Review:
Identity, Critical Literacy, and the Pursuit of Inclusion and Justice in Writing Centers

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Across the United States, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of college students show up in writing centers (Lerner 61) to discuss some aspect of their writing process or product—from critical examination of readings informing the student’s text to outside research required to development and reorganization of ideas and editing of final versions. Increasingly, writing centers are forging community partnerships as well, even breaking away from the college campus as sites focused on community literacy on a broader scale. On campus, faculty have a

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stake in how writing center consultations unfold with students from their courses since students’ discussions with tutors invariably shape the thinking and work the students produce, and many students will visit their writing center regardless of a professor’s endorsement or referral. Further, many college and community writing center tutors are undergraduate students whose engagement in coursework as well as preprofessional identities are significantly affected by their unique roles as mediators of their peers’ and others’ literacies (Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail). Writing centers are nevertheless largely untapped resources for literacy teachers and scholars as both sites of engagement for our students and sites of research for our scholarly interests.

While once broadly conceived of more simply as tutor helping student in a rather straightforward, albeit collaborative, discussion of assignment, ideas, questions, conventions, and execution (Harris), writing center consultations have, in the last fifteen years, become the focus of far greater scrutiny, thanks in part to one of our young field’s earliest monographs, Nancy Grimm’s Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times. Grimm’s critique of writing centers as sites run by well-intentioned people often and largely naïve about their own white liberal privilege struck a chord with the writing center community. While many agree that writing center scholarship has not addressed issues of complicity in institutionalized oppression sufficiently (Greenfield and Rowan), since then, a growing contingent of writing center scholars and tutors are exhibiting commitment to enacting and developing socially just, inclusive theory and pedagogy.

We review four texts that exemplify an important strand of writing center scholarship focused on power dynamics and identity politics in literacy teaching and learning, particularly but not exclusively within college writing centers. Each text takes up the entrenched problem of oppression and injustice toward students identified as being minority by institutional standards; each addresses possibilities for more productive, humane, and inclusive practice. Considered alongside scholarship by Suresh Canagarajah, Keith Gilyard, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Elaine Richardson, Jacqueline Jones Royster, John Trimbur, Victor Villanueva, and others concerned with disrupting monolingual, monocultural ideologies and institutionalized oppression, these texts add significantly to the conversation on theory and practice of critical literacy teaching and learning.

Three monographs and one edited collection shed light on the unique perspective writing center staff have on individual literacy practices. These are perspectives faculty outside of writing centers may see fit to seek out, perspectives which may inspire pursuit of invaluable research collaborations, perspectives which point to opportunities to develop more integrated experiences for students. We believe that all four of the texts under review here would be of interest to readers not only squarely within writing center studies but outside of this field as well.
In *Facing the Center*, Harry Denny inventories and maps the major identity markers that “are most central in our national context” (23) and that inevitably make an appearance in US writing centers: race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and language. He examines these markers through the metaphors of face (to signify the need to “face up” to them in the typically close, interpersonal, often face-to-face work of writing centers) as well as centrality and marginality (these last two fitting since writing centers can seem to be on the outside looking in, whether on individual campuses or in writing studies at large). Among his several aims, one is to make readers more aware that “Identity is ubiquitous to the everyday life of writing centers” (8). Because, as he points out, writing center studies has tended to locate identity markers in writers served rather than the bodies and faces of the staff, his constant reminder that “all of us signify even before we utter words, not just the folks whose performances and bodies are always already read as different” (115) is necessary and important.

To achieve this goal, Denny focuses each of the middle chapters of *Facing the Center* (2–5) on a different identity category, beginning each with a description of a situation or two that highlight the relevant complexities. To tease out and interrogate the implications of these situations, Denny deploys a stunning range of theoretical lenses (including Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, Bourdieu, Omi and Winant, and Yoshino, among others) while also grounding his conclusions in sociological data, with which he has a particular facility. In addition, the Introduction and Chapters 2 through 5 are each followed by an “Interchapter” in which one or more writing tutors speak to the issues of the previous chapter.

