

**TEACHING QUEER: POSSIBILITIES FOR WRITING, READING, AND KNOWING**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2011

This dissertation explores intersections between queer theory and pedagogy for the teaching of undergraduates—with particular attention to the teaching of writing. Queer theory has made significant contributions to the ways we understand gender, sexuality, identity, discourse and material bodies. My dissertation extends the work of queer theory, opening its insights to the practices of teaching while also considering teaching as a way to reflect back on the central questions of queer theory. Some scholars have called the intersections between queer theory and teaching “queer pedagogy,” though this term is still fraught, still in the process of being understood, and just beginning to be written about in terms of teaching practices and methodology. This work, grounded both in queer theory and in my experience of a specific writing course, is part of this generative beginning.

In this dissertation I explore, in depth, what I see as the crucial next steps in investigating what queer pedagogies might look like, who can enact them, and how they may be powerful methods in the teaching of undergraduate writing. My work puts some pressure on the previous emphasis on identity politics in scholarship on queer pedagogies. Over the past fifteen years, a series of notable texts emerged in thinking about the relationship between teaching and queer studies; these early texts are primarily identity-based and construct limiting theoretical notions of identity itself. However, my work in queer theory and my own pedagogical experiences have led me to think of identity as always, to some degree, fluid and unstable. I argue that queer

pedagogies, when enacted in the spirit of queer theory, can offer more than a way of conceptualizing identity politics in the classroom and can become queer methodologies, queer *practices* of teaching. I understand queer pedagogies as approaches, as theories of teaching that can be practiced by teachers and students occupying multiple, shifting, and varied subject positions. My dissertation offers these very practices, drawing from work in composition studies, from queer theory, and from the work of students.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a 1995 issue of *Educational Theory*, Deborah Britzman asks the question: *is there a queer pedagogy?* She asks this question at a time when scholars in English and in Education are wondering about what queer studies brings to teaching, about what conversations would emerge if we imagined queerness in relation to teaching and to the teaching of English. We can mark this time period in the mid-nineties as a moment when scholars began to put the words “queer” and “pedagogy” side by side, though we might say it is still, at this moment, a bit contentious as to what this pairing of notions means or what it makes possible. The mid-nineties also marks the appearance of texts like Haggerty and Zimmerman’s *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, Linda Garber’s *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians/Teaching/Queer Subjects*, and Harriet Malinowitz’s *Textual Orientations: lesbian and gay students and the making of discourse communities*, a moment when English’s queer turn sways toward composition more particularly. Several years later, both *College English* and *JAC* published special issues on Queer Pedagogies and Lesbian and Gay Studies. More recently, in 2008, the publication of Jonathan Alexander’s *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* illuminates the ways the merging of these two fields is still providing active and interesting sites for discussions about the teaching of writing, though I will also say that I agree with Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace who say, in their 2009 article, “The Queer Turn in Composition Studies,” that more exploration of these intersections is essential to both composition and to queer theory. I

see my work as contributing to and intervening in these ongoing discussions, and I want to say a few explicit words about what I see as the interventions my work aims to enact.

When I began studying queer pedagogies, and in particular queer pedagogies as they were connected to the teaching of composition, I noticed some interesting patterns. First, I noticed that often times (as in Malinowitz's book or in Garber's anthology) notions of queer pedagogies seem tied to GLBT subjects—meaning queer teachers or queer students. Second, I noticed that queer pedagogies were frequently equated with queer texts or the reading of GLBT literature. Third, I noticed little or sometimes no references to student writing *as* writing, meaning the discussions of the writing were bound to discussions of content (how to respond to homophobic papers, how to teach students to respect and honor differences in their writing, etc.). And finally, I noticed that when queer theory was cited (and it surprisingly very infrequently was), it was often cited through an application model of theory whereby we *apply* queer theory to teaching practice. I do want to say first that I value and make use of all of these kinds of inquiry in my teaching and in my writing about teaching, and I think the work and patterns I am referring to here take up very important questions that can be quite tied to reading and writing *practices*. However, I understand my exploration of queer pedagogies as more explicitly connected to the act and practices of writing and teaching writing. I wanted my students' work in the classroom and in their papers to become more central to the project. I wanted theory to emerge from practice and not only be applied *to* practice. With permission from my students, as collaborators and amazing generators, this project explores the terrain where queer theory and composition pedagogies overlap, intersect, and move into one another. Working through transcripts of class discussions, student writing, photographs I took of chalkboards, and my own teaching notes and journal during the Fall of 2007, I wanted to raise questions about the act of

writing and the teaching of writing; I wanted to consider queerer possibilities for the teaching of writing with particular attention to a first year writing course. Primarily, the composition course I write about in this project is a Seminar in Composition section of first-year writing, taught in the fall semester of 2007. The course was attached to a Freshmen Studies Learning Community called, “Human Psyche and Sexuality,” and the students enrolled in this course had chosen this course theme through the University of Pittsburgh’s Freshmen Studies program. In the context of this course and as I tried to gather a representation of the course in this project, I wanted to try to develop a set of queer methodologies, thinking of queer pedagogies as sets of theorized practices that any student or teacher might engage, sets of theorized practices that as practices were, or could be, queer. I asked myself, what would happen if the teaching of composition were queerer? What would that queerer look like? What kind of writing would students do? What would happen in that queerer classroom? What kind of teaching, and writing, would I do?

## **I. QUEER METHODOLOGIES**

To consider these questions, I needed to consider myself as a writer first. I needed to consider how I would go about representing the materials I had gathered, the students I had taught, and the questions I had wanted to ask. In considering these questions of representation and methodology, I became invested in writing that enacts its inquiry formally, and I turned to scholars in queer theory to think about the methodology. Both the project’s inquiry *and* its representation in this scholarship are informed by my own understandings of what constitutes the *queer*. Judith Halberstam, in her introduction to *Female Masculinity*, writes that, a “queer methodology is [. . .]a scavenger methodology, that uses different methods to collect and produce

information” (13). She argues that: “The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (13). This project takes Halberstam’s call for a “scavenger methodology” quite seriously, and pushes on notions of disciplinary, bodily, pedagogical, writerly, and scholarly coherence. Because I do not think scholarship in teaching can pretend to separate itself from the teachers and students who are its subjects, because I cannot convince myself (and have no wish to convince readers) that there is some objective distance between the stories of the lives of teachers and the stories of their teaching, and because I believe, as Halberstam does, that methods “that are often cast as being at odds with each other” can be put in dynamic, productive combination, I write as this scavenger. I collect my work and my students’ work alongside one another; I try to move toward the layers of understanding that might emerge. I blur the lines of authorship. I make use of literature, science, narrative, and individual experience. I recall my own education, I describe the fragments and fissures of my own life alongside the loons, my own martial arts practice, the body, and the dolphins that become metaphors against which my students and I can be read. In this sense, this project both is about writing *and is* writing.

*1984: My father says I'll end up a dyke from playing ice hockey. And my big brother says a dyke is a girl who likes other girls. And I don't like girls at all; they only play rope jumping at recess. And Jackie Wightman smells like fruit every single day. When I take my bike out into the horse trails, there are towers that make a sound like a baby singing. Only the babies are invisible. My Dad says no one is invisible but God. Sometimes, I pretend the barn is my house. Sometimes, I take my bike apart and put it back together all morning.*

Johnnie Hart, a student in the course I examine in this project, writes in his Mid-Term Course Evaluation Form<sup>1</sup>:

It's like I keep going to write something down, but I feel lost. I feel like there is not much I can say for sure in this class. So I guess my biggest question is how do I write if I can't say anything for sure about anything? In high school I was supposed to pretend to be sure when I wasn't in my writing and lots of other things come to think of it, but now, now being sure is a sign of weakness when before it was a sign of strength. My thinking feels all watery. It's hard to fight the urge to freeze it back up. (Hart, "Mid-Term")

It is easy to note Johnnie Hart's narrative gift of metaphor—how he is able to imagine his way through the literal circumstances of his experience with the readings and with the course. I am interested in his sense of liquid, of his thinking being “watery.” And I am interested in that water as a kind of alternative epistemology, a way of thinking and writing. I became curious about how I might more explicitly encourage student work that functions as liquid, as fluid. For me, this means I must contend with fluidity in terms of thought, reading, writing and interpretation as all of these kinds of literacy practices overlap.

One of the things I notice, again and again, about the work of queer theorists (and really, the work of many writers I love) is the fierceness with which they are willing to interrogate the self, identity, and language. We need not reach very far into the pockets of queer studies to find this interrogation: Foucault's interrogation of discourse and the repressive hypothesis in volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Butler's interrogation of the gender binary in *Gender Trouble*, or Sedgwick's interrogation of “coming out” in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick writes, “But, again, the extent, construction and meaning, and especially the history of any such theoretical continuity—not to mention its consequences for practical politics—must be open to every interrogation” (88). And in fact, even to think of Judith Butler's move to imagine drag as a

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<sup>1</sup> All students are quoted with their permission using the form in Appendix C.

kind of potentially subversive “trying on” of gender is also a way to imagine this course I taught as a kind of potentially subversive “trying on” of queer pedagogy—a kind of inductive experiment. Queer pedagogy is not liberatory pedagogy, not exactly critical or feminist pedagogy. And as Sedgwick additionally asserts: “Antihomophobic inquiry is not co-extensive with feminist inquiry, but we can’t know in advance how they will be different” (83). The same holds true for, say, queer pedagogical inquiry and other types of pedagogical inquiry. I taught this course with interrogation in mind—interrogation that would inevitably involve interrogations of language, identity, and self. And I tried to begin the course with an interrogation into perhaps the most sacred culmination of language, identity and self: gender. After all, male/female “functions as a primary and perhaps model binarism affecting the structure and meaning of many, many other binarisms” (Sedgwick 84). I had the idea that if students could do work in thinking through this powerful system of meaning, it would not only help them to understand how selves are made and how systems of domination operate, but it would also help them to write more interesting and more complicated essays, essays that proceed without the assumption that meaning can be contained. Just as Sedgwick characterizes her project as a writer, I, too, would characterize my project as the instructor for this course: “Repeatedly to ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially *mean*, has been my principal strategy” (Sedgwick 83). How categorizations “work” is a question of theoretical function and construction as opposed to what categorizations “mean,” which would suggest first that we could even know what they mean and second that they have inherent or still meaning. While queer pedagogy would not be the first radical pedagogy to aim to disrupt binarisms, it does seem that a queer pedagogy might ask that my students and I disrupt binaries in some very specific, embodied,

sexed and gendered ways—ways that cut right to the heart of who we think we are, or we think others are.

