

Queer Composition(s): Queer Theory in the Writing Classroom

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During the winter term of 1999, we designed and taught a first-year writing course that utilized Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* as the primary text for both discussion and writing assignments. Our goal was to create a curriculum that challenged students to think critically about how personal stories are told, how complex issues are represented, and how compelling lives are mediated through the process of writing about dramatic, traumatic, and transformative experiences. As compositionists, we wanted students to see how a master writer explores difficult issues through narration and exposition and how, in the *process* of writing, the writer comes to empowering insights about herself, the nature of family, and the construction of identities in the interaction between the two.

As *queer* compositionists, our choice of Allison's text arose out of a more complex set of motivations. Specifically, we were keen to introduce students to Allison's particularly queer take on the southern, white, working-class American family, and we wanted to provoke students to consider more critically the diversity of experiences and lives often contained and constrained within the phantasmatic cohesion of the family as a social construct. Critical energy for such a project came from both our commitment to thinking of the teaching of writing as a *social* process and from our interests in queer theory and its critiques of identities. As such, we attempted simultaneously to blend rhetorical and political goals, believing that it is better to acknowledge and grapple with the political within the pedagogical than risk teaching from unaware and unformed ideological biases.

Interestingly, most students seemed to respond well to what we were doing, and many became deeply engaged with Allison's text and with the critiques we were proposing. Their excitement enhanced our own, and added to it a sense of the forbidden or the transgressive, for we were

bringing heady material—the insights of queer theory into the construction of identity and social interaction—into first-year composition courses. On the one hand, the curriculum we designed was largely in step with the recent “social turn” in composition studies and pedagogies. Many other compositionists across the country have undertaken similar experiments in their classrooms, incorporating the insights of poststructuralism and social constructivist theories into their writing pedagogies. And we also knew that many of them did this with specifically social or political goals in mind. Indeed, as Bruce McComiskey has pointed out in *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, “There is mounting evidence that composition studies has experienced a ‘social turn,’ and, according to John Trimbur, this social turn is the result of an increasing disaffection among certain composition teachers with the radical individualism implied by the early writing-as-process paradigm” (19). Part of our curricular endeavor was to couple the development of rhetorical analysis with a querying of such “radical individualism”—or, using McComiskey’s description of “social-process composition” strategies, we wanted to “treat critical writing as rhetorical inquiry and political intervention into the cultural forces that construct our subjectivities” (3).

But while our participation in the “social turn” movement in composition pedagogy may have been nothing new, our specifically *queer* focus seemed innovative, and we began wondering if other compositionists were deploying the insights of the queer theoretical critique to invigorate or even rethink their writing pedagogies. And indeed, while queer theory has substantially influenced scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences throughout the 1990s, its applicability to pedagogy remains a subject that is only just now sparking serious scholarly and pedagogical inquiry. The reasons for such a delay are obvious, for when we begin thinking specifically about how queer theory might inform a particular pedagogy, such as the teaching of writing, many more questions than answers immediately present themselves:

- Can an esoteric theory such as queer theory really have an impact on daily interactions with first-year writing students?
- How would a writing instructor use queer theory in introductory courses where students are relatively unprepared to understand it as a theory per se?
- Might the intricacies—or even the “shock value”—of queer theory distract students from more basic concepts we are trying to teach in our composition courses, such as the writing process?

- As queer scholars *and* composition teachers who have spent much time thinking about the pedagogical uses of theory, we believe that such questions, as difficult as they may first appear, offer us the starting point for a productive discussion of how queer theory can not only inform but enliven writing instruction.

Before we can begin to answer such questions, we must have a clear understanding of what queer theory is—and is not. And while it is risky to assert that one can be “clear” about a theory as multifaceted and esoteric as queer theory, it *is* possible to identify recurring strains of thought in the work of major queer theorists. Basically, the main tenets of queer theory that we believe are applicable to writing pedagogy are as follows:

- Identities are constructed and performed rather than essential and “natural.”
- All spaces (both inside the classroom and out) are saturated with gendered and sexualized constructions of identity, which are never entirely our own but are given to us as “narrations” of self.
- We negotiate multiple identities through multiple social spaces, creating complex intersections between self, perception of self, other, and perception of other.
- Our conceptions of selves as sexualized and gendered beings are intimately connected to ways power is shaped, shifted, and shared between self and other in the social milieu.
- Understanding the construction and negotiation of these identities allows us to resist *normalizing* identity, which robs our differences—and the differences of others—of their critical power (see Jagose).
- Queer theory moves us *beyond* the multicultural task of accepting and validating identity and moves us *toward* the more difficult process of understanding how identity, even the most intimate perceptions of self, arise out of a complex matrix of shifting social power. In this way, we believe queer theory has uses and applications for self-understanding that engage *all* students as they narrate their identities for us, tell us who they are, and give us—and themselves—the stories of their lives, past, present, and future.

