



Lisa Bell, Lori Brock, Clint Gardner, Rachel Herzl-Betz,
Eduardo Mabilog, Jamaica Ritcher, and Victoria Vertein

Review: *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement* by Laura Greenfield

Introduction

During the summer of 2019, members of the Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association (RMWCA) gathered online to read and discuss Laura Greenfield's *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement*. Although much of the current conversation about social justice and writing centers occurs in journal articles, Greenfield's book fits into the expansion of book-length scholarship such as *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* (Grimm, 1999), *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007), *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring* (Denny, 2010), *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011), *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric* (Condon, 2012), and *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles* (Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère, & Sicari, 2018). Greenfield calls for writing centers to engage in social justice through a radical lens, arguing that writing centers cannot continue operating in a conservative/liberal *nexus* (p. 57). Greenfield builds the case that writing center personnel,

particularly administrators in positions of privilege, must reflect carefully and clearly on how politics are playing out in their institutions and within their writing centers. Adopting a radical praxis, according to Greenfield, is necessary for writing centers to be truly transformational spaces: “Through the frame of cultures of radical engagement, radical writing center praxis compels us to ask whose stories of writing . . . are circulated as normal and how we might complicate and expand those stories in order to create greater resonance across differences and transform ourselves and the world in the process” (p. 172). Greenfield’s radical praxis isn’t, however, focused on tearing down old systems but rather on a love-inspired praxis of transformation and traversing boundaries that includes work on the self, the systems, and the stories that shape our larger communities.

The context for our conversation, the RMWCA Summer Book Club, was formed in 2018 to provide those engaged in writing center work opportunities to discuss recent writing center scholarship and explore how research informs individual writing center contexts. In 2019, book-club participants gathered online monthly over the summer. They were joined by Greenfield for the final session to further discuss her work and ways writing centers can engage in radical pedagogies to “completely transform the field” (p. 58). Attendees were from a wide range of institutions across the Rocky Mountain region and also included guests from other parts of the United States. The majority of attendees were white writing center administrators from universities and community colleges. As with other writing center conferences, there were few attendees of color.

This review is a collaborative effort by a subgroup of RMWCA Summer Book Club participants to further implement this book’s transformative ideas in our individual writing centers. We initially responded to reflective questions after each book-club session to encourage participants to connect with the book and to begin to build the assessments from which this review derives. Later, a smaller group of us met online to begin crafting this review. After a frank discussion about the inequities related to privilege and whiteness that played out during the book-club online discussions, we developed an overall plan for this review that included the major questions we wished to address:

- How radical is this book?
- When and how should writing centers go beyond writing?
- Whose work is it to radicalize writing centers?

With seven coauthors, *how* we could address these questions was quite a complicated decision. We decided it would be most effective to respond individually to each question—or, of equal importance—to not respond. After reviewing individual responses, we collaborated on a collective conclusion.

Suffice it to say, this is not a typical review.

Responding to the “Radical”

As part of the discussion and review of *Radical Writing Center Praxis*, it seemed important to establish the radical nature of the text itself. While reviewers each brought their own perspectives, there were common questions about the book’s intended audience. They also shared an understanding that the conversation was not new, though this text might encourage awareness and engagement within some writing center sectors.

Eduardo

For many writing center administrators, Greenfield’s questions and framings of radicalism will create a needed, and intended, tension in the way our field often neutralizes power and voice. Notably, these readers may find themselves implicated in the conservative and liberal perspectives Greenfield critiques for impeding and avoiding genuinely empowering practices. To those who find themselves called out by such deconstructions, this text may help enact the type of transparency it defines as necessary for radical acts and truly be seen as a radical engagement.

To those who find their positionalities to have been informed by genuinely radical thinkers and actions, those who already see neutrality as violent and are critical of claims to liberate, this book may serve as a nonradical reminder of the continued ignorance of similar calls for radicalism, some of which are cited by Greenfield. As an undergraduate peer tutor and scholar of color who has become mindful of my privilege and marginalization, I could not fully appreciate the book’s potential radical engagement, in part because it speaks neither to my already lived experience in which occupying space is seen as disruptive nor to the communities that inform my need to deconstruct and recuperate. In many ways, this book has been seemingly designed to draw attention to my exclusion and erasure from writing center discourse while simultaneously and unintentionally making it difficult for me to see myself as its reader.

