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*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* (SDC) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published by the Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) biannually from the Georgia Institute of Technology. As a forum for practitioners in writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers, *SDC* publishes articles from administrators, consultants, and other scholars concerned with issues related to training, consulting, labor, administration, theory, and innovative practices.

Our editorial board welcomes scholarly essays on consulting, research, administration, training, technology, and theory relevant to writing centers, speaking centers, and digital/multiliteracy centers. Article submissions may be based in theoretical and critical approaches, applied practices, or empirical research (qualitative or quantitative). Submissions are evaluated by the editors, and promising articles are sent to our national editorial board for double-blind review. To honor *Southern Discourse's* historical context, future issues will include special sections that profile the work of regional associations, emerging undergraduate research, and centers across the country, providing a sustained look at regional and national concerns that centers face in the 21st century.



## *Consultant Insight*

### “Facing Harry Denny: Or, Facing Nationality in the Small College Writing Center”

ELIZABETH BURTON

*“...even before we get to writing, before we get to the product, L2 students possess historical and cultural capital substantially different than our own” (Denny 126).*

Since it started streaming on NPR’s website in October, I have been listening to Joanna Newsom’s new album *Divers* on loop. On one track, “Waltz of the 101st Lightborne,” there is a particular phrase that has stuck with me: “the war between us and our ghosts.” One ghost that I have been warring with was a session I had with a student writing an analysis of Natasha Trethewey’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book of poems *Native Guard* –a collection that deals with both an all-black squadron of soldiers in the American Civil War and Trethewey’s own mother, a woman engaged in an interracial marriage in the American South. It’s a beautiful collection that is steeped in American history and compassionately portrays the complicated intersection between love of the American South and knowledge of the South’s issues dealing with race. The difficulty of this text was exacerbated by the fact that the student I was working with was not from America.

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Transylvania University is small, with only around 1100 students, occupying a mere four city blocks in Lexington, Kentucky's north side. There have been changes to Transy's ethnic landscape over recent years, particularly with the rise in matriculation of international students. International students made up approximately 1.3% of the graduating class of 2015, having risen 1% in the last five years. First-year writers and international writers tend to comprise the bulk of our appointments, with international students accounting for 27% of the sessions that occurred last year.

Because of this climate, my meeting with this student was not an exceptional instance, and yet it sticks with me. The student, a young woman from China, had written incredible prose, incorporating lush imagery with creative turns of phrase, as well as other figurative language that I was delighted to see in a piece of academic writing. The trouble was, despite having gorgeous, articulate language, the piece had little to no actual analysis of the text and thus had not actually fulfilled the requirements of the assignment. That being said, she had already reached the maximum page limit: a hefty nine pages, which is no small order for an undergraduate writer of any linguistic background.

And so I was faced with a question: while her prose was wonderfully refreshing, should I have encouraged her to trim it down to make space for more typical, Western-style analysis? After all, the student was noticeably nervous about her overall grade. The ethics of my helping to squeegee her writing of any linguistic difference was of little concern to her aside from whether or not that would make her paper sound "better."

What was I to do? Ultimately, I did what the student wanted me to do: we got rid of much of the imagery and language that had caused me to be so enthralled with her writing in the first place, and made space for explication. She left the session thrilled. Yet this instance has never sat quite right in my mind.

Only when encountering Harry Denny's book *Facing the Center*, which explores how various marginalized groups

interact with writing centers, was I able to articulate what it was precisely about this session that bothered me: “What obligations do we have to educate students in the politics of their language use? Is it appropriate or fair to enable a student’s false sense of correctness or ability, even with the best of intentions?” (121) Encouraging this student to fit her writing into a box more familiar to Western academia did not sit well with me politically. However, I would have felt no better for her to turn in a paper that would not be well-received by her professor. It would seem that this situation was a catch-22. Denny, however sees a way out. While acknowledging that the “drive [of international students] to ‘fit-in’ and write in a ‘standard’ code of English...is completely understandable,” he also “[advocates] an awareness of resistant or subversive relationships to multilingual identity that writing center practitioners and others can offer to learners” (Denny 128).