Another of Denny’s aims is to help readers see “writing centers as sites for activism and social change” (26). This goal is vital because it helps all of us working or who otherwise have a stake in writing centers to see many everyday activities as potential forms of activism. Such activism must begin with the recognition of the ways in which the “pressures of identity—and their attendant politics” are demonstrated on a daily basis in writing centers. As Denny writes in his helpful introduction to the volume:

> A day doesn’t go by that somebody doesn’t contend with the dilemma of assimilating, going with the flow, or challenging the well-worn path. Often the context involves envisioning alternatives to hackneyed arguments or unimaginative approaches to writing tasks. But just as frequently, students, tutors, administrators and faculty must confront who they are, whether the identity in question is one from the margins or whether the context forces awareness of one’s privilege or position at the center. (16–17)

For Denny, because of the kinds of advocacy that writing tutors can offer, such dilemmas don’t need to end with a choice either to “assimilate or resist” (15). In their ongoing literacy work together, tutors and writers can become aware that they “have multiple voices and codes to invoke for . . . rhetorical purposes,” “already existing
capital, . . . [that] can be leveraged or parlayed for others,” and “the agency and responsibility to strategically use them” (55, 70). In their “whispering to one another insider knowledge,” tutors and writers enact Bourdieu and Foucault, “Explaining how to gather up chips and when to spend them” and “showing peers where a disciplining gaze comes from and how to act from a position of not being seen, to dupe the enforcers of normalization and perform the culturally pathological without getting caught” (81). Though Denny maintains “that sustainable change comes from having [such voices and codes] in circulation, forcing institutions and the academy to evolve and adapt,” and that “Writing centers, unique crossroads of students, faculty and institutional culture, are sites where organic difference can be made,” he is also quick to admit that “such . . . shifts are tremendously local, plodding, and at times, fleeting” (54, 44, 36).

Each chapter in Facing the Center offers useful insights, but the standout for us is Chapter 5, “Facing Nationality in the Writing Center.” In many US writing centers, a substantial portion of the clientele is made up of multilingual writers, yet a substantial number of tutors identify as monolingual English speakers. As a result, “ESL” has become a ubiquitous topic of much writing center literature (especially in educational material for tutors), most of it, as Denny points out, engaged in its own form of “Othering” that positions “ESL writers as ‘problems’ to ‘fix’” (119, 122). Denny’s discussion provides an alternative, shifting the them-versus-us binary to an examination of the politics of language that implicates all of us. Rather than a static set of codes to be taught, learned, and banked, Denny presents American English as a gestalt onto which anxieties about identity are projected and national borders drawn. Here, too, he advocates activism, specifically, “an awareness of resistant or subversive relationships to multilingual identity that writing center practitioners and others can offer to learners” (128). We find this chapter and the tutor reflections in the Interchapter that follows to be indispensable, not only for writing center practitioners and those of us who work with multilingual writers, but everyone concerned with literacy practices in the United States.

In his final chapter, Denny takes up the topic of the identities of writing centers themselves, in relation not just to “the individuals within them” (146) but also the campuses, departments, and academic fields in which they are situated. Denny ultimately calls for a professional inventorying and mapping regarding these locations, and for writing center professionals to “take up difficult conversations about identity politics and their practices to police, maintain, and make sense of difference” and also engage in a deeper investment in “academic life” lest they remain on the margins (165, 146). Facing the Center is a helpful starting point for both.

In their introduction to Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change, Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan issue a strong admonishment to the writing center community for our lack of critical engagement (and even
lack of acknowledgment to some extent) with the problem of systemic racism infecting and structuring our institutional spaces and our pedagogies. While they note exceptions, including Grimm’s *Good Intentions* and Denny’s *Facing the Center*, they point to a troubling silence about racism and literacy work in writing centers—in our journals, anthologies, handbooks for tutors, and especially, as they argue at length, on “WCenter,” the field’s listserv. Their collection, they hope, will disrupt our silence.

At the 2005 joint conference of the International Writing Centers Association Conference and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, Victor Villanueva (a contributor to the collection) gave an inarguably rousing speech on “the new racism” and called the writing center community to action. Greenfield and Rowan note that for most, the reverberations faded all too quickly after the conference was over and people went back to their respective day-to-day writing center lives. Precisely what Villanueva identified as the “new” racism—the rhetorical silence about racism that we perpetuate by masking it behind discussions of other concerns like culture and language—is one of several troubling phenomena Greenfield and Rowan watched play out in the weeks and months following Villanueva’s talk.