## II. THE QUESTION OF NARRATIVE

Elementary school—when it was time to get in line to walk from the primary classroom to gym class or to music class. There were, without question, the girls’ line and the boys’ line, the two linear formations in which we were to walk from one room to another. And there was me, always lingering at the end of those lines, floating between them like a small balloon. The narrative begins this way because it continues in this way as I stand now still in this androgynous, passing body, a body that cannot align itself even disciplinarily. This exploration of where queer pedagogies might be or begin, like my body, refuses linear formations, refuses the category of discipline. The investigations are narrative, theoretical, fluid, a series of constant movements between gender studies, queer theory, pedagogy, and composition theory. I both argue for an approach to teaching *and* try to invite my reader to embody that approach—fluid, queer, self-conscious, web-like and fragmentary. I do not believe the story of my scholarship is separate from the story of my life or the body in which my life lives. And while narrative has certainly played a role in composition studies thus far, I want to offer a particularly queer understanding of what narrative might mean to theory, and dialectically what theory might mean to narrative. In this work, the narrative cannot be separated out from the theoretical. It is both a theoretical narrative and narrative theory. I most closely link my own understanding of the scholarly use of narrative to Nancy K. Miller’s understanding in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. She writes:

By the risks of its writing, personal criticism embodies a pact . . . binding writer to reader in the fabulation of self-truth, that what is at stake matters also to others: somewhere in the self-fiction of the personal voice is the belief that the writing is worth the risk. In this sense, by turning its authorial voice into spectacle, personal writing theorizes the stakes of its own performance . . . Personal writing opens an inquiry on the cost of writing—critical writing or Theory—and its effects. (24)

While I have no intention of glorifying or romanticizing the personal, I do intend for the narrative to become spectacle in so much as it “theorizes the stakes of its own performance.”

The term *spectacle* can, of course, imply a certain kind of regretfully public moment, a disaster of sorts. But I want to read this term as carrying, at once, all its meanings and connotations—spectacle as public, open, in plain sight, and even the possible disaster of putting into view what might usually be kept out of view, behind the scenes. As this project is simultaneously about writing, about teaching and about my own selfhood, it aims not only to articulate queer pedagogy’s possibilities for teaching composition but also to *enact*, in its very writing, a kind of queer pedagogy—one that tries to both expose and complicate the life that leads to the study of writing and queer pedagogy in the first place.

*My mother went to great lengths to convince me, as a child, to wear shirts, to wear the tops to my bathing suits in the swimming pool. I tore the Communion dress and rubbed my hair violently against the velvet couch to dismantle the “body wave” the hairdresser offered up for the special day. The body of Christ. And I learned how to hold my hands to receive it, how to stand in line with the others. Mostly, in the late afternoons, when I’d ride my bike into the woods, I’d pull off my shirt and ride the dirt pathways with the sun lighting up my small back. No one was there to see me.*

I am working, in some sense, in a tradition in composition of using the personal narrative or the materials of experience in or for scholarship. And I hope to stretch and push on that tradition, opening up new possibilities for what counts as scholarship—blurring the creative and the critical, the linear and the non-linear, the personal and the public, the theoretical and the

“practical.” I hope the ways in which this project is, ultimately, about me, offer productive sites of inquiry—expanding the project and exposing its vulnerabilities (even as a kind of spectacle) as I try learn about and to put into view my own teaching practices. I have kept, in my mind, during this project, Paul Kameen’s important and groundbreaking book, *Writing/ Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, in which he takes his students and his experiences to be some of the central research materials of his project. He writes:

One could argue, for example, that what I offer here is either too practical or too local to be legitimately scholarly, that these are, after all, *only* teaching materials or *merely* autobiography or *simply* personal reflections. And they are, of course, all of those things. I present them, though, not specifically for what they say about the context out of which they emerged—my personal experience—but for the things that they attempt to *do* with the kinds of change, especially for the teacher, that are part of the stakes, tacitly if not expressly, in any pedagogical enterprise, most especially one that has an overt political component, as this course clearly did. (6)

Like Kameen’s characterization of his course, it is easy to see the two courses I draw from in this project as “overtly political.” However, I also want to raise questions “that are part of the stakes . . . in any pedagogical enterprise.” And I want to raise these questions through means that are quite “legitimately scholarly,” but perhaps not quite obviously, at times. I present the theory, autobiography, teaching materials and personal reflections *as* scholarship, as a kind of research—a looking again—in the teaching of writing. And while the particular courses I examine are First Year Composition courses, I expect the possibilities for queer pedagogies would be relevant to most courses and teachers of classes within the humanities. I am aware, as I begin, of the way in which my body, my identity, the events of the story of my life and education inform the way I construct this writing, my thinking, and the stories of my classrooms. I cannot read without my body. I cannot read without the presence of a fleeting masculinity, androgyny, contradiction and movement. And because I have come to see this position as a kind of blessing,

I try to find ways to offer contradiction and movement to my students—especially those students who have come to understand themselves as solid, as fixed and named forms who can make fixed and named assumptions about reading and writing. I seek to (as tenderly as I can and with acute awareness of the responsibilities) disrupt this kind of learning, as I believe it limits our capabilities, and places us (without our consent) into a state of unconsciousness. It leads us, unfairly and without self-implication, to walk the boys’ line or the girls’ line, endlessly, through each door of our lives.

*Before I knew the names of identities, before I had traveled the long years of “mistaken for a boy”, before I knew the word “butch,” before I stumbled upon the XY chromosome in my “female” body, I am no older than six or seven. And each month the Highlights Magazine arrives at the house. And I am giddy with excitement to complete my favorite task. It’s a game called “What does not belong?” in which the child (in this case me) is meant to identify in a picture the object or subject that does not belong and then use scissors to rid the picture of its not belonging piece. I can remember cutting out what appeared to be a bird from inside what appeared to be a body of water of some kind. The bird appeared to be swimming, so my mother happily hands me the red handled kid scissors. She watches me and is proud of how smart I have always been. “Careful,” she says, “don’t accidentally cut out a fish.” And here I am, thirty-one, remembering back. Here I am a poet who knows, of course, there is such a bird called a loon—in the air a bird, flying, but in the water a winged fish swimming.*

I return to Miller’s notion of “fabulation” above—fabulation being a kind of invention of tales, the creation of “fantasy” or a kind of wakeful dreaming. And at first, it’s difficult to swallow—to think of myself as involved in a constant fantastic invention of myself, of my students, of the classes I teach. I take my responsibility to my students quite seriously. I care very deeply about why and how teachers represent students. I care about the authorial respect and credit given to their writing, and I care about their privacy. I think of my work as both as an inquiry into the intricacies or problems of this “fabulation” *and* as an opening up or deepening of possibilities for this *fabulation of self-truth* or of “other-truth.” After all, Judith Butler, who is a

touchstone for much of my thinking about identity and pedagogy, not only points to the importance of these possibilities, but she also points in the direction of fantasy *as* possibility. She writes: “Fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable” (*Undoing* 28). Perhaps narrative and the telling of the stories of classrooms is one significant way to think through what this kind of fantasy and imagination has to offer composition pedagogies. We can represent and invent our students and our teaching. We can become better teachers and writers in the process—that is, assuming we can accept and honor the both-at-once-ness always looming in the distance of that project. We represent *and* misrepresent, read *and* mis-read, speak *and* mis-speak. To begin always with having already come to terms with these failures is to do justice to the complicated, reflexive and troubling project of narration—narration that conjures up a student who learns, whether that student is a student in my class, or whether I myself *am* the student. I begin with one classroom narrative, one which I will tell *three* ways.

*I had asked my students to read a chapter from Judith Butler’s Undoing Gender. Danielle says Butler is impossible. Maria jokes: doesn’t she have anything better to do than be completely impenetrable? Johnnie says: “This woman does talk in circles, I’ll give ‘em that.” I fear this is the start of the coup—the moment where my students forge an ever-strengthening uprising to overthrow the queer text they have been given. And by extension they seem to threaten to overthrow me, their queer teacher, and also to leave little room for the possibility of value in queer and difficult texts. I feel simultaneously angry and guilty. But I need to hurry, to decide what approach to take. There is, of course, the “eat your vegetables, they are good for you approach,” which I have to say usually ends with my students rightfully feeding my metaphorical vegetables to the metaphorical dog. There is the “therapeutic” approach; this is where I say “are you frustrated by this text?” and perhaps I make the ever-predictable move of “take us to a place in the chapter you found so difficult or frustrating to understand.” There also the “I hate ‘the man’ too” approach. In this approach, I validate their revolution. I say things like: “yes Judith Butler is impossible.” I say: “Yeah I don’t know why this theory stuff has to be so dense on purpose.” I say “We want theory for the people!”*

I can't say that I like the teacher in this narrative very much, even though this teacher is me. I can't say as though I find the students compelling either—how could they be compelling when they are so erased by my own inner neuroses. What my students are saying to me is quite interesting, though because I categorize their response to Butler as “resistance” or even more problematically a “coup,” it can be difficult to see how their responses are interesting. Though I suppose my anxiety, which is what causes me to see their responses as a kind of “coup” does interest me. The anxiety speaks to some of the complicated questions of power present in all classroom scenarios. And as queer theory's interventions in pedagogy can tell us, power is not fixed; it is ever shifting, even in moments we are reaching for its fixity. Knowing this, I need to find ways to work *with* the moments I can feel the power shifting between myself and my students, who can also feel power shift. My internal monologue amuses and disturbs me at once because if a shift in power is happening in this moment, none of the “approaches” I consider above seem to be conscious of that power shift. Each move is an attempt at taking power back, or asserting its fixity rather than moving *with* the shift of power in the direction of my students. So, perhaps I can tell the story another way.

