see them, for instance, in Banat’s discussion of the harmful effects of media narratives of religious extremism (pp. 156–157). Readers will see them, too, in the form of institutional norms and procedures, as Denny’s and Zmudka’s contributions, among others in this collection, make clear. And so, whether scholars use the terms *intersectionality*, *assemblage*, a combination thereof, or something else altogether, now is the time to think more critically about the messy convergence of private and public struggles in our lives and the ways they will inevitably shape the future of our centers.

References

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