Specifically how to bring such tenets together with pedagogical practice has been the subject of increasing debate in a number of disciplines. For

instance, Janice Ristock and Catherine Taylor, the editors of one recent volume, *Inside the Academy and Out: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Studies and Social Action*, claim that there “has not been a volume that shows how pedagogical and research practices in fact are parallel projects in lesbian/gay/queer studies, each conceived as a form of transformative work relevant to the larger social world” (5). To step into this void, *Inside the Academy and Out* seeks to bridge the gap between theory and praxis, between the often airy realms of an over-intellectualized queer theory and the grounded work of thinking through issues of pedagogy and classroom praxis. To do this, the first, more theoretically inclined section of the anthology presents several recaps of current scholarly issues in queer theory and lesbian/gay/queer studies, as well as some thought-provoking accounts of queer pedagogical encounters and research practices. For instance, Margot Francis’ “On the Myth of Sexual Orientation: Field Notes from the Personal, Pedagogical, and Historical Discourses of Identity,” offers personal stories from the classroom with a queer theoretical analysis of the historical evolution of sexual orientation classifications. She concludes that queer theory’s deconstruction of sexual identity categories might provide “a starting place for a different kind of discussion” in the classroom, one in which the “possibilities *and* contradictions inherent in notions of identity *within our pedagogy*” might be illuminated (89–90). Instead of reifying static and even sometimes restraining notions of identity, Francis claims we can pedagogically mobilize social constructivist and deconstructive approaches as “puzzles and unsettling for the ways we can think about and represent sexuality, gender, and the self” (90). The goal here? To “wear” our “notions of identity lightly, so they do not contain us, or contain the work of understanding desire” (92). The ultimate pedagogical aim is to create richer, denser understandings of sexuality; as Francis puts it,

I would argue that while education strategies may include the language of identity they must, at the same time, extend an invitation to examine the problematics inherent in this process. For it is only through making the messy contradictions of “our” various histories and movements visible that we will have constructed a pedagogy that does justice to any of our sexualities. (92)

Or, put another way, identity categories—even lesbian and gay ones—are often restricting, especially in the classroom, where we want to teach students to think more openly and critically about the construction and

deployment of identities. Clearly, then, one way in which queer theory can positively impact the classroom is by inviting students and teachers to critically rethink the various identities that they perform—particularly as gendered and sexed beings—in the pedagogical process.

But doing this, as many of the contributors note in *Inside the Academy and Out*, is often problematic. Didi Khayatt worries about the epistemological pitfalls of “coming out” to her students in “Beyond the Classroom Assignment of In or Out.” She asks, “Would coming out in class encourage students to filter my performance in class through their (often limited) understanding of my sexuality?” Her answer—“as a teacher I prefer not to stand in as a sexual category”—points to a problem with few readily available solutions (46). Deborah Britzman, in “Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques,” asks even more pointed questions: “Can the project of education become the gathering ground for ‘deconstructive revolts’? Can pedagogy provoke ethical responses that can bear to refuse the normalizing terms of origin and of fundamentalism, those that refuse subjection?” (49). Arguing for more than just a pedagogy of “inclusion,” Britzman calls for a “queer pedagogy” that exceeds

such binary oppositions as the tolerant and the tolerated and the oppressed and the oppressor, yet still hold[s] onto an analysis of social difference that can account for how dynamics of subordination and subjection work at the level of the historical, the structural, the epistemological, the conceptual, the social, and the psychic. (66)

Surely, this is a worthy, though challenging, goal to set for one’s pedagogy. But an obvious question looms: how might such theoretical positioning play itself out in a *composition* classroom?