The pieces Greenfield and Rowan have collected are fundamentally concerned with how writing centers, as sites of literacy and language education, perpetuate and/or support, wittingly or not, racist practices. Equally, though, the collection addresses examples of and possibilities for the enactment of antiracist work in writing center and classroom discourse and pedagogy. An activist spirit and agenda tie these pieces together, but its manifestations—through research agendas, pedagogy, etc.—vary widely, which readers from various contexts and parts of the United States and beyond may find useful and encouraging. The collection is organized in four sections, moving from “historical and theoretical foundations towards critical re-examinations of our everyday practices and individual experiences” (10), but pieces across each section speak to one another and work together in various ways to highlight and explore important phenomena significant to our understanding of race and literacy and to issues of pedagogy in antiracist work.

*Critical Consciousness and Racial Identity.* Implied and stated throughout this collection is the idea that antiracist work is relevant everywhere, regardless of an institution or particular writing center environment’s racial makeup, and it is important to note that contributors address antiracist work in both predominantly white institutions and in minority-serving institutions. While Greenfield and Rowan make the relevancy argument explicitly in their introduction and in their chapter, “Beyond the ‘Week Twelve Approach,’” Kathryn Valentine and Mónica Torres, Michelle Johnson, and Barbara Gordon, for example, also reveal that antiracist work is relevant everywhere by exposing through research and discussions of classroom pedagogy that the minority status of a person/people does not ensure critical consciousness about race (129),
nor is the minority status of a person a reliable predictor of whether or not she or he accepts dominant, hegemonic notions about language.

In “Diversity as Topography,” Valentine and Torres discuss their ongoing empirical research at colleges and universities at the United States–Mexico border through which students are asked, among other things, to report on the extent and nature of their cross-racial interactions. The authors report several initial findings, one of which is that students don’t see race and ethnicity as having a particularly significant impact on their lives; further, while students reported regular engagement in cross-racial interactions, these interactions are seldom outside of public spaces, seldom, that is, in more private, intimate settings and circumstances. One concern, then, is that the appearance of “meaningful” diversity (204) in these college settings is more simply structural diversity, which “allows students to regularly experience racial diversity, and consequently see it as normal, but at the same time allows them to maintain distance from substantive or genuine interactions” (204). These findings point empirically to a phenomenon often overlooked by those of us working in seemingly harmonious diverse spaces.

Valentine and Torres, concerned about the implications of students and peer tutors lacking critical consciousness about race and ethnicity, provide recommendations for writing center practice. However, the authors also implore readers to seek micro and macro views by conducting their own empirical and textual research, acknowledging that the challenges and benefits of racial diversity warrant attention on large scales, too. Like other contributors (see, for example, Villanueva’s “Rhetorics of Racism,” Greenfield’s “The ‘Standard English’ Fairy Tale,” and Grimm’s “Retheorizing Writing Center Work”), Valentine and Torres argue that addressing racial diversity and systemic oppression at the level of individual interactions is wholly inadequate.

In “Racial Literacy and the Writing Center,” Johnson reveals a systemic perspective on teaching racial literacy. A professor identifying as a committed advocate of her campus writing center discusses what happens when students from her freshman seminar on racial literacy meet several times with writing tutors who are equipped to varying degrees to engage critically with the seminar students on the content of their writing. From students’ session reflections, class discussions, and individual conferences, Johnson classifies students’ responses to their sessions as illustrative of a tutor’s evasion, appropriation, or engagement with students and their work. Johnson takes pains to assure readers her intention is not to expose what is wrong with the writing center but to offer a productive illustration of the need for tutors to be supported in developing racial literacy so that she and others engaged in classroom teaching around race are not doing this work with students “in a vacuum” (226). Johnson’s discussion of her students’ experiences offers a unique and significant argument for writing center staff to talk explicitly about race given that racial literacy affects the
discourse and practice of writing tutoring regardless of context but also because evasion and appropriation of a student’s work, especially regarding such a complex and sensitive topic, are damaging to students.