First things first: what is this “standard’ code of English” to which these students are aspiring? Laura Greenfield defines “Standard English” as something that is necessarily without definition. Rather than being able to immediately recognize writing as Standard English, for Greenfield,

...the language of white people collectively [is] called “Standard English”, and when “Standard English” is imagined as a tool necessary for participation in mainstream society, people of color are put in the oppressive position not of having to speak or learn to speak a particular language...but of ridding themselves of all linguistic features that may identify them with communities of color. (Greenfield 46)

In short, this student (with good reason) was attempting to both sound colorless and perform as an academic in a white, Western setting despite the challenge of writing in a new language, in order to access real, material rewards: a good grade. The student’s primary issue was difficulty understanding the expectations of the assignment. Denny would agree with Greenfield and take it one step further to

claim that it is not just that this student was a person of color, but that she was from China that made our session so fraught. Denny claims that we (“we” being, presumably, Americans, and more specifically, writing center practitioners) are more forgiving of the complications that occur when transferring from one language to English when the speaker/writer in question is European: “L2 [those who come to English as a secondary language] use of English—and Americans’ tolerance of it—shifts depending on the subject and her or his perceived country of origin” (Denny 124).

While this kind of philosophical theorizing is useful to us from a pedagogical standpoint, it is ultimately not the main concern of many international students, and it definitely was not the concern of the student I worked with. The stakes for these students are incredibly high: “Multilingual writers face real material consequences for failing to gain facility with the dominant code” (Denny 128). While these material concerns are, to a certain degree, common to all students, this link between undergraduate success and future stability is even stronger, and even more urgent, for international students: “even before we get to writing, before we get to the product, L2 students possess historical and cultural capital substantially different than our own” (Denny 126). This cultural capital varies between international students, but for the student I met with on her poetry assignment, her cultural capital preceded her and inevitably overshadowed any actual work we did on her paper. Even now, I am writing about her as an international student, focusing on her status as “other” rather than on her as a writer.

However, I was not the only one who was working across cultural boundaries; the student was also attempting to write in a discourse that was not native to her, and it was this act of interpretation—on her part by interpreting the assignment, and on mine by interpreting her writing—that made our session so difficult. While we may seek painless resolution to this discussion, Valentine and Torres insist that “interacting across cultural differences...will not necessarily be easy,

comfortable, or neat, but these very challenges may also serve a fundamental mission of higher education—the cognitive and social development of its student population” (193-4). But it is precisely this messiness that makes interactions like these so important, particularly in the writing center. As writing center practitioners already denaturalize the system of power that allows an institution like academia to run by being between the positions of student and professor; we are also in a place to denaturalize other such institutionally held systems of power.

Although the question Denny proposes at the beginning of “Facing Nationality in the Writing Center” sounds as if it is suggesting a dichotomy between political awareness and practical assistance, there is space for compromise. Rather than promoting a wholly assimilationist or a wholly separatist politic in working with students like the one I worked with, the wisest course of action at the moment may be to help them to negotiate between indulging the powers that be and letting one’s political opinions alienate you. Rather than focusing solely on making this student’s writing sound as “standard” as possible, or going off on a political diatribe she may or may not care about, our role is to help students with their concerns while maintaining a mindfulness of the forces at play that shape their writing and our responses to it. While this solution sounds unsatisfyingly tentative to my own somewhat radical politics, Denny wisely focuses on gradual change rather than out-and-out revolution: “tipping points happen at unexpected moments and can’t be predicted, per se, but they build from something, from some spur” (Denny 26). Joanna Newsom warns in “Waltz of the 101st Lightborne” that ultimate failure is “eternal return and repeat” of our current ways. With this in mind, examining our own prejudices and mistakes may be the smallest step we take toward change, it will be the first of many, and ultimately will be the one that allows us to move forward.