Before we begin to answer this question, we must agree with Britzman and enter a caveat: when we speak of the impact of queer theory on composition pedagogies, we are not talking about simply including lesbian, gay, or transgender readings in our courses or about teaching the work of queer theorists. We are talking instead about the way theory *shapes* practice. Though both of us have traditionally included readings that address issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in our curricula, we have come to believe that the inclusion of such readings is, in and of itself, a pedagogical theory—and one that does not necessarily indicate that a teacher’s pedagogy has been transformed by queer theory. Our own work with students leads us to believe that inclusion, though important and useful, can actually reinforce an essentialist view of

identity, for when students read fairly self-contained works in which authors focus entirely on individual aspects of their identities, they often come to understand those identities as both exclusive and permanent. Of course, queer theory's assertion that identity is liquid and performative works against such an understanding. Inclusion is mostly about *what* is taught; a queer theoretical pedagogy is about the *how* of teaching, and we maintain that queer theory has much to teach us about how it might *inform* curricular innovation and experimentation in the composition classroom.

In what specific ways? Amanda Knoradi's "On Moving Toward a Feminist Pedagogy of Deviance" presents a straightforward summary of how queer theory could be used pedagogically—both for her scholarly field (sociology) and, by extension we believe, for composition. Relying on the work of Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer, Knoradi proposes four ways in which queer theory might inform teaching:

First, we must study human sexuality as socially structured and all human interaction as inherently sexual. We must analyze how all social institutions (i.e. family, medicine, criminal justice, and work) are involved in maintaining heterosexuality as a normative idea and practice. Second, we cannot assume that sexuality is fixed in people or in time or assume that individuals necessarily take their identity from their sexual practices. Thus, we must analyze sexuality as a spectrum of practices, rather than study individual people as homosexual or heterosexual. Third, we must challenge what is believed to be known about sexuality and the accepted academic paradigms for investigating and communicating about it. This means providing revisionist reading and using nonacademic modes of analysis and communication, such as parody and carnival, where appropriate. Last, we must analyze areas of social life thought to be nonsexual for their sexual content and things thought to be heterosexual for their homosexual content. (22)

Running through each of these methods is a concern with understanding how narratives of self and society are formed and maintained—and how such narratives might be challenged, reread, and retold. In particular, Knoradi's fourth point seems aimed at thinking through and troubling assumptions about who we are and how we tell the stories of our identity. She explains:

A fourth task for the . . . instructor would be to evaluate whether classroom practice and assignments are conducive to "deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings" and to the academic success of nonheterosexual students. (22)

As such, Knoradi's understanding of the pedagogical uses of queer theory might prove particularly appropriate for first-year composition courses, in which students are often asked to narrate and analyze stories of identity, both others' and their own. Such stories would be examined to uncover the ways in which one's seemingly "natural" identity—for *any* subject position—is a construct of various social forces and expectations; and such examination then might open up a space for transformative play (such as Knoradi's "parody and carnival") that could simultaneously help students re-vision themselves through their writing and enliven the very act of writing itself.

And indeed, compositionists with interests in queer theory might agree that such problematizations are pedagogically useful. Ki Namaste argues,

Queer theory recognizes the impossibility of moving outside current conceptions of sexuality. We cannot assert ourselves to be entirely outside heterosexuality, nor entirely inside, because each of these terms achieves its meaning in relation to the other. What we can do, queer theory suggests, is negotiate these limits. We can think about the *how* of these boundaries—not merely the fact that they exist, but also how they are created, regulated, and contested. The emphasis on the production and management of heterosexuality and homosexuality characterizes the poststructuralist and queer theory project. (199)

Hence, queer theory offers teachers and students a way to critique the identities they bring into the classroom, as opposed to just accepting and affirming them. A queer theoretical pedagogy asks both students and teachers to acknowledge that identity is a performance and that, as such, it can change from day to day, hour to hour, or even moment to moment. Certainly, engaging in this kind of pedagogical critique and inviting students to participate in it with us is to recognize the classroom as always already politicized—as a space in which such critiques of identity are not only necessary but inevitable if we are to understand dynamics of social control and resist delimiting normalizations. Such work is clearly parallel to that of other compositionists who employ the "social turn" of composition theory in their classrooms; and we readily acknowledge that queer theory, as even its harshest critics point out, is necessarily, perhaps inherently, conscious of its political investments. However, to understand queer theory's concerns as *simply* political is to miss how deeply and even intimately *rhetorical* queer theory is, for queer theory asks us to question, at the most fundamental levels and in the most essential ways,

the nature of authorship, representation, and the process of coming into being through language.