*When my students say Judith Butler is impenetrable, I laugh. I say: “Don't you think it's kinda ironic that we're calling a butch lesbian queer theorist 'impenetrable.'” They look stumped. Finally, Johnnie says enthusiastically from the back:” Oh, I get it. Impenetrable, like won't be penetrated. Like by a man.” The students shift uncomfortably in their seats. “Something like that,” I say. I'm a little worried I've said something “wrong” but hope I'm hiding it well. I hope I am teaching my students that penetration is a something we can collectively consider as an intellectual term. When my students then say Butler is impossible, I feel sad, defensive even. So I read from Butler page 29: “Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.” Interesting, I say, that we are accusing a person who says possibility is crucial as bread of being **impossible**. Does anyone else find this interesting? From the back again, “It just proves her point,” Johnnie says. I am sweating. I know in my mind that I have my clothes on, but my body feels naked. And Johnnie, the other “visible” queer in the classroom is wearing his compassion on his sleeve. I can tell he wants to help me. We are of the same impossible body, after all. Him with his purple beret, his skinny girl jeans and beautiful queer lisp. Me with my unruly chin hair*

*and a voice that I can only describe as my father's. How will Johnnie and I lead the students out of impossibility? "This woman does talk in circles," Johnnie says, "I'll give 'em that."*

I don't know about this teacher either. And clearly the representation of students is just as problematic as their erasure. I don't know if I should or how I should write about my students' bodies or if their bodies and fashion choices move the narrative in another theoretical direction. I don't know if I have the right to say what Johnnie's cooperation means. I do know there is always something different about a classroom in which there is a queer body, a queer sensibility. This narrative is about trying to make Butler *possible*—not accessible, or easy, or even pleasurable but possible. There is much at stake in recognizing her possibility. Because if she is *impossible*, I also am impossible. Johnnie is impossible. Queer pedagogies impossible. Queer bodies have certainly the potential for pushing up against what is possible; and this potential can cause us to be deemed *impossible*. This is not necessarily a problem; in fact, it is sometimes desirable to be impossible, illegible—to become the difficult text. Can this teacher, who is me, really make an ironic joke about penetration with first year students? Is that even possible or ethical or "appropriate"? What context would a narrative need that says this? What teacher would we allow to say it? Narrative exposes our vulnerability as teachers (and often the vulnerability of our students) endlessly. Some times I wonder if it is the vulnerability itself that gives classroom story a bad rap or turns narrative into the little brother some like to bully. But narrative almost always raises complicated questions about representation. And as queer theory also tells us: representation is already impossible before we even begin—identity itself is moving beneath our feet as we teach, as we write about teaching.

*Much of my teaching is waiting. I try to be patient—I try to wait the way I wait for the bus. Confident it will arrive. Not exactly sure the precise moment, but soon. Each class a series of*

*waitings. On this particular day, I am waiting for one of my students to make a comment I am able to see as possibility—the piece of a discussion that we will all remember because without it, the conversation might have fallen to pieces. They have read Judith Butler for the first time. There is the sense of struggling, maybe even of suffering in the room. Comments are made about difficulty, about big words, about density. One student even heckles Butler a bit. I am waiting still. This woman does talk in circles, Johnnie says, I'll give 'em that. By "them," he means the other students. He means he agrees with them about the denseness and difficulty of the text. But what I am interested in most are the circles. What it means for a writer to approach her task "in circles." What shapes do people usually talk in? I ask. At first, they seem to think a little that I am teasing. Then Danielle sees that I am not and says: I think of essays more like boxes that connect. On the board, I draw a picture of circles spiraling into one another and then boxes that connect. We end up drawing a geometrical diagram for every essay that follows (both the course readings and the students' essays); we try to graph their shapes as a way of understanding the content. Some students grow to like the talking in circles—the way ideas slip back into one another again and again—and each time they are changed.*

It's hard, even for me, to see these three narratives as speaking about or telling the story of the same classroom moment. But each one does describe the same period of time. I move them *in* time. I begin at a different moment. I skip over time. Narrative time becomes as fluid and moveable as power and identity. I offer these narratives not because I see them (or any narrative) as instructions for writing pedagogies, but because the questions narrative produces for me are distinct and essential to teaching practice and to queer pedagogy as a theoretical field of inquiry. I thought to begin this section by finding a teaching narrative in which someone attempted to record or describe queer pedagogies in composition. And each time I noticed the way I treated the narrative more like an object, like an opportunity for critique. I noticed myself pointing to the limits of narrative first before thinking about its possibilities. So I decided that I might raise some questions about my own teaching story, that it might be important or illuminating for me to risk my own narratives to start—to offer a moment where both narrative possibilities and pedagogical possibilities intersect. And I think every one of these narratives is problematic—narratives are never *not* problematic. But I am also interested in thinking about and asking questions about what narratives make visible. And as someone who is interested in

the intersections between queer theory and composition studies, I am curious about the ways teaching stories are shaping understandings of what queer teaching might mean or make possible. I do, after all, agree with Judith Butler that: “Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread” (*Undoing* 28).

### III. THE BODY PARAGRAPHS

My students and I are having a writing workshop. The subject under discussion is writing introductions. And we have been looking at several students’ introductions to their essays on a first draft assignment. The assignment, to offer a brief description here, asked students to focus closely on an idea or writerly approach taken by one of the writers we read in the course and to consider that approach as both connected to writing and connected to lived experience.<sup>2</sup> Some students wrote about humor, some about sentence fragments, some about the act of reflection itself. One student, Jennifer Bracken, took up the subject of questioning as a writerly approach and as what she believed to be an important aspect of writing and of being in the world. The following is her first draft introduction to her essay entitled “There Are No Stupid Questions”:

When I think all the way back to elementary school, I remember teachers telling my fellow classmates and me, “there are no stupid questions.” Then of course once you get to high school you hear the jokes that go, “Yeah, there are no stupid questions, just stupid people who ask questions.” Regardless, questioning is something we have all done; even Benjamin Franklin, the man who discovered electricity, certainly asked questions on his way to accomplishing something great. Of course I wasn’t present when he did this, but had he asked no questions, there would have been no motive for him to put that key on that kite to see what happened. This is the essential reason questions are important, they lead us to form new ideas, learn about ourselves, and to turn these new ideas into reality.

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<sup>2</sup> The assignment prompt for Bracken’s essay “There Are No Stupid Questions” is Essay #4 in Appendix B.

They also help us to complicate our thoughts when we question the thoughts of those around us—not to judge or find one idea better than another, just to try to better understand one idea in order to complicate another.

During this particular workshop, I asked students what they were most interested in about this paragraph, which sentences they felt most connected to and why. Students, almost unanimously, pointed to the first two sentences of the essay as most compelling, offering reasons like: *it's actually what she's thinking about* and *you feel like someone is actually talking to you in those sentences*. To be honest, I thought what might follow here was some kind of discussion of voice in an essay, but this isn't what happened at all, not that it is at all unusual for me to be surprised by the directions my students take me. While in some workshops, the student writer is asked to remain anonymous or silent, I ask that my student writers participate in the workshop as the writers. So, part way through the conversation, Jennifer Bracken sits up in her chair and says, "It's weird, the first two sentences are the only sentences it feels like I even wrote. The rest are format sentences." I'm intrigued by what Jennifer has said. *What are format sentences?* I ask. Jennifer and the class erupt with answers like: *the Ben Franklin thing is the linking sentence* and *yeah, the sentence that gives three reasons why questions are important is the thesis* and finally *that last sentence is the transition sentence where you transition to the body paragraphs*. "Yeah," Jennifer says, "it's like the essay's all great if I take out the thesis and stuff." The class laughs a bit. I shift some in my chair. I try, as a teacher of writing, to value my students' prior experiences with writing and to honor the teachers that may have offered them these kinds of experiences in writing introductions, experiences that have brought them this far, to a university. Besides, the trouble here is not with the names for these sentences or even what the names were intended to do, but rather with what the names have come to mean. Class comes to a close in the middle of this conversation—one, I tell the students, we will continue to take up in our next class

meeting. That afternoon, Jennifer Bracken visits my office hours. *Should I not have a thesis?* she wants to know. *Is that what you want me to do, take the thesis out and the Ben Franklin linking thing out?* I ask Jennifer to hold her questions one more day until the class meets again. Truthfully, I needed time. What did I want? If I am trying to queer the essay, should there not be a thesis?

I spent that evening thinking about names, about the names given to sentences, and inevitably about the names given to identities, to places, to human beings. In a sense, I began, in my mind, to do the very assignment I had given my students to do—thinking carefully about a writerly approach, about its connection to lived experience. I began thinking about Kate Bornstein who writes, in *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws*, “I have this idea that every time we discover that the names we’re being called are somehow keeping us less than free, we need to come up with new names for ourselves, and that the names we give ourselves must no longer reflect a fear of being labeled outsiders, must no longer bind us to a system that would rather see us dead” (36-7). I remember that for queer being, new names are a matter of survival. If there are not new and shifting names, I myself as the genderqueer teacher of this class cease to exist as myself. When I first began teaching composition courses just over ten years ago, I was (and it seemed at times my students were as well) frustrated with the language already in place to talk about being and about writing, and this was the problem of the current teaching moment at hand. And while I do not think, for example, that the “thesis statement” as a name for a piece of an essay is inherently problematic, I do think that the naming has come to limit rather than expand or stretch our ideas about what essays are and, perhaps more importantly, what essays can or might do. And so, in the spirit of “queering the brew,” as Harriet Malinowitz puts it, I thought I might ask students to invent new names, new

ways of calling into being what their essays can do. Perhaps, I thought, as a class we might practice naming together, inventing a common language among us, a new language, one that we create, one that captures what we think we are doing. This is the first time of what will become many times I ask my students to rename, to give their own voice and invention to a set of writing terms or notions. I will ask them to consider new names. I will ask them to let go a bit of the terms: thesis sentence, linking sentence, transition sentence, introduction. I will, I think to myself, ask them to let go of the “body paragraphs.”