Lisa

Mirroring the radical educators she describes, Greenfield works to unmask and examine assumptions about power, learning, literacy, and identity that infuse writing center work and their educational systems and settings (p. 72). For many involved in daily writing center work, these conversations are not new. However, these discussions have typically not been grounded in theory but in personal and situational struggle, taking place after difficult tutorials or challenging trainings, yet they have included a wide range of voices and perspectives. As a female, contingent staff administrator, I found Greenfield’s scholarly text useful for providing theoretical frameworks and terminology,

but, along with other reviewers, I found the richness and reality of representation in radical work to be absent. Greenfield distances the scholarship from high-stakes radical practice, leading to questions about the book's intended audience.

Lori

Greenfield's book does not reach the height of radicalism she implies she wanted to attain when she first says writing centers must be centers that promote peace and love, possibly because she does not define those terms, nor, for all her many examples of what radicalism might look like, does she clearly define radicalism. She dares people to go beyond what they are doing now, but to what end?

Victoria

Greenfield's book has one proverbial foot in the land of radicalism and the other in the land of privilege. The path from privilege to radicalism is really what this book seems to be about, and the target audiences are those standing along the sides of that gold-brick road.

Having worked at several predominantly white institutions (PWI) whose directors were on varying stages of that path, I can see how this book would help in self-examination and framing of topics that many find difficult to voice out loud. I think the questions Greenfield raises are good in forcing that type of introspection and conversation. I think a book framed in this way, for this audience, is necessary. I wish it were not.

The end of this road, the land of radicalism, is already densely populated with people, predominantly people of color, who have been writing, speaking, agitating, surviving against all odds—people who are borne into radicalism by necessity rather than by choice. This book is not so radical for us; it is a reiteration of our lived experience by someone who has more access.

That being said, I appreciate how open and honest Greenfield is about her own privilege. She references and gives credit to many of the voices that came before, going so far as including an entire section on the work of Black women (pp. 135–138). The true radicalness and potential of her book are in this acknowledgement of our concealed history. This subtle goading, to do what is right and not call yourself a hero for it, may not be 100 percent radical in itself, but it is ten steps in the right direction for those at a stand-still.

Jamaica

Though I began *Radical Writing Center Praxis* with eyes wide open to perspectives that felt, to me, *new*, over the course of our group's discussions, I began to see it as more an introductory-level course (one of its subsections is even titled "Oppression 101"). Eduardo and Victoria point out, and I agree,

that for people already doing the intellectual and embodied work of radical activism, Greenfield's explication lacks depth, or feels unearned. But for those who haven't yet read the work of radical scholars like Judith Butler or Paulo Freire, or who haven't yet felt the pressing relevance of radicalism in relation to their own writing center work (I was one), this book is an important starting point. Greenfield argues as much, calling on readers to use the practices included in her book to launch "a new process of inquiry into radicalism itself" (p. 141).

Moving "Beyond Writing"

As Greenfield makes clear, her book "is a call for a paradigm change for writing centers" (p. 85). At the start of the second half of the book, Greenfield quotes writing center scholar Brian Fallon, who notes that "we have to get over this whole writing thing" (p. 85). Within this context, reviewers discussed what it means for writing centers to go beyond writing and address issues of identity, language, and learning. We asked if writing can ever be neutral, and if not, can writing centers afford to feign neutrality?

Rachel

As a white writing center leader at a public commuter college, I found the text most compelling when it argued that we cannot afford to frame power or identity as beyond writing. When we do, even as a temporary, strategic choice, we fool ourselves into thinking that (a) we can run an apolitical writing center or that (b) we can't afford to be radical until we are fully established as permanent faculty in well-funded institutions.

Jamaica

Throughout the book, Greenfield makes the case that writing is completely intertwined with language, identity, and learning. So if writing centers exist for writing, they must exist for everything with which writing is intertwined. She then prompts us to ask why we focus on writing if not for justice and peace (p. 86). Green is not suggesting we leave writing behind or accord it a lower priority but that we expand our vision of the impact writing centers can and do have. This message may empower some and overwhelm others. When I think of centers like the one where I work, a small center that, though serving the entire university, is historically underfunded, has been frequently misunderstood, and is run by contingent labor, I imagine responses along the lines of *I already have so much work and so few resources—how can I now do this?* But Greenfield acknowledges and champions the importance of small actions people can take. If initially overwhelming, the book offers important perspectives for more effectively advocating for writing centers and for better

articulating to those outside writing centers the significance and potential found there.