For instance, when we ask ourselves and our students to think of identity from a queer theoretical perspective, we ask them also to engage in a kind of rhetorical analysis in which they see the writing they study (either their own or professional) as impermanent, liquid, and always in need of revision. In this context, students can be asked to view each draft of an essay (including the “final”) as a rhetorical entity that captures a moment in time rather than a timeless truth. Our queer theoretical pedagogies, then, have helped us provide students with a new way of seeing the writing process, one that places revision at its core. In our own experience, students have had a difficult time seeing revision as anything other than punishment for a job done poorly. Queer theory helps them see it as a *rhetorical* tool for understanding the fluidity of identity and experience.

Even more specifically in terms of teaching writing, Robert Yagleski tell us, in “Who’s Afraid of Subjectivity? The Composing Process and Postmodernism or A Student of Donald Murray Enters the Age of Postmodernism,” that in the postmodern world, “individuals are configurations of a dizzying array of social and cultural interconnections and relations” and that “understanding writing may have more to do with understanding its social uses than with understanding the ‘cognitive’ abilities of individual writers” (211). Queer theory, connected as it is to postmodern theories, helps us provide students with a way of speaking writing about their own and others’ “dizzying array of social and cultural connections” and of seeing that because writing is both socially constructed and constructive, it must always be in a state of flux and available for critique. In this way, queer theoretical pedagogies reinforce the more traditional process pedagogies familiar to most compositionists. Queer theory reinforces the “writing is never finished” mantra that writing teachers have been espousing for decades. The difference is that it addresses some of students’ core resistances to working through the process because it places the process itself in a social rather than a purely academic context. Discussions about the multitude of identities we all bring to the classroom easily give way to discussions about audience and purpose, and discussions about our performances of different identities in different contexts easily lead into discussions about dealing with contradictions in writing, about organization, and about how readers “read” us when they encounter our writing. Clearly, we believe that queer theory reinforces process pedagogies. In fact, we would go so far as to

argue that queer theoretical pedagogies provide one of the social contexts in which process pedagogies can be effectively practiced. But before we go any further, it will be useful to understand how we have come to ask—and begin answering—questions about how queer theory can inform a composition pedagogy.

In composition, queer theory has emerged with much the same lineage as in other fields: from lesbian and gay theory and the growing field of LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) studies. Hence, historically situating the presence of lesbian and gay identities and issues in the field of composition will help contextualize how queer theory might inform, or potentially revision, composition pedagogy. Such a survey reveals that the presence and changing configuration of lesbians and gays, as well as the treatment of “queer” issues in the composition classroom, has passed through three identifiable stages: coming out and identifying oppression, inclusion and visibility, and transforming praxis and theory by teaching queer and theorizing queer.

The Seventies: Coming Out and Identifying Oppression

In the 1970s virtually no work was being done that today we would call lesbian or gay composition scholarship—an absence that can be attributed to two distinct factors: first, composition scholarship in general was less theoretical and more pragmatic at that time, and second, the gay rights movement was still in its infancy. This is the decade, though, when scholars were laying the groundwork for later lesbian and gay composition scholarship. For instance, in 1973, Louie Crew wrote to Richard Ohmann, the editor of *College English*, to observe that the journal would benefit from a special issue devoted to lesbian and gay scholarship in English studies. Ohmann responded by asking Crew to submit a prospectus; eventually, Crew and Rictor Norton guest edited the special issue, titled “The Homosexual Imagination”—the first issue of an academic journal devoted to presenting gay and lesbian scholarship as a valid field of inquiry. Since the publication of that special issue in 1974, there has been an identifiable, though somewhat intermittent, stream of lesbian/gay scholarship in composition. For instance, in 1975 Crew delivered a paper, “A Faggot in the Woodpile: Teaching Gay Students,” to the Annual Meeting of the College English Association. He and Julia Penelope (then Stanley) formed and cochaired NCTE’s Committee on Lesbian/Gay Male Concerns and the Lesbian/Gay Caucus. By 1979, NCTE and CCCC had both passed Resolution 4, which charged the

organizations to end discrimination against gays and lesbians in the profession.