At the beginning of the next class, I put all these terms on the board: thesis, body paragraph, introduction, and so on. I begin class with the sort of nervousness that emerges whenever I am depending on my students. I don't have control over what they will say; I cannot dictate the new names they will give to these forms. I have to trust, to trust their creativity, their perception, their language. I have to forget my own notions about what these sentences are meant to do, what these movements are for, what they are called.

*I want us to rename the thesis sentence, I say. Let's call it something else. Think for a moment about what the sentence is for, what you hope it will do. What could we call the thesis, instead of calling it the thesis?* They don't think for long. Danielle looks up from her notebook, *the thesis is the heart, you know, like the heart of the matter, the core, the inside.* It's hard to know which of her terms to lock into. I find the heart metaphor a little cliché. But before I have time to write the “c” in “core,” Tearsa says, *the heart, I like that. It is. It's like the heart of the essay, the thing that keeps it alive.* I become more interested in the heart in this new elaboration by Tearsa. I write it on the board. Iggy leans forward, “It's a little cheesy,” he says, “but not if you think of it like a real heart.” What do you mean? I ask. Iggy explains: *like if the essay has a heart, a real beating heart, and that's the thesis, then the rest of the essay is like the places the*

*blood is pumping to, like hands and feet and stuff.* There is some laughter, though I am fascinated by what my students are doing, surprised again and again about their capacity to teach me, to show me what I want to say to them about writing. *Well, Johnnie says, if that's the case, then if we're gonna change all the names of this stuff that's fine, but we gotta keep calling them body paragraphs.* I am interested in this renaming as well, that now we can keep the name, though it will mean something different—now that we imagine an essay with a body, with a heart, with hands, and muscle, and veins, even. *OK, I say, we've got a heart and a body. What about this linking sentence? If it's a part of this essay that is also a body, what body part is it?* Students offer several options, they think, of course, of connectors: joints, muscle, bone. I have them vote. The class settles on “muscle.” Before I have time to shift to the transition sentence or the introduction as something we might rename, Laura says, *the heart's made of muscle you know, so that means the tissue that holds the thesis together also holds other parts of the essay together.* Maria raises her hand: *it's weird if you think of the whole essay as a body... like it's sexual, like it wants something.* The class laughs some. I am laughing too. *But it does want something, doesn't it?* I ask. We sit a moment in the language of desire. I am thinking about what an essay wants, who it wants, what it wants to do to those it wants. Yeah, Iggy says, *that means when you quote someone else, you're kinda into them.* More laughs. Kelsey offers a rebuttal, *maybe, or maybe quoting someone is more like punching them or wrestling or something.* The possibilities become endless. At this moment, my students are talking in more nuanced ways than ever about what it means to engage with another text, about the ways one might perform that engagement. *Or pinching their cheeks like a grandma,* Kristin says. I am trying to keep up, writing their phrases on the board. Erasing the thesis, I am trying to draw a

picture of a body: a heart inside, a fat hand like a boxing glove, other stick figure bodies surrounding this body.

The class continues to make connections between things a body can do and things an essay can do. They turn from the kinds of questions I was asking about renaming the parts of an essay to asking questions about how the metaphor works. *What would be the lungs?* a student asks. *Yeah, does an essay breathe?* I am still intrigued and compelled by what they are doing, but I begin to wonder how the conversation will translate, how the students will absorb, or enact, this conversation in their writing, or if they will be able to. Or, even if they tried to, what would it look like? So as we close class, I begin to ask them about this kind of transference. *As you think about revising the essays you've just written, how could you account for this conversation? What could this metaphor we've been creating offer to your writing process?* They're quiet. It has been much easier to stream of consciousness create this body. What will we do? What would I do as a writer? I have asked a hard question. I give the silence some time, which is hard for me, as a teacher, to do, though I practice it. I practice being quiet. After a few minutes, Iggy offers a possibility: *Well, I guess if I think of my essay as a body, it's like a person instead of an object.* I'm interested but still not sure what he means, what this means he would do to his essay. *Can you say more?* I ask. Iggy answers: *Uh, okay, if my essay is a person with a body, then it needs to have like a personality, and be attractive. I gotta dress it up.* There are, again some giggles. With all the discussion of drag in this class, it's hard not to laugh. Tearsa interjects: *I think, if were gonna revise using this, I'd use more physical words, like things a body would say.* I'm running out of time. It's hard to know exactly how to help them, though they are doing an honorable job helping themselves. *Try it, I say. Bring in just your first paragraph revised in light of this conversation today.* Students turned in revisions of their introductions, and some

pretty interesting things happened, and particularly with Jennifer Bracken's writing. Here is her revised introduction:

When I think back to elementary school, I remember teachers proclaiming, "there are no stupid questions." Then of course once I got to high school, boys in baggy jeans heckled from the back of the classroom with jokes that went, "Yeah, there are no stupid questions, just stupid people who ask questions." And who wants to be that stupid person who asks. They boys in the baggy jeans don't want questions. They are too cool to ask. But without questions, we make no discoveries. Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity through questioning. Of course I wasn't standing with him in a thunderstorm when he did this, but had he asked no questions, his hands would never have put the key on that kite to feel static electricity. Questions, like Franklin's lightning, can feel wild and dangerous. They can also start sparks. This is the essential reason questions are important, they lead us to form new ideas. The boys in baggy jeans are no Ben Franklins for sure. A writer is like an inventor. We need to ask questions. I seem to be able to do this questioning in my life more often, now that the baggy jeans boys have disappeared into my old town memories, but questioning while writing is another thing altogether. It's harder. My hands start typing what I know instead of asking questions.

I'm actually not particularly interested, at this moment, in talking about this piece of writing as better than the first piece, though I can imagine some ways it might be. What interests me is the set of choices Bracken makes in revision. First, I notice the actual bodies that appear in the essay—the boys in baggy jeans, Ben Franklin now "in a thunderstorm" and having actual hands that put the key on the kite, Bracken's own hands in the place of that "transition sentence" to the body paragraph, this paragraph itself becoming more of a body paragraph, more embodied by both the cast of characters it makes use of and more embodied by Bracken herself. I notice the ways Bracken embodies herself as a writer of the piece, talking explicitly about being a writer, about the body (her hands) moving in knowing fashion without questioning. It interests me that Bracken's embodied writing enacts a kind of contradiction—a hand with a mind of its own, a hand bound to an act of expression that is not a question.

Bracken also gives questions a shape, a kind of embodiment of questions whereby they are turned into sparks, through the image of Ben Franklin's lightning, lightning that leads her to the sense that questions are "dangerous and wild." Something about our discussion seems to press Bracken toward the figurative: The writer is like an inventor. The baggy jeans boys disappearing, their bodies leaving the scene of Bracken's writing as she tries to leave them behind. I notice the newly shaped "we" in this revision—her first draft invoking an abstract we, an "all of us," while this version seems to imagine the "we" as writers, as thinkers that "need" to ask questions. I find the verb need striking, too, its connection to desire, to the talk of relationality. And where, I ask myself, as I read Bracken's revision, where is the thesis? It's hard to answer. But when I ask myself, where is the essay's heart, I imagine a complex web of investigation whereby Bracken writes to explore the notion of questioning, to even go so far as to implicate herself in not always being able to ask important questions. The truth is, and I suspect this is likely true for many writing teachers (especially writing teachers who are writers themselves), very few of the books and essays I admire have a thesis sentence, but every one of them has a pulsing heart, has an embodied presence, has a writer who appears (even if perhaps in different ways), has a kind of muscle tissue, reaches out to other places (whether they be texts, experience, or language) to touch, in some way, something outside itself. Kenneth Burke writes, "Indeed always beneath the dance of words there will be the dance of bodies" (*Rhetoric of Religion*, 288). Of course, Burke is not talking specifically about the writing of an essay, but he does remind me that voice, that subject I thought my students and I were going to discuss at the start of the first class meeting I describe, comes from the sense that someone is speaking, that there is a mouth speaking words, a body who makes them.

One of things queer pedagogies and queer theory itself has to contend with is the material body and embodiment. Transgender studies, through the work of theorists like Susan Stryker, Leslie Feinberg, and Jay Prosser, has been bringing the question of the material body more prominently back to theoretical discussions of gender, sexuality, and identity. And in the first chapter to follow, I explore notions of the teacher's body (my body) and the students' bodies in the space of the classroom itself. However, what this renaming reminds me, and what's queer about the namings my students enact is the inevitable and infinite ways to embody. In an essay in the journal *Pedagogy* from 2006, Amy Winans writes: "Ultimately, queer pedagogy entails decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring the facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation" (106). I believe Winans' comment connects not only to understandings of sexual and gendered identities, but also connects to our understandings of writing. I want to suggest that not only are there dominant cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality that can be disrupted by queer theory (an area of inquiry my course does pursue), but that there are also dominant cultural assumptions about writing that can be disrupted by queer theory, including the assumptions: that writing is something that happens in the mind, and not the body, that it is a production of the body's capabilities but not an actual embodiment, that writing is something that can be contained by formulaic sentences, that it is something we can "know about" in some definite way. In this sense, the renamings I ask my students to do are, as Winans puts it, "decentering." If I am to ask my students to question the processes by which identity and writing is made, if I am to ask my students to decenter themselves in relation to the materials of my courses, my teaching must also embody this very decentering—not merely apply the concept of decentering to teaching. I must be willing to decenter myself, even my notions of teaching and research. I must ask of myself

the same complicated renamings. In this sense, as I'm sure you can see, my teaching is not something separate than my research. My students, the writing they produce, the comments they make, and the questions they ask are a kind of archive I draw from to try to further articulate queer notions of theorized practice.