Gordon’s “Caught in a Firestorm” recounts a semester-long experience precipitated by her attempt to teach students in a writing center course about race and language. Her story reveals, in yet another instructive way, that racial makeup cannot serve as a predictor of knowledge of, or opinions about, intersections between language and race, nor should we underestimate the need to study and carefully consider how to present material on the issue to a group of people. Despite her intention to challenge common misunderstandings about language and expose students to linguistic fact rather than myth, she found herself embroiled in a complex, painful, and public conflict precipitated by one student’s response (the only African American in the class) to material on AAE that Gordon used in class discussion. This is a cautionary tale for those eager to teach about race and power but who are, perhaps, naïve about the messy complexity of the topic. Not only is it dangerous to assume another person’s perspective on race and power without learning about it from him or her directly, it is dangerous to assume that we do not need to anticipate a range of emotional responses when we address race in the classroom. Along with the other articles in this collection, Gordon, though not didactic, shares lessons to heed.

Classroom and Tutor Education Pedagogy. Most pieces in this collection address pedagogy, either as a focus or to explain a theoretical argument. While most of the discussions of classroom pedagogy center on writing center courses, they are nevertheless relevant for readers engaged or interested in using literacy as a course topic and certainly for graduate faculty and students preparing to teach. About both classroom and writing center tutor education, in “Beyond the ‘Week Twelve Approach,’” Greenfield and Rowan argue against a “pedagogy of coverage,” which seeks to cover complex issues like race in a single unit, often toward the end of the semester, as opposed to embedding critical literacy and discussions of how race and other significant identity markers affect literacies and literacy instruction throughout the entire course. Informed by Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, bell hooks, and other critical education theorists, Greenfield and Rowan offer up for scrutiny description, reflection, and analysis of their own courses, each an attempt to avoid a pedagogy of coverage regarding racism and other forms of oppression that affect sites of literacy learning. Greenfield and Rowan discuss an assignment Rowan has used to test the transfer of student’s developing awareness and ideals about race, power, and language to their actual practice, the outcome of which exemplifies the difficulty not just for tutors but for all of us to merge high-minded theory and everyday practice.

While it appears in a later section of the collection, Ann Green’s “The Quality of Light” is a natural extension of Greenfield and Rowan’s argument against a pedagogy of coverage. In it, Green discusses the necessary evolution of her peer tutoring
course from one in which race was addressed in a single unit and in a matter-of-fact manner to one in which discussions of race infuse course content and discussion all semester. Green discusses how critical race theory’s use of stories informs her “less direct” approach meant to ease students who are uncomfortable with discussions of race into sustained consideration of race, racism, and language (256). Stories—she agrees with Stuart Greene and Dawn Abt-Perkins, Richard Delgado, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic—can allow us to hear experiences otherwise silenced by dominant narratives about race. Illustrating what she notes Beth Boquet calls a “higher risk-higher yield” model, Green describes in detail two course assignments carefully designed to expose her students, most of whom are white, to the multiplicity of voices and stories, to how they “overlap and conflict, mesh and disconnect” (260). Students “analyz[e] how articles work for the stories they tell” about race, class, gender, or sexuality and tell their own stories about experiences of dissonance with race, class, gender, learning, and sexuality (260). Her description of students’ experiences with these assignments reveal the “wildly different stages of identity development” they were in, a factor she addresses through the fluid nature of her strategies and approaches in response to each group of students as well as challenges she continues to confront.

Anne Geller, Frankie Condon, and Meg Carroll also discuss the importance of stories to antiracist classroom and writing center discourse and pedagogy, but their chapter, “Bold,” offers a different perspective on the utility of anger and shame from what Green seems to suggest. Where Green describes her approach as indirect and sensitive to the multiple stages of identity formation her students are experiencing, Geller, Condon, and Carroll argue that anger and shame are necessary and useful to antiracist work. Particularly interesting is their use of Roland Barthes’s and Elspeth Probyn’s work to theorize the importance of dissonance, discomfort, and shame to writing center communities’ efforts to counter white hegemony (106–07).