The Eighties: Working Toward Inclusion and Visibility

During the 1980s most of the composition scholarship addressing lesbian and gay issues dealt with two goals: including gay and lesbian experience in the composition classroom—mainly in readers, writing assignments, and classroom discussion—and gaining professional visibility. For instance, Crew continued his work in gay studies, publishing several pieces, among them “Thriving as an Outsider, Even as an Outcast, in Smalltown America,” which originally appeared in 1975, but was widely anthologized during the 1980s in composition readers such as *Life Studies*. In the late 1980s, a new group of young lesbian and gay composition scholars, most of whom went to graduate school in more congenial environments than their predecessors, began to invigorate the field. In 1988, for example, Sarah-Hope Parmeter and Irene Reti edited *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom: Writings by Lesbian Teachers*. Most of the pieces in this slim volume are either poems or first-person narratives, but Ellen Louise Hart and Parmeter both contribute analytical articles. Parmeter’s contribution is “Four Good Reasons Why Every Lesbian Teacher Should Be Free to Come Out in the Classroom,” and Hart’s is “Literacy and the Lesbian/Gay Learner.” Hart argues that the needs of lesbian and gay students are systematically ignored, and these students “frequently must sit in silence while abusive comments about homosexuality and homosexuals made by their peers are tolerated, condoned, echoed by their teachers” (31). As far as we can tell, Hart’s is the earliest composition article to deal with the issue of the lesbian or gay learner, and because it moves those learners from the margin and places them at the center of theory and praxis, it is groundbreaking work.

Paul Puccio’s formation of the CCCC Caucus for Lesbian and Gay Professionals in 1989 did much to facilitate lesbian and gay composition scholarship. Puccio attended the 1988 conference and noticed a conspicuous absence of discussion about lesbian and gay issues. In response, he proposed a special interest group for the 1989 conference. The number of scholars who attended that session was staggering. Puccio had expected twenty or so people, but nearly sixty showed up. That first meeting was devoted almost entirely to introductions and personal narratives about what brought people there; in fact, the group spent so long just talking to one another that a second meeting time had to be set so that members could get down to the business of establishing an administrative identity

for the new group, which was later to become the CCCC Caucus for Lesbian and Gay Professionals (Puccio, Personal).

With Puccio as its first chair, the caucus began to identify several interrelated but distinct goals: (1) to provide lesbian and gay composition scholars the opportunity to meet annually to share ideas about their work and their experiences in the academy; (2) to bring scholars who are doing similar or related work together to propose CCCC panels; (3) to become politically active in the larger organization, making connections with members of the Executive Committee and proposing resolutions to protect lesbian/gay scholars against discrimination. The caucus has had an effect on the “look” of the conference; besides facilitating the dramatic increase in presentations of lesbian and gay scholarship mentioned above, in 1995 the caucus also encouraged conference organizers to invite lesbian comedian Sarah Cytron to perform at the CCCC in Washington DC, where her routine “Take my Domestic Partner—Please” played to a standing room only crowd.

The 1989 publication of “Homophobia and Sexism as Popular Values” by David Bleich and “Breaking the Silence: Sexual Preference in the Composition Classroom” by Allison Berg, et al. (then teaching assistants in Bleich’s program) marked a significant change in the discourse about lesbian and gay issues in composition. The two related articles analyze classroom dynamics in a first-year composition course when lesbian issues were introduced. In both articles, the scholar/teachers take a social constructionist approach in examining their teaching. Bleich understands his students’ reactions as reflections of popular values; the teaching assistants then analyze how those popular values manifest themselves in the classroom. This type of criticism represented a new type of lesbian/gay composition scholarship—one that focused on not just incorporating lesbian and gay material in composition courses but rather on an analysis of what happens in the classroom when the inclusion is already accomplished.

The Nineties: Theorizing Queer, Teaching Queer

Benefiting from the momentum gained in the 1980s, the 1990s were “boom” years for the discussion of lesbian/gay issues, pedagogies, and theories in composition journals and at the CCCC. The dramatic increase of the number of scholars grappling with les-bi-gay issues is itself telling: in all the years before 1987, there were fewer than five presentations of lesbian or gay scholarship at the CCCC and only a smattering of articles in professional journals; by contrast, in 1990 alone there were thirteen

lesbian or gay presentations at CCCC. Throughout the first half of the 1990s, the number of presentations steadily increased, including significant presentations by Paul Puccio (1989, 1994) and Gerald Luboff (1992).

