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Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

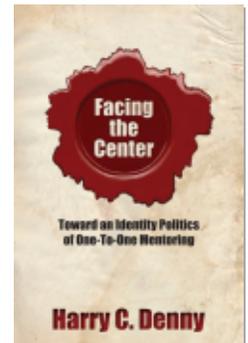
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INTERCHAPTER 2

Rochell Isaac, former writing consultant, current doctoral student in African American Studies, Temple University

The one thing that my tutoring experience has taught me is that the lack of confidence surrounding the act of writing often centers on matters of agency. Short of ESL and other debilitating issues, the struggle to write centers around our (in)ability to process and evaluate (critical thinking), our (in)ability to express opinion with clarity, and/or our (in)ability to own our viewpoints/opinions. Of course, those requirements call for some measure of self-reflectivity. My tutees and later my students all seemed to shy away from locating themselves on an issue. It was as if the elephant in the room, the silent question being asked of me was, "What right do I have to an opinion on the matter of X?" This was followed by the not so silent, "Who could possibly think that I'm smart enough to evaluate X?" At those moments, I became supportive. "Yes you can," I'd interject somewhere in those sessions. Now I wished I'd been more open. It might have been more helpful to share how much of a fraud I sometimes think I am.

What I love most about this response is its subversive quality. As an African American woman, Rochell created a response that avoids directly engaging an earlier draft of this chapter. After my nagging and begging her to produce the comments, Rochell's thoughts aren't immediately about race, at least on the surface, and are instead about her everyday experiences today as a teacher. The response also speaks to a reality of identity that readers and I need to be attuned to: identity politics aren't totalizing to our experiences; who we are doesn't always already occupy what we do and strive for. What she couldn't have known was that all of my other former African American consultants who aren't already featured in this chapter also declined to contribute to this dialogue, and not with an active, "Hell no, I'm not doing that!" More often than not, they declined passively. Time intervened and their lives became occupied with other matters. Both Rochell's response and those of the others got me thinking about how the request was problematic on a whole host of levels. I wonder whether the response rate would have changed had I made a space for her and them to decide which chapters they

could react to and on what terms. Instead, here and throughout, I sought out, in my best—and worst—well-meaning-liberal sort of way, people who seemed to fit the chapters' focus, positioning them as spokespeople or proxies for a way thinking and knowing. In theory, I knew no one person could stand in for a collective, even when the intent was to make representation more democratic and inclusive, yet in practice I still reverted to presuming that someone in Rochell's position had some transcendent view or trumping wisdom for the dynamics of race. In the end, the request wasn't reasonable or appropriate; she should have had the right to enter into this dialogue where and how she chose to.

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**Cameron McLinden, former writing consultant, St. John's University;
graduate student in English, Brooklyn College (CUNY)**

As a tutor, as well as simply a student interested in academia, I felt the pressures of conforming to the standard that is highlighted in this chapter, even though I am white. I grew up in the American South playing basketball and living in lower income communities; incidentally that placed me in a culture of the Southern black world. In college I found myself wearing baggy clothes and a backwards hat, hip-hop banging from my ipod, and speaking with a distinct representation of the culture in which I was raised. The attitude of academia and the writing center that hit me, in no specific way, told me I was out of place, needed to release the drawl in my voice, change my clothes, and essentially "act my skin color." It happened. I left much of the culture in which I found conviction for the "more proper" white culture I never got to know as closely as some now assume. The biggest place I found this pressure was in actual sessions – while peers who were raised in similar cultures embraced my tutoring more, those who were raised closer to the "proper white standard" at first had a look that seemed to show they thought they were on an episode of Candid Camera. I never confronted it directly, I always let my authority over writing do the talking, but it gradually pushed me away from what made me individual.

In what Cameron writes here, I hear echoes of experiences at the borderlands of class and race in the U.S. The pressure he felt but lacked the language to articulate speaks to the socio-cultural identity of someone working class, the focus of a subsequent chapter. But Cameron also speaks into an affiliation with an African American community back home that signifies as a culture both separate and aligned with his own in the South. I suspect the disjunction for his white

middle-class peers here in the northeast at St. John's has as much to do with the remnants of redlining segregation as it does with economic differences and with the ways those privileges get mapped onto everyday experiences. In the South, working-class people, regardless of race, are more likely to live in close proximity to one another and come to know each other's cultures, not that familiarity has dissipated deep-seated racism and racialized oppression. In the larger urban centers of the northeast, migration patterns over the last fifty years, the ones that made the suburbs possible, reflect a pattern of "white flight." Federal, housing development, and mortgage policies encouraged first-generation middle-class Caucasians to purchase homesteads far from city-centers, usually to the exclusion of African American and other racial minorities.¹² As metropolises became more racially concentrated and polarized, the employment stock shifted as well, particularly as manufacturing disappeared. The result of these shifts was a concentration of poverty commingled with racial segregation, often leaving society to equate urban poverty with race. While they have become linked, the antecedents to this material reality aren't often explored; instead, a rhetoric of meritocracy justifies the suburban "utopia" and more recent gentrification and repatriation of cities by ex-pats of outer rings of metropolitan living.