Rebecca Day Babcock’s *Tell Me How It Reads: Tutoring Deaf and Hearing Students in the Writing Center* takes a different tack from Denny and from *Writing Centers and the New Racism*, offering the only book-length empirical study and the only discussion of disability of the titles under consideration here. Yet like the other authors whose works we review, Babcock is vitally concerned with identity as well as “equality, social justice, and people’s rights” (vii). As she reminds her readers, “deaf/Deaf” identity is just as politically complicated as those Denny describes in *Facing the Center*, an identity in which a cultural-versus-clinical view of deafness makes “insider/outsider status . . . complex” (22) and for which the term “disability” signifies only “that our society is geared toward hearing people” (15). Offering the results of the first study to date of “mainstream college writing tutorials conducted through an interpreter” (3)—a naturalistic study based on tutorial observations and interviews and using grounded theory—her six chapters culminate in very helpful “recommendations
for practice” (178) and are punctuated by five “Interludes” that profile writers (both deaf and hearing), tutors, interpreters, and writing center administrators based on her interviews with them. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of Tell Me How it Reads is its call to reconsider many familiar tutoring techniques that, despite what Grimm would call our “good intentions,” inadvertently prevent writing centers from serving all writers. Indeed, Babcock’s primary argument is that writing centers should be prepared to help everyone, even when the help needed does not align with the kinds of help traditionally offered.

Babcock makes her recommendations by examining the ways in which deaf identity intersects with literacy in the writing tutorial. On the one hand, the differences between tutorials she observed with deaf and hearing writers were relatively minor. As she writes, “all of the tutoring sessions I observed—for both deaf and hearing tutees—centered around some type of literacy work: writing on the one hand and gathering and understanding information on the other” (36). Yet the differences in sessions with deaf students are important because they highlight moves that run counter to such traditional and obviously inappropriate practices as asking all writers to read their work aloud and listen for what “sounds right” (165) as well as the less obviously inappropriate inclination to depend solely on hands-off, nondirective tutoring techniques such as encouraging writers to put ideas “in their own words.”

To our growing awareness of and responses to the vast heterogeneity of student populations in terms of language, literacies, race, ethnicity, and learning abilities, Babcock’s study of deaf students adds to the reconsideration of the hands-off, nondirective model that has influenced so many writing center practitioners since the 1980s. One reason that nondirective methods are ineffective with deaf students, Babcock surmises, has to do with “Deaf culture’s value of directness.” As she explains, “Deaf people value direct communication, or ‘straight talk,’ because communication and information are important commodities in the Deaf community.” After all, “Deaf people do not have the privilege of overhearing incidental information” (11). Babcock continues her arguments against nondirective methods by pointing out that all writers need direction to obtain literacy skills: “In order to enter a new discourse community, people have to know whether their attempts are making sense and if they are on the right track” (102).

Furthermore, in the tutoring sessions Babcock observed, those with deaf writers were “more likely to be focused on reading for understanding” (165). She suggests that this focus is due not only to these writers’ lack of familiarity with print but also to the fact that reading “is the only fully accessible, direct avenue to English for deaf people” (184). Related and especially poignant is a transcript of a session with a deaf writer whose tutor repeatedly asked her to put a source into “her own words” (49–50). As Babcock explains, the writer couldn’t manage this process “since she didn’t have the schema” because of her lack of familiarity with print; even looking up the words
in the dictionary didn’t help “because she did not understand the definitions” (51). Complicating matters further is that in situations such as the sessions Babcock observed, the writers all worked with interpreters, so that the very “notion of putting something in one’s own words” becomes problematic because “sometimes the words are not the student’s but the interpreter’s” (59).

With empirical studies increasingly called for in both writing studies and writing center studies (see Haswell; Driscoll and Perdue), an added bonus of Tell Me How It Reads is that Babcock’s scrupulous recounting of her research process (in Chapter 2) makes her volume a useful addition to any writing studies course focusing on research methods. One seemingly unintended yet illuminating finding of her study is that researchers must attend to the identities of their subjects when choosing methods. Babcock recounts how her early decision to audiotape rather than videotape her interviews “was both insensitive and naive” since, as one of her deaf subjects told her, “a deaf person is not represented on an audiotape—only the interpreter’s voice is there” (23). Moreover, even her qualitative interview techniques of open-ended questions proved to be “culturally insensitive” to Deaf culture’s valuing of directness (175).