Eduardo

Perhaps the most strenuous moments for some readers will occur because of Greenfield's constant juxtaposition with and connection of writing to those notions more immediately associated with ethical power and oppression. However, the lived marginalization that informs the view of many who see writing as a political and embodied process takes a back seat to declarative statements written by Greenfield. Privileged readers may be unsettled into action while those who have a history of action, in part because their very presence is seen as defiant, may feel excluded once more from conversations on radicalism. Ultimately, this call to move beyond writing is significant and necessary to consider for many writing centers. Nonetheless, when so many have already been imposed upon to consider their existence and perspectives as unrelated to writing, and as such have been forced to move beyond writing from the beginning, Greenfield's text fails to signal solidarity.

Lisa

As Greenfield makes clear, radical work involves asking who benefits from the writing systems and standards writing centers uphold. From a radical praxis perspective, preferences and positions on literacy, language, and learning are never neutral but support or challenge larger systems and power dynamics. By asking writing center colleagues to move their work beyond writing, Greenfield is asking that we not be naïve or complicit in reinforcing problematic power structures or the oppression often inherent in our everyday work.

Lori

How does a radical writing center look different from any other activist group? In my experience as a reluctant disability rights activist, most activist groups have a clear understanding of who they advocate for, what they are advocating for, and the methods they use to advocate. They know whether they are concerned with direct action, legislative action, or service to a particular population. If Greenfield had stayed within the service boundaries of writing (and words), her radical approach could have soared. Indeed, she does touch upon the dismantling of the physical walls of writing centers, but her notion that writing centers should exist to promote peace and love is too broad to be of any use. When a student comes to the writing center with a paper promoting terrorism, people in the writing center can challenge these assumptions. But what if someone comes to the writing center and opens fire? Do we discuss peace and love in that moment? Greenfield's goal of peace and justice leaves us

in a freefall with no tools to actually be radical. Although she does attempt to remove the shackles of impartiality from tutors, in getting away from writing and speech, she waters down the new-found power of a writing center's participants.

Victoria

Many cultures have deities dedicated to wisdom, knowledge, and writing, whereas we teach composition as a three-credit general education course. I think it is this disparity in our current perspective surrounding the power of writing that Greenfield is trying to get at. When she argues for going beyond writing, I think we should add "as a simple, non-consequential, ordinary act." As Lisa says, communicating the power of words is inherently rooted in identity, language, learning, politics—in everything that makes us human. To take these out of the equation is not to defuse the potential of a person's voice but rather to dole out unfettered capacity with no direction, timer, or concern for outcome. Writing is not neutral. Writing is not simple. Writing is power. In that sense, writing centers do have an obligation to impress upon students the gravity of their keystrokes and/or the deafening vacuum and consequences of their silence.

Distributing Radical Labor

While planning this review, we discussed whether radicalizing the writing center is an individual or collective responsibility. This discussion brought us back to our initial questions about audience and action and led to additional thoughts on privilege, power, and possibilities for this work.

Lisa

While it often seems Greenfield's intended audience for this book is established and privileged white writing center administrators, perhaps the intent is to draw those within the field with the most power more solidly into the discussion and labor of addressing systems and practices of oppression in writing center work. The personal experiences Greenfield includes illustrate how writing center administrators can fail to recognize the ongoing discussions and challenges tutors and colleagues wrestle with. Her transparency with her own issues of awareness and privilege functions as a call to those in similar positions to join other stakeholders in the work of transforming writing center work with radical praxis and peace as central aim of our community(ies). The role of administrators in radical writing center work cannot be relegated to leading tutor-training discussions and producing scholarship, leaving tutors, typically with less power and privilege, to the full practice of everyday transformative, radical writing center of empowering writers in the act of writing.

Rachel

I agree with Lisa that Greenfield's call for administrator responsibility is necessary. It also frames a conflicted rhetorical context. The text argues for writing center radicalization as collective labor, but Greenfield's structure, diction, and chosen discursive community frame *Radical Writing Center Praxis* as written for a small fraction of those who do this work. For established scholars, those choices likely read as markers of ethos. I found myself wondering if she was speaking more directly to this audience because they must join the conversation or because, to her mind, they must lead it?

Eduardo

Greenfield, at most, explicates that the labor of creating a radical paradigm shift falls upon an entire community. Using Greenfield's own argument for transparency and deconstruction, it is evident that this generalized call for community labor, at times, problematically conceals the ways white administrators have been the largest force impeding such shifts, and as such, owe much of their labor to removing self-imposed barriers. This is not to say those who occupy marginalized positions should not simultaneously labor—quite the contrary. Including the oppressed paradoxically must involve the oppressors, as the oppressors have the most access and power to create a genuine shift, one that threatens their own privilege (pp. 55–56). Furthermore, just as the book highlights how many writing center spaces, communities, and individuals can exist in both privileged and marginalized positions, few are totally removed from privilege. Thus, marginalized and oppressed individuals must establish how they can labor for the betterment of themselves but not to the detriment of others.