There are, of course, a number of reasons for that increased visibility, but one of the most important is the incredible energy and political savvy poured into the newly created field by lesbian and gay scholars, many of whom were (and still are) members of the CCCC Caucus for Lesbian and Gay Professionals. Karen Harbeck and Didi Khayatt both called attention to the presence of queers in the classroom, Harbeck with *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula* and Khayatt with *Lesbian Teachers: An Invisible Presence*. But perhaps even more importantly, the 1990s witnessed the energizing of many academic fields by the emerging discipline of “queer theory,” which prompted scholars and teachers to steadily shift emphasis away from simply *including* lesbian and gay material in their classrooms and toward a willingness to consider how the *critiques* offered by queer theory could be incorporated into both scholarship and pedagogy.

This shift started in 1994 with the publication—and critique—of *Tilting the Tower*, a collection of essays about “lesbians, teaching, and queer subjects.” Initially, the anthology, edited by Linda Garber and published by Routledge Press, was greeted by many in the academic community, including compositionists, with much enthusiasm. The section in the anthology entitled “Classrooms: College/University” includes a number of essays about composition pedagogy and theory, including a reprint of Berg’s essay mentioned earlier and one by Alison Regan entitled “‘Type Normal Like the Rest of Us’: Writing, Power, and Homophobia in the Networked Composition Classroom.” By emphasizing the notion of breaking silences, the collection potentially neutralizes the possibility of using lesbian identity to critique a heteronormative culture, a culture with serious expectations for sexual/gender behavior and identity. In a review of the book, Harriet Malinowitz jokes: “How many lesbians does it take to break a silence,” and points out that in a culture whose mass media seems preoccupied with issues like gays in the military and gay marriage, there are few silences left to be broken (15). As she puts it,

In 1994, the issue facing us is no longer silence (if it ever was), but rather our relationship to the cacophony all around us—both the feminist and

queer voices reconstructing religion, family, culture and politics, and the voices of those desperately trying to preserve entrenched ideologies about sexuality and gender. (16)

Malinowitz's assertion clearly defines the place lesbian and gay composition scholars inhabited throughout much of the 1990s: we were no longer invisible to our colleagues and students in composition classes. Indeed, the majority of readers used in writing classrooms made at least some effort to include lesbian and gay issues.

Inclusion was no longer much of a problem—but understanding the dynamics of homophobia and heterosexism *were* of increasing importance, both to lesbian and gay scholars and activists. New kinds of questions, informed by the emerging field of queer theory, started to appear in scholarly publications and presentations—questions such as, do we want to continue to use readers and texts that encourage dichotomizing classroom discussions about whether lesbians and gays have a right to exist and enjoy the rights afforded to straights? Or, do we want to use social constructivist theories to question the construction of *all* identities? Further, how will we transform the academy so that it will allow for a deconstruction of subjective distinctions among sexual orientations? And how might this work be suited to or carried out in composition classrooms, where narrations of self are often a part of first-year writing assignments?

Malinowitz's 1994 dissertation, "Lesbian and Gay Reality and the Writing Class," which was published in 1995 under the title *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities*, was the first composition theory book to examine the manner in which our pedagogies impact our lesbian and gay students' learning *and* to analyze the discursive interactions among lesbian, gay, and straight students. Describing two composition courses dealing with gay experience, Malinowitz uses social construction theory, liberatory pedagogy, feminism, ethnography, and queer theory as frameworks for analysis, and she proposes "a pedagogy that uses the vantage point of the social margin." In bringing together these disparate methodologies, Malinowitz's analysis seeks to *replace* the margin, re-centralizing it in the classroom. This recentering process never asks students to engage in dichotomizing discussions about the rights of lesbians and gays to exist or about the pros and cons of our lifestyles; instead, students are asked to consider lesbian/gay experience in the context of heterosexist and homophobic American culture. Malinowitz puts it this way:

A chief product of postmodern theory has been to puncture the master cultural narratives that swallow up anarchic and infinitely complicated human difference. The object is not simply to give “silenced” discourses a chance to be heard; it is rather to expose the indeterminate and hybrid nature of all discourse, to prompt incendiary questions about what is wrong with pictures that present themselves as seamlessly composed. Yet the project is of particular importance to subjugated peoples, since master narratives become hegemonic precisely by distilling and then strategically universalizing dominant ideologies, rendering the presence of others unimaginable. (265)