The most recent of these publications, Tiffany Rousculp’s Rhetoric of Respect marks even more of a departure from the previous titles because it is concerned with the development of a writing center outside of an academic context. Rousculp’s five chapters and two appendices are organized around key moments in the history of the Community Writing Center (CWC) in Salt Lake City, which was founded in 2001 with the mission “to support, motivate, and educate people of all abilities and educational backgrounds who wanted to use writing for practical needs, civic engagement, and personal expression” (6). Funded by Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) yet remaining relatively autonomous, over the next nine years it served 5,000 people from 130 organizations in the metropolitan area (7). Alongside a necessary emphasis on place, space, and history, Rousculp is also concerned with identity and literacy.

Rousculp draws on a wide range of theorists, including Certeau, Flower, Friere, Giesler, Brandt, Street, Gee, and Stuckey to theorize the history and location of the CWC. As she discusses in her preface, Dobrin, Weisser, and ecocomposition, for example, help her turn “to place/environment as a critical path of inquiry into the production and consumption of written discourse” and see the “relationships . . . and systems” within those environments (xv). Through this lens, in Chapter 1, “Recognizing the SLCC Community Writing Center,” Rousculp presents the CWC as “a living organism, mutating, and adapting to specific environments and discovering certain ‘ranges of tolerance’—the limits of its survivability—which it had to retreat from or respond to by revising itself” (6). The dynamism Rousculp describes directly affects the literacy work the CWC facilitates and may be particularly curious, perhaps inspiring, to readers directing or supporting more institutionally embedded programs. Similarly, in Chapter 3, “Transforming Energy in Pursuit of Uncertainty,”
Rousculp draws on Ellsworth’s concept of “anomalous learning spaces”—spaces distinct from educational institutions and characterized by “pedagogical pivot point[s]” that put learners in contact with “the outside world” and those who inhabit it (xvi, xvii quoting Ellsworth, emphasis in original). Such spaces, she holds, explain the benefits and challenges of CWC undergraduate writing assistants’ shift from “a safe student environment where they were not expected to be able to make their own decisions” to the more “vulnerable space” of their authentic work with community members (79).

Literacy and identity come to the fore especially in Chapter 2, “Evolving a Discursive Ecology: A Rhetoric of Respect.” According to Rousculp, it was Brandt’s analysis of “literacy sponsorship, specifically how literacy both empowers and limits human beings,” that served as part of the inspiration for the CWC. Indeed, as Rousculp writes in a later chapter, the CWC ultimately “embraced [the] literacy ‘sponsor’ identity” and the advantages of working with writers and organizations” (115). This is an exceptionally helpful move: all writing centers operate as literacy sponsors, for better and worse, whatever our best intentions (to borrow from Grimm again, though Rousculp does not cite her). Such investigation of literacy in turn enables Rousculp and the CWC to explore identity issues, finding, with Stuckey “that literacy cannot be divorced from other social contexts through which people are defined, regulated, empowered, and controlled—such as class, race, gender, nationality, and education” (31). Moreover, Rousculp claims that it is the “self-interests” of the CWC’s literacy sponsorship that in turn created the space for its “particular discursive ecology” that she calls “a rhetoric of respect” (115, 24, emphasis in original). Rather than the “sometimes patronizing responses to difference or conflict”—in the form of “tolerance” or “acceptance”—a rhetoric of respect is “grounded in perception of worth, in esteem for another,” and in the case of the CWC, “a solid faith in a potential partner’s own capability and in their agency to determine what they needed or wanted” (24, 25, 27).

And rather than only respectful feelings, this is a rhetoric that “requires discursive action” (25) to finally offset the violence of literacy.

Subsequent chapters of A Rhetoric of Respect highlight the particular advantages of operating a writing center outside of an academic institution. As Rousculp writes in Chapter 5, “Engaging Place: Acclimation and Disruption,” “We believed a writing center sited in the community could create an alternative to hegemonic structures that determined what (and whose) literacies were valid and the means by which people could acquire new literacies” (132). And as she maintains, “the off-campus location made it more possible to disrupt the roles and identities assigned to bodies in educational institutions (e.g., student, teacher, administrator, staff)” (134). As noted above, one set of disrupted identities were those of the undergraduate tutors, which Rousculp argues produced a more deeply rhetorical, collaborative environment than institutionally housed writing centers. And in Chapter 4, “Shifting Relations, Transforming Expectations,” she holds that rather than bringing “truth” to the community,
all outreach efforts should be accompanied by an openness to being transformed by
the community. In the case of the CWC, such transformation ultimately resulted in
choosing the needs and desires of individual writers over the goals of the sponsoring
organizations. Some writing center scholars, including many cited here, are troubled
by campus writing centers’ degree of alignment with institutional expectations at
the expense of individuals and their developing agency; Rousculp’s frank account of
changes to the CWC’s mission resulting in the latter bold stance offers a significant
illustration and discussion of counterhegemonic activism.