Jamaica

I agree with other readers that Greenfield's rhetorical stance, particularly in terms of audience, can be construed as conflicting with her message: that while the text seems written for writing center directors, the argument is that the work is for everyone. But this disconnect might be fine. Writing centers are not without their hierarchies, and writing center administrators occupy positions of relative power. Much of Greenfield's text, in particular as she moves from idea to practice, advocates for a flattening of those hierarchies, for sharing leadership and encouraging engagement, for not leading so much as allowing oneself to be led (p. 144). I read this as a call for those in charge to move out of the way, to make room for and support more voices, more experiences, wisdoms, and visions.

Lori

Writing is innately radical. Whether we agree with the *status quo* or believe the entire world should be torn down and rebuilt, to put our thoughts, feelings, opinions in indelible ink or on social media is an act of courage and resistance. By neglecting to make writing, and our response to writing, the focal point of her argument, Greenfield undermines the incredible—though admittedly underutilized—power writing centers already have at their disposal. Imagine what could be accomplished if our writing and our response to writing were focused on promoting love and peace or even if the focus were on a lesser goal such as equality. I just realized that my explicit answer to this question is found in the word “our”: everyone from the students who use the services, to the director, to the teachers who encourage students, to the funders we seek. Everyone involved with the writing center must, first, realize the power of writing, then accept that this power for the writing center is focused on promoting love and peace, and, finally, wield their words towards this goal. Now the question, of course, becomes How?

Conclusion

Any kind of radicalism is going to fall short, especially when we attempt to capture it in text, because new voices are constantly coming to the fore while other voices are being left behind. As a group, we value Greenfield’s choice to take on entrenched norms in our field and to challenge fundamental expectations about writing center work. Our most consistent criticism of this book is the narrowness of the intended audience: a group that typically has the most privilege and an ongoing platform for their voices and viewpoints. Together, we grappled with the discomfort of reading a book that speaks to a privileged slice of the writing center profession. Those in our group who are not included in that slice have lived experiences of oppression and extensive scholarly expertise that relates to radicalizing writing centers; that the book did not include them is problematic.

In the end, we reviewers agree the book is necessary for the kind of systemic change Greenfield argues for. In other words, *Radical Writing Center Praxis* bridges conversations that have long existed with ones just emerging in writing center spaces. Moreover, Greenfield is clear in her articulation of writing center radicalism as a process, not just a product (pp. 89–105). She calls attention to the ways other voices will need to build on this work moving forward (pp. 165–72). We agree. More people and contexts for expertise must be recognized in our field. We must listen to and hear those people who, as Victoria states, are “borne into radicalism by necessity rather than by choice.” *Radical Writing Center Praxis* issues a call to action and change, both individually and collectively, asking writing centers to make bold use of words rather

than hide behind the guise of neutrality. The ultimate test for the book's value will be found in what *we* in the writing center community do with it: how *we* bring it into conversation with voices who have come before and with those just beginning their writing center journeys.

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Lisa Bell is the Coordinator of the Fugal Writing Center at Utah Valley University. She serves as President of the Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association and past At-large Board Member of the International Writing Centers Association.

Lori Brock currently works as writing consultant for the Salt Lake Community Student Writing & Reading Center where she engages college students in conversations about their class writings and projects. Lori has worked as an editor and grant writer for various non-profit organization, including Art Access.

Clint Gardner is the Program Manager of College Writing & Reading Centers at Salt Lake Community College in Salt Lake City, Utah. He is Past-President of the Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association.

Rachel Herzl-Betz is Interim Writing Center Director at Nevada State College, where she also teaches courses in Literature and Writing Studies. Her research interests include disability studies, accessibility, and equity in Writing Center recruitment.

Eduardo Mabilog is a first year MA/PhD student in Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy at the Ohio State University. In the past he has presented writing center research related to voice, language, and marginalization at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing and the International Writing Centers Association conference.

Jamaica Ritcher is Director of the Writing Center at University of Idaho and past outreach coordinator for the Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association.

Victoria Vertein is the Assistant Program Manager of the Pima Community College, Desert Vista Campus Learning Center. She is currently collaborating on the creation of a Liberatory Writing Across the Curriculum Program at PCC.