The connections, for me, are quite evident in terms of the relationship between queer theory (which I understand as a particular way of looking, a particular methodology) and the teaching of writing. Jonathan Alexander and Michelle Gibson, in their essay, "Queer Compositions: Queer Theory in the Writing Classroom," remind us "how deeply and 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" (Alexander and Gibson 8). I think our teaching of composition asks us to do the same. It asks us to help our students "come into being through language," and to come into being means, in part, to become embodied, to appear as a body, to let Ben Franklin appear, to let your authorial hands appear. And perhaps we might, as I first thought, call this some notion of voice; our teaching of composition asks us to engage with paradox, with difficulty, with the ambiguous blurs of articulation; it asks us to give new names to the interpretative and writerly moves we make, to revise those names, as Bornstein put it, "every time we discover that the names are somehow keeping us less than free"; it asks us, as teachers, to "decenter" our practices, and this might mean collaborating with our students, this might mean temporarily moving out from the center of our classrooms, it might mean generating new languages with each class rather than providing language. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest here, or elsewhere in this project's inquiry, that the student work in writing and discussion or my own work as a teacher, exists in reflection to be reproduced—such that another teacher might say

to her students: *let's turn the essay into a body*. What is here is not meant to prevent or enable the use of this body metaphor in another class setting; the point, however, is the process of generating new names, new language, a strategy I return to again and again, a strategy that drives work in queer theory, a strategy that values new ways of knowing, queer epistemologies, rather than merely offering new knowledges.

I am interested in the possible dialogues between queerness and composition, dialogues that open pathways through which teachers of composition can move towards goals I actually think those of us in composition do, generally speaking, agree about, goals of teaching more conscious, reflexive, complicated, nuanced and fluid writers—writers who exercise habits of mind that lead to more imaginative, bolder, queerer compositions, writers who imagine new ways of talking about and writing essays. Alexander and Wallace refer to what they call the power of queerness. They write:

As queer compositionists, we believe that the power of queerness extends beyond exposing and challenging heteronormativity and that substantive attention to queer people and perspectives has the potential to help composition theorists, teachers and students to come to a new understanding of identity as well as a new understanding of what it means to take literate agency in a postmodern world. (301)

And so I begin in a way I might ask my students to begin, with attention to self-implication, with a move toward the self-reflexive, with bringing my personal, political, and educational stakes forward. I do want my students to “come to a new understanding of identity” and “of what it means to take literate agency in a post-modern world.” And, I believe that these new understandings will have invaluable effects on how students write and how they think about writing. As a teacher of writing, this an important reason why I show up in my classroom. Yet, as a human being who is a teacher, as a queer person with a genderqueer identity, my teaching is also an act of survival. The truth is, I think most of us teach to make the world more bearable for

ourselves, which means, for me, to make the world more queer so that I might live more safely and more possibly inside it. Judith Butler tells us that in order to be considered human, to be considered a life and have what she calls a “livable life,” one’s being must be recognized, must be legible within the field of constraints that shape what we can and cannot see. And as a half man, half woman who stands in front perhaps 50-100 college and high school students each year, I teach because I want my students to stretch the field of constraints from which they see. I teach them to see me. And I try to teach them to see what seems unseeable, to read what seems illegible, to say what seems unsayable, to describe an essay in terms of a body, to invent new languages and new lenses from which to see things they’ve already seen. And I like to think that I encourage them to do this in every way, when they are looking at anything. So in this sense, I want to teach to make the world more bearable for others too. It’s possible you are thinking: *what’s this gotta do with me? I don’t teach because I want to be legible, or possible, or because I want to be safer in the world.* And maybe this is true: maybe what I am describing is only tied to those of us who find ourselves in marginal positions. But I have a hunch that somewhere—if we ask ourselves, what our teaching is about, or what it is for—that somewhere in the heap of layered and contradictory answers is the most vulnerable part of our identities, or our own stories of who we are. It is my desire to live in a world where it is possible to transform those same old names we’ve given to things, to live in a world that moves, to read writing that can account for something with out a name, or not yet named—perhaps even account for something not yet thought. When my students reinvent the essay, when they call its thesis a heart, its ideas veins, its sentences muscle, the queer becomes more possible (and I mean both the queer person, who is also me) and the queer as a notion, as a way of seeing new possibilities for being, for writing, for reading and for knowing.

And so the first chapter here takes up questions of the teaching body. This body that shows up vulnerable in a first day of class. A teaching body will always be waited for, looked at, put on its front-of-the-room stage as the first kind of student knowledge, the first body of knowledge. In Chapter One, “Becoming the Loon: Queer Pedagogies and Female Masculinity,” I offer a hybrid genre theoretical meditation with the hope of inviting teachers to see their bodies, to confront the fear, defensiveness and erasure that constitutes what it means to be a teaching body. In this chapter, teaching *queer* means quite literally teaching *as a queer body*. And while I link this theoretical meditation on the body to my own experience and lived material existence, I also think this chapter calls on the figure of the teacher to consider her queerness—whether than queerness is linked to gender-specific instantiations or not. The body is queered by all sorts of non-normative marks and those marks become perhaps more visible as the body stands as spectacle on stage for the eyes of other bodies: the body queered by disability, the body queered by race, the body queered by beauty, the body queered by pregnancy, and so on. Some might argue that a pregnant body is not queer, for example, perhaps because of a presumed connection to reproduction. But the way I want to understand *queer* in this particular context is as a kind of deviant mark, a bodily expression that exists outside a normative construction of the body. In this sense, we can imagine the pregnant body marked with *queerness*, how the body moves around the stomach, how the presence of another body is imagined within it, how the practices that may (or may not have) produced this pregnant body become part of the body’s interpretative possibility. Chapter One takes the loon as its central metaphor, and offers narratives from my own life that seem inextricable from my present teaching life. The loon’s body, like my own, is a blurring body—attributes of fish and bird. Chapter One considers my body as my students might interpret it, or perhaps considers my reading of their interpretation, a reading that without

question contains my own fear, my own imaginings, my own past in addition to my intellectual and analytical consideration of what my students have said and written and how I might understand those utterances in relation to the body. The body enters the classroom first—before words, before syllabi, before the first exchange.

In Chapter Two, “Alternative Orientations: Actions, Labor, Practices,” I consider elements of the documents informing and circulating in the course: the University of Pittsburgh first year composition mission statement, the course description and instructor’s statement, and the sequence of assignments themselves. I consider this chapter an inquiry into the course documents that reflect and contribute to the course logics and ideas. I offer, in this chapter, some glimpses of student responses, the writing they composed in response. This chapter develops the figure of the dolphin, which, like the loon, is not an arbitrary selection. As a child, I was not exactly a reader. I always wanted to be, but just could not seem to stay interested for long. That is, until a class trip to an aquarium where I saw my first dolphin. And because of its curled body and what seemed at the time like joyous dives, I read. I read anything about dolphins I could. Sign posts, encyclopedia entries, children’s stories. It became a kind of marker of my expertise: relatives brought dolphin t-shirts to my birthdays instead of “girl” presents I would refuse to engage with. I posted dolphin photos in my room. I had a dolphin key chain—its mouth lit up if you pushed on its fin.

It is no accident that, as a child, I was drawn to creatures that could do amazing things from, in, and because of water. And like many scholars of Queer Theory over the past twenty years, I am drawn to notions of fluidity, though I am interested in the notion as it is connected to water, to liquid. Consequently, in Chapter Three, “Becoming Liquid: Reading and Writing Like Water,” I consider what it might mean to queer literacy and to consider interpretation as an

integral aspect of that queering. Drawing from the work of my students, I want to ask questions about their interpretations, about moments their writing seems more like water. And as I think about this water, this idea of becoming, I am brought back to Johnnie Hart's words: "My thinking feels all watery. It's hard to fight the urge to freeze it back up." I read Hart's notion of freezing as a kind of permanence, a turning from water to stone. And so Chapter Three considers ways of moving students, or helping them to move themselves away from dualistic constructions of body, of argument, and of categorical placement. The chapter takes my own practice of Tai Chi as part of its own movement. It is through my own body—both through its shifting gendered position and its daily martial practice—that I try to understand what it means to *become water*, moving water, which, in the end, resists its own freezing up.

I wanted to think through how this sense of liquid might be enacted, or how writers write like water, particularly how Queer Theorists might do such a thing in order to articulate what has yet to be understood or thought about gender and sexuality. What kinds of writerly moves might students make to enact this movement in their essays? What would writing this way mean about organization, structure, and grammar? I take up these questions in Chapter Four, "How to Write Like a Queer: Composition in Drag." Judith Butler's ideas and writing become particularly central to this chapter—because my students bring up Butler's bad writing award as a way to push on my pedagogy, because I take up Butler's notion of drag as another way to think through what queer pedagogies might offer, and because I am most drawn to Butler as a writer and theorist. Butler's writing, however difficult, allows for the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" that her work both argues for and enacts (Sedgwick 8). In Chapter Four, I consider my students' writerly moves in relation to Butler and Michael Warner's (an author whose book, *The Trouble with Normal*, they

were reading for the course). I ask students to think about structure and organization, and if or how those notions can survive in a queer context. What does queer structure look like? Is that an oxymoron? And, if it is, is that just fine? The notion of “writing like a queer” is one I both relish in and problematize in the chapter, trying to understand if there might even be such a thing and why I would ask my students to try such a thing. This chapter returns back to the body as its central metaphor, the body appearing in order to *embody* the practices I describe and the pedagogies I try on.

**1. BECOMING THE LOON: QUEER PEDAGOGIES AND FEMALE  
MASCULINITIES**

To learn and to teach, one must have the awareness of leaving something behind while reaching toward something new, and this kind of awareness must be linked to imagination.

Maxine Green  
From *Releasing the Imagination*

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal.

Judith Butler  
From *Undoing Gender*

The wild foxes, uncertain, walk across the frozen river, listening beneath for the sound of water. If they hear nothing, they may cross to the other side.

David Rothenburg  
From *The Blue Cliff Records*

**I. LEGITIMATE BODIES**

As children, we get some of our first lessons in difference and domination. Find what is different in the picture. Dominate that difference. Stabilize the difference. Remove it.

Categorize it elsewhere. Toss it into your plastic Peter Pan garbage pail. It does not belong. I have dedicated many of my adult years to teaching and to building a pedagogy that blurs difference and tries to call systems of domination into question—heterosexism, racism, classism, sexism—and to call the ideologies that form these systems into question as well. I have selected numerous texts in my courses that aim to disrupt hierarchies and expose systems of privilege of all kinds, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality. I have resisted, for a long time, many male teachers whom I saw as constructing and using masculine domination to lead a classroom. Pedagogy's interesting intersections with gender and masculinity are striking. And while it is not within the scope of this project to examine the history of pedagogy through the lens of gender, I do want to offer an example of the *kinds* of historical moments that interest me in terms of the stakes of the classroom practices I intend to engage.