Malinowitz’s book begins to “queer the brew,” to borrow a phrase she uses in her concluding chapter; she presents us with a pedagogy that begins moving *away* from simple rhetorics of inclusion and asks us to *query* how identities are deployed and narrated. In the final chapter of *Textual Orientations*, Malinowitz argues that teachers should think fully and carefully about the ways in which the identities that both teachers and students bring to a writing classroom are complicated and varied. More specifically, she asks us to acknowledge the extent to which we might wish to maintain, rather than erase, our differences; as Malinowitz says, “though people usually want to leave the margins, they *do* want to be able to bring with them the sharp vision that comes from living with friction and contradiction” (251–52). Such friction and contradiction can offer a number of critical entrances into critiquing the dominant narratives with which and through which our lives are constructed and lived. Configured as such, the writing classroom becomes a powerful site for developing skills of cultural critique, investigating the social functioning of narratives, and examining the construction of personal and political identities through social deployments of language and story.

Others have taken up similar queer critiques of their pedagogies. In the field of English in general, George Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman’s edited collection, *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, offers some essays that address a number of scholarly and pedagogical questions in the broader field of lesbian and gay studies, with some attention to how queer theory can inform the study and teaching of literature. A comparable yet more recent anthology is William Spurlin’s edited collection, *Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Teaching of English*. Described as a “wide-ranging, international collection that provides a contemporary overview of issues of sexual identity as they relate to teaching and learning in English from elementary through university

levels,” this collection is useful in terms of the broad field of English studies, generally, but, specifically in the area of composition, discussion is limited. In the same vein, Spurlin’s September 2002 special issue of *College English*, entitled “Lesbian and Gay Studies/Queer Pedagogies,” included articles with titles like “Theorizing Queer Pedagogy in English Studies after the 1990s,” “Tales of the City: Marginality, Community, and the Problem of (Gay) Identity in Wallace Thurman’s ‘Harlem Fiction,’” and “Out in the Academy: Heterosexism, Invisibility, and Double Consciousness.” While this issue also included Karen Kopelson’s “Dis/Integrating that Gay/Queer Binary: ‘Reconstructed Identity Politics’ for a Performative Pedagogy,” which deals with pedagogical ideas that can be applied to composition pedagogy, *College English* is not a journal whose focus is composition, so the issue itself does not finally serve as a significant contribution to queer *composition* pedagogical research.

Contemporary Queer Composition(s)

It’s encouraging that the field of English studies, as a whole, is grappling with queer theory and sexuality studies, even as the generality of such work makes it difficult to identify work that is specifically applicable to the composition classroom. If we focus our attention on work in composition studies, though, we see some authors, since Malinowitz’s study, attempting to focus the conversation on queer theory’s usefulness for writing instruction and composition theory. As we see it, most of that work addresses the following issues: the queer teacher, queer writer(ly) identities, and queer classrooms and pedagogies.

Essayists interrogating notions of the queer teacher examine how the teacher’s performed identity can be used to evoke “queer” readings of identity and selfhood. These writers call into question certain of the traditional assumptions about the dynamics of the writing classroom—particularly normative heterosexuality, the idea of empowerment, the disconnection between the erotic and pedagogy, and the teacher’s and students’ essential (and therefore static) identities. These writers are particularly concerned with how queer theory can transform our notions about teachers and their interactions with students. Some works that fit into this category include “Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke: Pedagogical Performances of Class, Gender, and Sexuality” by Michelle Gibson, Martha Marinara, and Deborah Meem, and Jonathan Alexander’s “A ‘Sisterly Camaraderie’ and Other Queer Friendships: A Gay Teacher Interacting with Straight Students.”

In contrast, essayists who address queer writer(ly) identities discuss specific composition classroom activities, exercises, or assignments that the authors use to help students “queer” their understandings of various subject positions, including gay, straight, and even homophobic identities. In general, these authors offer queer critiques of traditional composition assignments that ask students to adopt fixed identities rather than come into an awareness of how identities are constructed as fluid narrations. Some articles that fit include Alexander’s “Out of the Closet and Into the Network: Sexual Orientation and the Computerized Classroom” and an abridged reprint (2000) of Richard Miller’s 1994 *College English* article, “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone: Assessing Homophobic Student Writing.”

