

Book Review

Denny, H., Mundy, R., Naydan, L. M., Severe, R., & Sicari, A. (2018). *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*. Utah State University Press. (276 pp., Paperback \$34.95).

James Hamby
Middle Tennessee State University

As America continues to grapple with a political climate that promotes division, the role of identity politics in education remains contested. While this discussion often focuses on classrooms, it takes on unique dimensions for academic support centers. These centers are ostensibly “safe spaces” that rely heavily on one-on-one interactions in a non-hierarchical setting. However, as the authors of *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles* demonstrate, these spaces can be fraught with politics and prejudice. This volume demonstrates how writing centers are contact zones where identities enter into conflict rather than safe zones where everyone is free to be themselves. Though tutoring centers tout themselves as egalitarian spaces, the editors of this volume point out that “[i]ssues of inequitable power that are synonymous with the institution and the larger culture are easily replicated in the center unless we are cognizant of existing power dynamics” (p. 8). The essays in this volume build upon other studies about bias within writing centers such as Harry Denny’s *Facing the Center* (2010), Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan’s *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* (2011), and Frankie Condon’s *I Hope I Join the Band* (2012). This volume aims to expand these discussions by exploring “the very public and yet also personal” nature of tutoring under bias at a variety of

institutions (p. 4). Each essay offers unique, personal insights into how tutoring centers can incorporate anti-discrimination practices into their trainings and procedures. The editors urge readers to reexamine their awareness of diversity and consider how they use “identity politics as a theoretical framework” (p. 9), and they invite tutors and administrators to reflect on whether or not their centers are truly safe spaces. Though written with writing centers in mind, this book is also pertinent to communication centers or subject tutoring centers as each section explores issues of bias and power structures replicated throughout the university.

The book contains six sections: “Race,” “Multilingualism,” “Gender and Sexuality,” “Religion,” “Class,” and “(Dis)Ability,” each including between one to five essays by tutors who have experienced discrimination followed by a review recapping the essays. All chapters successfully blend research with personal experiences, creating narratives that contain both pathos and academic rigor. This approach makes this volume ideal for tutor training, as it explores critical theory with personal narratives that academics, both novice and veteran, can relate to. The editors begin with race because, as they say, “race, and especially the experiences of African Americans, occupies a powerful center in the United States and academia that just cannot be denied” (p. 15). In addition, the

focus on racial discrimination also underscores intersectionality. The editors explain that the intent of the collection is to “foreground the complexity and intersectionality of identity” and note that “[n]o other current text has such a self-awareness and an antifoundationalist mission” (p. 16). The sections on multilingualism and gender and sexuality especially benefit from this intersectional focus. The sections on religion and class are particularly compelling as they highlight forms of discrimination that often go unaddressed. Finally, the section on disability offers a helpful essay on neurodiversity, but ultimately disappoints as it has only one essay. The editors admit that not every single type of discrimination can be covered in one volume, and they encourage readers to discover what “gaps or lapses” may exist within this work (p. 18). Taken altogether, these six sections offer a comprehensive view of how deeply biased practices are embedded within tutoring centers and how political acts coincide with personal experiences.

The first three sections focus on many of the most politically charged aspects of discrimination in our society. The first section on race has five essays ranging in focus from perennial issues in identity politics, such as invisibility, which Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison discusses in “Being Seen and Not Seen: A Black Female Body in the Writing Center” to seemingly non-political acts, such as touch, which Alexandria Lockett explores in “A Touching Place: Womanist Approaches to the Center.” Lockett admirably demonstrates how everything—speech, body language, and the ways tutors and tutees relate to one another—intersects with political considerations. The following section on multilingualism blends well with the opening essays, as discrimination against

race and language often go hand in hand. Both essays in this section are informative as to how multilingualism intersects with race and class, but, given the importance of multilingualism to the nature of tutoring centers, it is regrettable that more essays were not included in this section. The section on gender and sexuality astutely records the ways in which discrimination against the LGBTQ community can be subtle and pervasive. As Harry Denny says in “Of Queers, Jeers, and Fears: Writing Centers as (Im)possible Safe Spaces,” “systemic moves to make interaction toxic render a space unsafe” (p. 121). Denny’s essay exemplifies how frequently prejudice occurs and how it is composed of small, every-day interactions that often go unnoticed.

The sections on religion and class examine prejudices often brushed aside. Sami Korgan, Ella Leviyeva, and Hadi Banat write on their experiences of being Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, respectively, and of how they deal with the presuppositions that others have about them. Banat’s essay, “Floating on Quicksand: Negotiating Academe While Tutoring as a Muslim” deals not only with her marginalized status as a Muslim academic in contemporary America, but also with her status as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon. As an outsider in both America and Lebanon, Banat examines how identities are complex and layered rather than based on a single characteristic. She states that “being pushed to reduce your identity to a single belonging by xenophobes and fanatics constitutes an illustration of extreme bigotry” (p. 157). She believes that when tutors recognize the multiplicity of identities in themselves and in students they will tutor with greater cultural awareness. The section on class is equally nuanced and idiosyncratic, focusing both on the ways that

academic labor creates hierarchy in which non-tenured instructors feel devalued and on how academics from working-class backgrounds struggle to enter academia. However, as Rita Napoleone says in “Class Division, Class Affect, and the Role of the Writing Center in Literacy Practices,” tutoring centers are spaces that can challenge class-based biases and disrupt established hierarchies (p. 211).

The final section on disability contains an insightful essay by Tim Zmudka, “Embracing Learning Differences: Spreading the Word to Writing Centers and Beyond,” detailing his struggles as a learner with ADHD. Zmudka argues why writing center professionals need to be aware of neurodiversity in both tutors and students. As mentioned above, this is the sole essay for this section. At least one more essay, perhaps on persons with visual or hearing disabilities, would have rounded out this section.

Out in the Center challenges readers to consider all the aspects of personal identity that administrators, tutors, and students alike bring into the center on a daily basis. Its strength is a discussion of these topics rooted in both scholarship and lived experience. Moreover, *Out in the Center* chronicles where writing center scholarship is today vis à vis the current political and social climate, and provokes further conversation on whether or not tutoring centers are truly safe spaces or perpetuators of pre-existing power structures.