*The loon is the only bird with solid bones as opposed to the hollow bones of other birds. This is what makes the loon a brilliant diver.*

Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori's edited collection *Pedagogy: Disturbing History, 1819-1929*, provides a lens through which we can begin to think about masculinity and pedagogy, and, importantly, about the complex relationship between pedagogy and identity. What strikes me about so many of the documents in Salvatori's collection are the many ways definitions of pedagogy struggle with essential philosophical and political questions of what it means to be in a body, what it means to *be* in the lived world, what it means to learn. Gabriel Compayré, in one of the documents (written in 1910) aiming to define pedagogy, writes the following:

The science which claims to establish the laws of education, which would instruct and raise the child and form the man, cannot with certainty construct its inductions and deductions unless other sciences have taught it what man is, what

child is—in body, in soul, in his individual nature and also in what he must be in terms of his destiny, his social role. (32)

There are several things that seem to me worth noticing about this passage. Rather than putting pressure on the word “science” as an understanding of pedagogy or putting pressure on the masculine understanding of who is worthy of being taught, I want to focus first on the ways this passage links pedagogy (“the science which claims to establish the laws of education”) with ontology, with concerns of *being* (“what man is”). Compayré is quite aware that in order to begin to understand what it means to teach, we must also begin to understand bodies, souls, nature—in essence, being—meaning that pedagogy is not alone a question of education, but also a question of ontology, a question of identity, physicality, theology and ecology. This, of course, is one of the reasons pedagogy is endlessly contested and summarily reduced to one thing or the other. What can we know about what we are? About what “the child” (who is to become the man) or the student (or even the teacher) is? And if our vision is always blocked or otherwise blurred by these limits, how can we see what we are becoming, or being, in order to educate ourselves not only *about* what we might become but also *about* what it means to teach another being, another being who is also becoming? I ask these questions to remind myself that when I am talking about teaching, I am, without question, talking about and making assumptions about *being*, about who I imagine myself to be and who I imagine my students to be—though I understand both states of being as always temporary and mutable, even if, for a moment, we might find ourselves stable, fixed or seemingly still. I sat some time with this passage. I grappled with what this question of *being* implies about both the endless possibilities and frustrating limitations of what pedagogy means or can do.

*Loons often swim all day—paddling and pushing through the water. Their leg muscle fibers are mostly red. Loons rest their wings most of the time, though their wings are made of red and white fibers because when loons do use their wings, they use them furiously and steadily.*

Nearing the end of this document, Compayré writes, “We must hope that the day will soon come when a scientific schematization will finally be accomplished” (34). Here, he indicates that we will someday be able to *know* what pedagogy is after science has finally determined what man is. For Compayré, once we know what man is, we can know what it means to teach him. Perhaps these questions of “what man is” are part of the reason pedagogy has taken its modern home at times in composition—because writing has something to do with *being*, because composing thoughts, composing writing and composing a self permeate every aspect of being. But how do we bring questions of being to questions of pedagogy more explicitly? What will be said of our doing so? And what is man? Who is the man who teaches him? What kind of man am I?

*I am told by doctors that I have an XY chromosome (read: male). I look, talk and walk, like a man (read: male). I am carrying what we call here at this historical moment and in most cultures, a “woman’s” body (read: female). But this body alone cannot make a theory of teaching writing. I must, as any writer must, put myself at risk. Writing, much like reading, risks revising the self, having the self in question, even at times in annihilation. I am then a woman who is a man, or, to put it another way, a man who is a woman.*

The university classroom, in its long history, is a masculine place. As Pierre Bourdieu points out in *Masculine Domination*:

The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy [a term he uses to mean the justification of a masculine society as it is constructed] comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: *it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction.* (23)

Bourdieu points out how domination is linked to the masculine but that the masculine is linked to “biological nature.” And anything linked (despite its social construction) to “biological nature” is going to be seen as natural. As Connell suggests, “True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about the male body” (45). In this sense, domination is natural, the masculine is natural, masculine domination is natural. Of course, many gender theorists know this not to be *true*. Many gender theorists, Kate Bornstein and Judith Butler among them, have shown us that our sense of the natural is actually made, constructed—that what is natural is always in question. However, I am interested in what happens when masculinity’s “truth,” its fragility or fluidity is exposed via the body, in my case via the “female masculine” body.

I am interested in the way my masculinity (read often as illegitimate because it is *perceived* to be *not* linked to “biological nature”) might provide a site for a complicated performative pedagogy in which the now destabilized masculinity becomes a site of contention, disruption or even horror and melancholy, for students; in other words, the both-at-once-ness of my body itself might launch any course I teach as already disruptive. I could, and at times have wanted to, ignore this disruption; I could proceed to teach as if the disruption is not there. To an extent, most teachers have. We often teach as though the baggage of ourselves has been left as some metaphorical door. We are in the classroom. We are teachers now. We are not women or men. We are teachers. Through this project I have begun to ask questions about the man who teaches my course, the man who is me, who is also a woman.

*The word “loon” is said to derive from the Scandinavian word “lom”—which means clumsy and awkward person. The loon gets this name because of how graceless it seems on land, its hind legs too far back for walking. It moves in strange jerks and diagonal patterns on the ground. One can always recognize a loon’s sporadic walking.*

What I am calling the “illegitimate masculine” (the masculine not lived in a “male” body) is most visible when it comes into contact with or is put under the gaze of “legitimate masculinity.” I am sometimes working alongside male masculine students who seem to fold their arms in refusal when I walk in the room in my suit and tie, who challenge my authority in various complicated and sometimes comical ways, or who might sense my gender performance, perhaps rightly so, as an embodiment of a pedagogy that is asking them to change the way they think about identity. I am fully aware that there are a variety of reasons students might act in these ways; however, over the past ten years of teaching courses in the university, I have become acutely aware of resistance that is gendered, that is an embodied response. I can feel this (for different reasons and in different ways) both when I run into a female student in the public bathroom and we both shift our eyes toward the walls, shift our weight from foot to foot with the sense that I do not belong there (despite her “knowing” I am a “woman”) and when a male student looks over my clothing the way my cousin, who is a serious skateboarder, might look at a boy in “skateboarder” wardrobe who cannot “actually” (whatever that means) skate or cannot skate well—or look “natural” doing so. I believe the word my younger cousin uses to describe this is “poser.” I am a “poser,” illegitimate and non-authentic. My performance can never be “the real deal,” the real masculine deal. I have not learned my masculinity or been given the “masculine habitus” (a name Bourdieu gives to the set of sometimes invisible codes for masculinity and domination that are taught, reinforced and handed down in any given society) in an authentic (meaning natural) and institutionally approved way. I am, in that sense, the self-made masculine or, in Bourdieu’s terms, an autodidact:

Because he has not acquired his culture in the legitimate order established by the educational system, the autodidact constantly betrays, by his very anxiety about the right classification, the arbitrariness of his classifications and therefore of his knowledge—a collection of unstrung pearls, accumulated in the course of an

uncharted exploration, unchecked by the institutionalized, standardized stages and obstacles, the curricula and progressions which make scholastic culture a ranked and ranking set of interdependent levels and forms of knowledge. (*Distinction* 328)

Bourdieu's notion of the autodidact is certainly useful in talking about masculinity and about how masculinity is read by the larger culture and often by students in a classroom. The autodidact, then, "has not acquired his culture in the legitimate order established." *He* betrays; *he* is "a collection of unstrung pearls." The butch performance clearly echoes the description Bourdieu offers of the autodidact. In this case, it is me who has not had my masculinity sanctioned and approved by the legitimate order. It is my own body and performance that "betrays" me, that reveals "the arbitrariness" of classifications—my body standing at the chalkboard, fleshy proof that masculinity might be worn, might be acted out by one who does not have "birthright." And consequently my body *betrays* and in doing so becomes a kind of *betrayal*. In some sense, I betray my students, so that in addition to reading, say, a text as radical as *Gender Outlaw* by Kate Bornstein or *The Trouble with Normal* by Michael Warner, my students are also faced with a teaching body and performance that betrays them—they have difficulty reading or interpreting the texts I give them *or* the text I am to them to the point that these texts (my body) may seem impossible. College students might already feel a sense of betrayal in those contexts where their high school skill sets or former interpretive strategies appear not to work in this new university context. And this sense of betrayal could be further intensified when the teacher him/herself requires a different set of interpretative strategies in order to be read or understood.

*Loons find their prey not by heat or scent, but by sight. They need, in order to survive, to see clearly. For this reason, they look for clear lakes.*

And perhaps my interpretative act here, my giving my students hypothetical feelings a temporary name is a kind of projection of my own fear—the fear of being, ultimately and forever, illegible. Erased. A poser, indeed. Here, Bourdieu would seem to agree with Judith Halberstam’s assertion, in her seminal text, *Female Masculinity*, in which she argues that masculinity “becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” (2) and that “female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach” (3).

*There was always something about the public bathroom doors, always the dry chalk of androgyny sticking in my throat as I’d walk towards the women’s room with my mother. Somehow I knew she wasn’t bothered by the stick figure triangle skirt that indicated the path we were to take, the ways we were to interpret our bodies. But my mother and I do not have the same body. We do not read the signs on the bathroom doors similarly. In fact, my mother does not read the doors at all; she is automatic in her automatic body. She tugs me in by my small arms and leads me to the stall. Often, I have trouble urinating. I ask my mother to sing so no one will hear my body and she does. “I’m leavin’ on a jetplane, don’t know when I’ll be back again . . . leavin’ on a jetplane, don’t know when I’ll be back again.”*

In 2003, an anthology was published called *The Teacher’s Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*. For so long we have been talking about negotiating identities in the classroom and in texts, but rarely are those identities talked about in relation to the body itself in the classroom or to the body’s performance. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, in her essay “A Vessel of Possibilities,” writes: “The academy largely insists on the body’s erasure because the body is the undeniable reminder of our private selves. Our bodies betray truths about our private selves that confound professional interaction” (188). While on some level, this erasure can serve to protect or function as a kind of safety having to do with sexual harassment or with the unequal power distributions that circulate also dialectically between teachers and students, the erasure

still functions as a denial of materiality. The academy is so often a disembodied place—a place where we might be asked to distance from our bodies, to leave them behind in favor of some intellectual practices that we imagine happen outside of or independent of the body. Not so. Our bodies are with us always. We cannot, as it were, teach without them.