That pressure Cameron felt to act white, to perform his whiteness, is a powerful insight to me because it represents an important move, as Frankie Condon (2007) would no doubt support, to inventory his own racial identity and the practices that make it possible and enforce our wider system of and discourses of privilege around racial identities. I also like that Cameron names a practice that permeates writing center and composition classroom practice—the circulation and normalization of codes of English that reflect racial as well as other hierarchies. To be "right proper" (white) in the academy can often mean learning to change the way we signify, in language, through our bodies, by our adornment. And each movement brings along with it a certain loss and injury, especially when people aren't allowed a space to negotiate the privileging of one discourse practice, to speak into it or to mourn its loss. If we don't enable that processing, in conferences or workshops, we risk re-enacting, re-enforcing the damage to voice and sense of agency, and undoing all our work to free up individuals from cognitive and social restraints to move toward unfettered expression (before it's ultimately adapted to genres and audiences). I wonder how we can make greater time and space for this decompressing without also being patronizing or unproductive.

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12. For more background on redlining, see Nicholas Lehman's 1992 *Promised Land*, or Kenneth Jackson's 1987 *Crabgrass Frontier*.

Jennifer Fontanez, former writing consultant, undergraduate and Master's student, St. John's University

I recall one day in the writing center an African American student came in to work on a donor thank you letter. During our brainstorming session he very bluntly shared with me that the reason he believes that he is receiving this scholarship was "cause he was black" and he "shoulda gotten more dinero" and "I should know what he's talkin' about." I asked him to elaborate and explain his responses. He responded by stating, "you should know what I'm talking about...I mean aren't you Spanish or Asian or some shit like that?" I was initially very annoyed that he would even think of using his race as an apparatus to obtain funding and that he was completely ungrateful for the donations. I then became even more aggravated that in an abstract way he related to me because in his eyes I was classified as a minority of some sort and so we must have shared some common experience. The student's assumptions were incorrect about how I identified. I was appalled at how he was using his identity to his advantage (even though I showed no sign of disapproval or approval) and I thought that he was a bit arrogant in the way he approached identity and used it to his benefit.

After reflecting on this session I realized that I, too, use identity in a way that would give me an advantage. My non-position or refusal to neither confirm nor deny is my way to gain advantage. I can morph my identity depending on my situation, surroundings, and audience. White tutees usually don't question my credentials because there are few concrete indicators that I might be different or the Other. Minority students often gravitate to me; they can identify with me because they assume we share a common identity or experience. Highlighting my heritage roots when it is beneficial and being silent when situations are uncertain helps me be a universal consultant.

My own identity will never be constant; it will always be in flux. Although I am first generation in the U.S., I not only identify with being Hispanic, but I can also identify with the dominant culture of my surroundings. This is not because I have mixed blood in my veins (I am a 100% Puerto Rican), but rather because I quickly learned the expectations of the dominant culture, instead of resisting it. I am in no way, shape, or form advocating for assimilation or for people to deny their roots; having a general understanding of expectations can give people the ability to move fluidly between two very different worlds. For me, it has allowed me to connect with people from all identities, thus making me more accessible.

I'm intrigued by the transition in Jennifer's feelings from visceral offense to a reasoned comfort with her positioning. What's lurks as a tension is the conflict

she must feel on some level as a Latina whose identity has been assimilated into the mainstream (white) culture and society. The conflict becomes legible, for me, when Jennifer was surprised that an African American student would feel an immediate affiliation with her as a person of color, and when she didn't feel reciprocity with him. The reaction suggests Jennifer didn't see her identity as marginal/oppositional as he did, even as she recognized him in that role (as other). In the moment when Jennifer feels frustration with his apparent lack of gratitude for the scholarship he had received and for which he was being made to write a letter of appreciation to the donor, she best expresses the tension and gulf between her experiences with racialized marginalization. To Jennifer, this student's refusal to play along with the institutional process ran against the grain of her greater willingness to be compliant or accommodating to it. Her response also represents an important insight for the negotiation of the racial and other cultural assumptions in relation to institutional demands in writing centers and composition classrooms. How do we make possible venues for students to play along with, resist, and even subvert larger institutional practices, possibilities that no doubt lead to greater student agency and engagement? Like Cameron, Jennifer learned to play along with forces probably too big to challenge on her own, yet I wonder how we can tap into or better respect/honor students who find the rituals, as her client did, dubious at best. Must students always assimilate as Jennifer has done? What other possibilities can we present them that don't reduce the choices to "take it or leave it"? I'm also drawn to wanting to know more about how she works reconcile her strong identity as Hispanic with her life in the academy. Clearly, as Jennifer mentions, students are drawn to her because they suspect or assume she'll have empathy for their journeys. In spite of her stated assimilation, her ethnic identity remains strong, yet it feels bracketed for her everyday experience as a student, tutor and teacher. I wonder when Jennifer feels her ethnicity and when it informs and influences the empathy and pedagogy she uses with students.