And, finally, essayists describing queer classrooms and pedagogies examine broader ways in which the space of the composition classroom can itself be “queered.” Drawing heavily on queer theory, as well as on their experiences as queer teachers, these writers reject composition pedagogical theories that they believe reinforce heterosexist, uncritical views of identity performance. In general, these essays are addressed to composition practitioners who are considering the general applicability of queer theory to their teaching. An article that broaches this discussion is Lauren Smith’s “Staging the Self: Queer Theory in the Composition Classroom.”

To our minds, the articles in this special cluster of *JAC* move us forward by beginning to extend these categories—primarily by using the notions of queer teachers and queer writer(ly) identities to explicate and explore additional possibilities for queer-based composition curricula and pedagogies.

Jan Cooper asks what happens to the “inclusivist” view of multicultural classroom dynamics when it is challenged by the writing of students in composition courses that explicitly address sexuality issues. To do this, she discusses three notions operating in composition courses at Oberlin College—“coming out,” its attendant metaphor of “the closet,” and Mary Louise Pratt’s “arts of the contact zone.” Considered together, Cooper claims, these terms provoke a different approach to “multicultural education” than any one of the terms might have produced without the others. She believes this primarily because students who variously identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning, among other labels, have continuously reported that their experience of composition classrooms that directly address sexuality issues is particularly, indeed inescapably, confrontational. Drawing on her substantial experience as a

composition teacher, on Harriet Malinowitz's *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities*, and on more recent work in both sociolinguistics and queer theory, the author looks at what her queer students' writing and commentary on the acts of writing in such confrontational environments reveal about the extent to which "contact zone" is an adequate metaphor for composition courses—and potentially for a multicultural education in general.

Robert McRuer examines the role of queer bodies, broadly conceived, in the cultural practice of composition. As both queer theory and disability studies have aptly demonstrated, our culture generally positions able-bodied and heterosexual subjectivities as the norm; queers and people with disabilities are merely supplemental to an unmarked able-bodied/heterosexual ideal and, in fact, that supplemental and highly visible position is precisely what secures heterosexual/able-bodied identities. McRuer argues, however, that a focus on the composing body (the body of the writer facing the blank page or screen) requires us to understand heterosexual and able-bodied subjectivities themselves as supplemental. Heterosexual/able-bodied identities might be, and usually are, written into existence by the composing process (that is, again, a process committed to order, hierarchy, and the elimination of agitation), but the body at the moment of encounter with the blank page is another sort of body altogether. Through a consideration of two composition courses at George Washington University, organized around queer theory and disability studies respectively, McRuer argues that composing bodies are inevitably queer/disabled bodies, and that the temporary and contingent universalization of queerness and disability allows us to shape a composition theory and pedagogy committed to critical de-composition, not simply to the routinized production of hierarchical, heteronormative order.

Connie Monson and Jacqueline Rhodes use queer theory to conduct a broad critique of composition pedagogy. In particular, they explore the implications of a queer writing pedagogy, arguing that the writing classroom forms a key site from which to articulate, explore, query, and better understand the intersections of private, personal, and public discourses. As James Berlin argues, one role of writing classes is to intervene in the constructions of subjectivity, to locate the conflicts "in order to make them the center of writing." To do this, Monson and Rhodes examine what "passes" as private and personal in first-year composition, particularly from the standpoint of the teacher-as-classroom-writer. More specifically, they examine the mutually enriching interrogations of

positionality and power undertaken in queer and composition theories—interrogations that insist on multiple comings-out, multiple impersonae, and multiple risks from both teachers and students—if we are all to develop richer, more subtle, and more “aware” understandings of the circulation of power, position, and identity around us.

All of the contributors to this cluster grapple with the ways in which queer theory has come to inform, problematize, and sometimes revitalize their teaching of writing, and they explore the boundaries of how theory permeates our writing instruction—as well as how theory is itself reshaped in its pedagogical deployment. Most important, though, the essays in this cluster participate in current trends in queer composition pedagogy by considering the connections between theory and practice; the teachers are also theorists and the theorists are also teachers, and all of us believe strongly in queer theory’s direct applicability to the writing classroom. Ultimately, these articles—engaged dialectically with your own theories, practices, and pedagogical investments—can excite new thinking about the ways all of us enter the classroom to teach—and learn.

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