*There were several long days of snow that year. The students seem tired having stayed up late figuring the snow would cancel their buses and leave them asleep and warm. I have been teaching at this small high school in central Pennsylvania only a few months. And after the eleventh graders have turned in their papers on “the whiteness of the whale” in Moby Dick, one student stays behind. She leans awkwardly against my desk. She looks down at the patches she has sewn to her backpack. One reads, “If you can read this, you’re too fuckin’ close.” I almost giggle—knowing the school’s policies about such language displayed. “What’s up?” I ask her. “I’m pregnant,” she answers. And we both stand quiet under the horrible fluorescent lights. She begins to cry. I cannot come close to her. I cannot comfort her. I have listened hard to my teacher training meetings: Do not touch your students under any circumstances. Do not touch them. They cannot be touched. You cannot trust what they will say. You cannot touch them for any reason.*

## II. PRACTICES OF BODY

It can certainly trouble both teachers and students when they come face to face with the materiality of the body. It helps me to understand both myself and my students if I think of my masculinity as a kind of embodied betrayal—not because I believe that, as their teacher, I commit a kind of falseness, but because understanding the dynamic as a perceived betrayal helps to explain what, for many students, is a challenging and unusual interaction—the androgynous body, the men’s ties I wear to class, the deep voice, the “female” pronoun. The body that betrays “professional boundaries” by *not* being able to be rendered invisible (a body that appears legible in its normativity *might* be able to be rendered invisible) is a body that must be reckoned with as

one of the classrooms primary texts. One cannot avoid or ignore it any more than one could avoid or ignore the work of a course that must be done in order to complete it. To be intelligible then might mean to be invisible even if that intelligibility is only a perceived intelligibility. And as Judith Butler reminds us: “There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms” (3). In other words, it is not necessarily a sad story to be an unintelligible body, to be some other than “produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms.” To be intelligible is to be seen through the lens of what already is, or already appears to be. To be unintelligible is to be, quite literally, a becoming. Butler goes on to say that: “if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred” (3). In this sense, my students do not recognize me, and that they do not recognize me is integral to my survival—that is, if I want to be the person I continue to become and still teach classes in settings where the social norms “by which recognition is conferred” cannot be said to apply to me. I do not have the desire to be “recognized within a certain said of norms” and so Butler is spot on that this lack of *desire* means that my survival “depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms.” I am always aware, when I am teaching or thinking about my teaching, that my pedagogy is at its heart about my own survival, or about the survival of *my kind*—those of use living outside the “those norms by which recognition is conferred.” And there is a selfishness, I fear, to this pedagogy, though most of the time I suspect we are all, all of us teachers composition, trying to survive, asking students to try on news ways of thinking so that we might live in a more layered world—one ringing more loudly with possibilities for writing, for knowing and for becoming.

*A newborn loon can dive and swim on its own the second it is born, though most newborn loons will on their parents' backs for the first few weeks of life. They do this primarily to maintain heat and to avoid predators.*

The cyclical process of disruption and recognition brings to light some of the differences between the body and embodiment—“embodiment [which is distinct from but also inextricably linked to notions of the body] moves in conjunction with inscription, technology, and ideology” (Hayles 4). Hayles suggests that embodiment “moves,” that it is moving in accordance with inscription (which might be understood as what is “written on” or inscribed upon the body, a kind of labeling that implies meaning); technology as it changes what can be known and done about bodies; and lastly ideology, which tells us what bodies mean. Embodiment, Hayles writes, is “the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference” (5). Hayles understands embodiment as being created *by* difference; without difference, or the perception of difference, there would be only bodies. The “noise of difference” rings loudly in classrooms—between students, between our performances to and for one another, between their gendered embodiment and my own. Such a curious, cacophonous, seductive, beautiful and tragic noise—a noise that calls out in my writing of assignments, and in my students’ trying to write and work within the parameters I, in some ways, have little choice but to set. To teach queerly, to teach as a queer, to enact or design a queer pedagogy is, by definition and by practice, quite paradoxical. If part of the transformative power of queer theory is the concept of queer—its elasticity, its fluidity, its resistance to definition—then queer teaching becomes a particularly challenging contradiction. I, after all, make a syllabus, design assignments, ask students to perform within the parameters I define. And though I confess to not always being comfortable setting these parameters, or giving grades as partly a response to how well students might follow these parameters, I do these quite un-queer tasks in an attempt to *queer* them once they are in place.

*Loons have considerable and remarkable stamina. They travel and migrate long distances during the winter, and they can live up to thirty years.*

Like any social or cultural experience, the classroom has its field of constraints, its norms. Butler calls this the “doubled truth that although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us” (*Undoing* 205-6). And the violence Butler refers to has many meanings and layers. There is, of course, the obvious and over violence, which is easier to see and identify *as violence*. But the part of my challenge (as a teacher interested in the idea of queering teaching itself) is to identify those less clear moments of violence—moments, without my knowing, my norms (my syllabus, my assignments, my set of assumptions about my students) might do their own version of violence. And this is not always easy to see and understand. Norms themselves are not violence, but as Butler cautions, norms can constrain in ways that *do violence*. I think of this violence as a kind of control or limitation that is completely un-queer—meaning without flexibility, elasticity or the possibility of change. I write my assignments, not always successfully, in an attempt to leave room for students to change and resist the very parameters the assignments might set up. But this room sometimes leads to a tricky and difficult negotiation between the violence my parameters might do to students and the violence their resistance might do to me.

During the first of two times I taught the course I discuss in this project, I asked my students to do a short writing response to Kate Bornstein’s concept of the Gender Terrorist. The assignment was as follows:

Re-read the following passage from *Gender Outlaw*:

For a while, I thought that it would be fun to call what I do in life gender terrorism. Seemed right at first—I and so many folks like me were

terrorizing the structure of gender itself. But I've come to see it a bit differently now—gender terrorists are not the drag queens, the butch dykes, the men on roller skates dressed as nuns. Gender terrorists are not the female to male transsexual who's learning to look people in the eye as he walks down the street. Gender terrorists are not the leather daddies or back seat Betties. Gender terrorists are not the married men, shivering in the dark as they slip on their wives' panties. Gender terrorists are those who bang their heads against a gender system which is real and natural, and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us. These are the real terrorists: the Gender Defenders. (72)

Compose a response to Bornstein's definition of a gender terrorist. Can you think of examples of Gender Terrorism as she defines it? Are we all implicated in her definition? Are you implicated in any way? Why or why not?

Many of my students responded quite thoughtfully and compassionately to the passage, citing examples of having seen people asked to leave bathrooms, talking about their gay or trans cousins, friends, etc. Many students spoke eloquently about the expectations set by society, and about how those expectations caused people to respond or behave. Many students were able to write in a complicated way about their responses, even despite the fact that my final question "why or why not?" sets them up to do one or the other of these things. In reading through the student responses, there is one particular response that seems relevant to my concerns about this idea of *violence*. This response is from a male student who often let out sighs in class (sighs I read as disbelief or a kind of resistance) or sat with his arms folded but rarely said anything. I read these classroom actions as a form of resistance, though I cannot, of course, be certain of what they are. And of course, the student's writing inevitably shapes the ways I understand his classroom actions. I want very much to leave room for his resistance; I want the assignments and the classroom to have room, to leave open the possibility of his discomfort, or his frustration—if that's indeed what it is. In response to the assignment, the student writes:

Bornstein should change this book now that it's 2005. You can't run around calling people who think women look ridiculous and funny in ties gender terrorists. Terrorists are people who fly planes into important buildings. It's horrifying to think her problems are serious at all enough to equate them with

terrorists. Even all her examples are funny. When people “slip on their wives’ panties,” they make themselves open to ridicule. I’m not going to feel bad for them. (Student Paper, Fall 2005)

I first notice that Bornstein says nothing about “women in ties” but the student does say something about this. And, of course, I have been standing in the front of the classroom in a shirt and tie for two months by this point, so it is hard to imagine the student is not talking to me (even though he, technically, is not). Technically, he is talking about a more general and less dangerous “them,” a “them” who is not in the room, a “them” who is not me, a “them” who “slip on their wives’ panties,” a “them” he cannot imagine in any room he might be in. But my reading of his writing is that this student will not take seriously a performance of “illegitimate” masculinity such as mine. I begin to think he imagines me as a “poser,” as the autodidact masculine who makes him/ herself “open to ridicule.” Perhaps a serious identity, a valid and authentic identity, is one that matches a body, a “normal” portrayal of gender and sexuality. As I read this student writing, Bornstein’s concerns are “horrifying” in that the student is horrified that she would consider her “problems” to be problems of a kind of terrorism. This horror might not only about the word *terrorism*’s connection to September 11<sup>th</sup>. Terrorism, the student worries, is not funny. And I think we (all of us—students, teachers, writers) would agree it is not at all funny. Bornstein certainly does not say that gender terrorism is funny. As I read it, this student’s horror *is* about terrorism; it is about the idea that someone you couldn’t see, someone undetectable, someone you might have even trusted, would betray you—your traditions, your culture, your life, your country. This horror is, more specifically, the horror of “passing.” It is also the horror of moveable boundaries, of blurring, and of coming to see that what we think we know will not stay still, will not, in the end, *become* knowledge.