A Rhetoric of Respect provides valuable insight, reflection, and cautionary tales
for readers interested in community writing centers. But it also gives those of us
who run institution-based writing centers much to consider. To have the freedom
to choose how to support individual writers, to start with a blank slate, and to be
able to chart the history from the beginning, all with (relatively secure) funding is
idyllic in many ways. For those of us on the outside looking in, Rousculp gives us a
fresh perspective on the opportunities, artfulness, and energy possible in this work.
This idyll also puts into especially sharp relief the ways that, as Denny says at the
end and beginning of Facing the Center, institutional writing centers “aren’t islands
unto themselves” but “make local, material, and individual all the larger forces at
play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions” (166–67, 6).

What strikes us about all of these works is their admirable and conscious—often
confessional—struggle to recognize and carve out space for identities many of the
authors (or editors) do not themselves share. Most successful is Writing Centers and
the New Racism, which, as an edited collection, is necessarily polyvocal. Especially
noteworthy, Vershawn Ashanti Young’s code-meshing chapter, “Should Writers
Use Their Own English,” provocatively addresses discourse, identity, and linguistic
prejudice, with a strong argument for teaching writing descriptively—that is, exposing
students to existing hybridity and supporting students’ pursuit of opportunities for
hybridity, too—and against what he sees as the kind of Stanley Fish prescriptivism
which only prepares students to write “stilted middle-brow discourse” (65). The
authors of the monographs had a much more difficult task, which they met with
varying degrees of success. Babcock’s transcripts and the “Interludes” focused on deaf
writers go a long way toward representing the perspectives of these individuals. Yet
as she herself is careful to point out, the “voices” we “hear,” or, more accurately, the
quotations we read, are those of their interpreters, albeit verified “through member
checking (participant feedback)” (26). Denny takes up this issue of representation
most explicitly and thoughtfully, analyzing both the “conspicuous, but also jarring
. . . . absence of experiences and voices of Others” in writing center studies (5) and
“the dominance and privilege that [his] voice and narrative [take] on, particularly in
the context of a monograph that’s as much about disrupting the face at the center
as it [is] about facing the center” (29). But in some ways his attempts to make up for
this absence—by including vignettes by writing tutors who represent the identities he cannot—are as jarring. As he himself admits, and though he “knew no one person could stand in for a collective,” these individuals are positioned “as spokespeople or proxies for a way of thinking and knowing” (59). Rousculp, too, shares the hopes she had early in her process of composing a “collage of voices” (x–xi) that that would best represent CWC members—hopes that had to be set aside to produce a single-authored, academic book. While she ultimately does not attempt to represent the perspectives of the other members, she does address the conflict and challenge she experienced with them, and she certainly aims to address the complexity of meeting the diverse interests and needs of the CWC’s community users. However, we would be remiss if we did not admit that one set of identities we wish had been more adequately represented in Rhetoric of Respect is that of institution-based writing centers as discussed in the leading writing center scholarship. Grimm’s Good Intentions along with Facing the Center, for example, would have provided Rousculp with useful perspectives on the ways writing centers—institutional and otherwise—can and do work to confront hegemonic literacy practices related to race, ethnicity, and language.

In all, these four texts have much to offer writing center scholars, administrators, and tutors wishing to learn more about the complex ways that literacy and identity intersect in their everyday work, whether within or outside educational institutions. And we believe they have as much to contribute to the broader discussion in writing studies as well. From their diverse geographical and institutional vantage points, these authors exemplify the activist spirit, comfort with complexity, and ability to work concretely toward more just practices. They exemplify the humility required, too, to recognize and reflect on ways they (all) are potentially complicit in unjust institutional gatekeeping and other forms of hegemonic control that can affect individuals’ dynamic identities in profound ways.

Works Cited