*If threatened a loon might do what is called a “penguin dance” whereby the loon looks as though it is standing on top of the water, holding its wings at its side like a penguin would. The loon is a kind of chameleon. The “penguin dance” is a sign of extreme agitation. Birdwatchers advise humans to keep away from loon doing a “penguin dance.”*

What we think we know will not emerge as a stable truth; it will not, as it were, turn into truth; it will not *become* permanent and knowable knowledge, but it will become a becoming, an emerging, elastic and changing knowledge—knowledge queered. And the truth is, as I read this student’s writing, I understood the various ways he might be terrorized by me (by my course, by this book I had chosen for him to read); I also understood the ways I, too, felt terrorized by him—he’s *not going to feel bad for them*. It’s the “them” that’s terrifying. It’s seeing myself as this student’s “them.” It’s becoming the *other* to a single one of my students. It is the fear that every one of them, however politely, thinks of me this way. They might or might not, of course. And of course, on some level, and if I subscribe to my own definition of knowledge, I cannot know what my students *really* think, or how they imagine me. But I am, after all, afraid of my students—as, I think, most teachers are if we are honest with ourselves about what is at stake in offering one’s vision—one’s assignments, philosophies, and inevitably one’s identities—as a site for intellectual inquiry and written exploration.

*Then there is my crying in dresses. “Since I was born,” my mother says. She walks the line of my crying. The church dress I will not. The pigtails I will not. The long nights praying: Please God, if you let me wake up and be a boy, I will never say another swear word again.*

Here Julia Kristeva offers me one interesting way of thinking about the experience of students who are “traditionally gendered” when they come into contact with the female masculine body, with my body. She writes: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that

causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Abjection seems a viable way to describe what happens when students encounter an unreadable body in a pedagogical context. Here, the pedagogy *and* the teacher’s body are sites of abjection—both do not “respect borders, positions, rules,” both are the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” After all, as Karen Kopelson suggests, “A queer performative pedagogy, in fact, often *strives* to confuse, as it strives to push thought beyond circumscribed divisions—strives to push thought beyond what can be *thought*” (20). A queer pedagogy aims to put pressure on or stretch those norms of recognition Butler describes. What *can be thought* is already within those normative parameters. And to push beyond *what can be thought*, we must be able to think beyond those norms, to write beyond them, to think of new possibilities. And while this seems compelling, I am aware, as a write this, that I want my students to be able to imagine me, to *think* of me, to make me, in the end, possible.

*It is illegal to hunt or kill loons. Many have been found dead at lakesides with high amounts of mercury in their blood. Many of their natural habitats are being polluted by the pastime of driving one’s motor boat or by the spilling of chemicals.*

Kopelson argues for a pedagogy and a teaching body that disrupts and destabilizes identity. She argues, for example, that “coming out” as any stable identity is a mistake in the classroom. According to Kopelson, one might only seek to “come out” as destabilizing. And if we are interested in what queer theory offers us, a productive way of thinking about identity and the body, we might consider the ways we might all “come out” as destabilizing, impossible, unthinkable. I am not interested in arguing here whether certain identities may feel themselves to be fixed or stable; I work with the understanding that there are momentary and even necessary

fixities, or particular strategic (and even activist) reasons why one might, at some given moment, name identity as fixed or unilateral. For the purposes of my work, however, I am interested in the idea that fixed and stable identities are not always useful for writing pedagogies. I think that what it means to introduce students to academic writing in the humanities is to ask students to consider that writing an essay is not a moment where we decide one thing over another or take one side of a two-sided debate—rather, it is an act of wavering and careful consideration where writers move fluidly through the complicated terrain of their own thinking and the thinking of others. In terms of this fluidity I would say that while my masculine body is at times troubling or resisted, it can also be an opportunity for confusion of the productive kind, the kind that produces complicated ways of knowing that push the borders of what can be written or thought.

*I am in college and taking a course titled “fictional history.” I have a professor who practices, in each opportunity for confusion of the productive kind, a “destabilizing” pedagogy.” We are talking about why a particular student in the class does not find pleasure in reading a series of Toni Morrison’s books. The student says to the professor, “I just think women enjoy books like these more than men, that’s all.” He says it with no ill-will, sort of sweetly. The professor, Professor Hill, says to him, “And do you think I am a woman?” The student, sort of, grins. He sees her clearly in her long dress, her full lips and perfectly feminine cheekbones. We (all of us in the class) “know” she is a woman. She goes on: “What makes you think I am a woman, Charles?” The student doesn’t answer again. We spend the better part of that hour, as a class, making a list of reasons we think Professor Hill is a woman. It starts with silence before someone says, “Your first name is Mary.” Another student, says, “You said you were a mother.” She writes them on the board as we list them. We must reckon with our perception of her body. No one ever says she has breasts, but we are all thinking it. We are all thinking of the material conditions we could not (because of boundaries) name that would settle the question once and for all. Professor Hill shows us the holes, the room for possibility in each of our womanhood proofs. We never did get to Toni Morrison that day, or perhaps we did some other way I couldn’t name.*

### III. ABJECT PEDAGOGY

At times my masculinity is read in a way that is advantageous to me. As Deborah Meem writes of her own positioning as a teacher: “Students and faculty see my butchness as powerful, especially as contrasted with femme experience, which is mostly invisible” (82). Like Meem, I also never experience the space of invisibility that she describes here, the space reserved for “women,” a space that is sexually visible while intellectually or politically *invisible*. I have no idea what it is like, for example, to be treated as a female sexual object by male students. My masculinity might be said to protect me from this particular gaze, however illegitimate my masculinity may be. And the issues I may have with authority in my classroom are rarely public—most male students do not, for example, challenge me publicly (as they might do silently or in their papers). And this may be in part because of my enactment of teacherly authority, but because of the ways my teacherly authority is inextricable from my masculinity I often wonder if this lack of public or classroom challenge comes from a fear that my illegitimate masculinity may somehow supernaturally trump their “real” masculinity. Feminine “women” might not be feared in this way, though they are, of course, feared in others. Masculinity worn on the “female” body can change an environment in specific ways, can change the bodies in that environment, can call the entire notion of the body and the environment into question, because it troubles their meanings. After all, as Kristeva also points out, what is abject has much to illuminate with regard to meaning:

If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it; what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (1-2)

The “desire for meaning” is not merely a desire for any meaning at all or for multiple meanings. The meaning of legitimate masculinity is a singular, fixed meaning according to those who establish and perpetuate its singularity and static-ness. So when, as Kristeva asserts, “the abject” brings us to the place “where meaning collapses”—*the place the bird hits water*—we are, in turn, horrified (and perhaps intrigued as well). We are faced with a moment of crisis about ourselves and about our notions of how the world is named and ordered. Written texts can have this effect as well; but, I want to emphasize that the body is most rooted in desire, and in shame, and that its appearance creates the intense and visceral site of abjection that Kristeva describes. While I have taken only part of Kristeva’s theory of abjection as a lens through which to look at female masculinity in the context of my classrooms and their discourses, I read her notion of abjection as a lens that allows us to theorize the in-between, the ambiguous and the unnamed in the classroom.

*Naming. Kindergarten. I do not like salt water, the class gerbil or writing on the black board. I do not like the girls’ line and the boys’ line. I do not like swallowing my gum. I will not tell anyone my middle name. The teacher, she tells the whole class my middle name. “It’s Ann,” they scream, “we know it’s Ann.”*

The abject can often be seen as criminal. And there is a sense in which I have “stolen” masculinity, a sense in which I have taken an inheritance that does not belong to me or to my line of people—namely “women.” Masculinity, is, in a sense, a type of inherited capital (the male body) which prepares a man for his acquisition of cultural or social capital (what Bourdieu would deem the masculine habitus). In this way, we can understand Bourdieu’s thoughts about education alongside the model of female masculinity I have described above. Bourdieu explains:

Likewise, in every relationship between educational capital and a given practice, one sees the effect of the dispositions associated with gender which help to

determine the logic of the reconversion of inherited capital into educational capital, that is, the ‘choice’ of the type of educational capital which will be obtained from the same initial capital. (*Distinction* 105)

Here Bourdieu writes about educational capital as a series of titles or stages achieved through masculinity, the inherited capital masquerading as achieved educational capital. To become a gender, we must learn it; we must receive an education in it; we must learn masculinity. Some us, though, are perceived as having inherited it as part of our *natural* right. This system of reconversion applies to the inheritance of masculinity and finally to how masculinity is passed down—educationally, culturally, socially. As for the female masculine, we must resort to stealing pieces of the masculine educational capital regardless of our living in a society that tells us we have little or no right to that capital. We have no inherited capital, as women. The inheritance of masculinity belongs to men. While of course Bourdieu’s claims are linked to other kinds of identity, I am interested, for the purposes of this inquiry, in the connections he makes to gender and masculinity. I am interested in thinking about how women (and genderqueer folks) become thieves of masculine capital. And I am quite interested, in some sense, in thinking about myself as this kind of thief, someone who has attained masculinity without any right to it, someone who is a writer—another kind of thief altogether. As a young poet I can remember quite clearly the first time I heard T.S. Eliot being quoted: “Good poets borrow; great poets, true great poets, steal.” But what do poets steal? What do I, as an illegitimate masculine person, steal? In poetry, images are stolen, phrases, syntax—all performances of language. In gender, we steal the same: image, phrase—what we might call the grammar of masculinity.

*There is always the sense that students find their teachers strange outside the environment of the classroom. For me, however, there is the sense, in certain moments, that this strangeness is*

*amplified. When my composition course breaks half way through, I stand nervously with the women in my class as we wait for stalls in the women's room. They are nervous too. We do not speak. We look at the white floor. Or I do. There is the sense there is a man in this room. There is the sense of invasion, of the criminal.*

It is language and image, after all, that are at the center of teaching rhetoric and composition. What we name conjures up an image. This is one of the primary ways meaning is made. And it is not merely enough to expose this constructedness to students, for what good does it do us to know that names are constructions, that the images these names conjure up are twice constructions, that we all lie floating dead still in our pool of names and identities? Language is performance; we are performances—unstable, improvisations of ourselves. In this sense, the world is not a stage; it is, more precisely, a drag show in which, as Butler would have it, we are all imitating the “copy with no original”; we are “acting out” an authenticity that can never be an original. But so what? What good (beyond awareness itself) does knowing this do for my students' lives, for their writing and thinking?

*The loon needs up to one half mile of build-up running in order to lift themselves up into the air. Once they do, they can fly up to sixty miles per hour.*

The title of this section is, in a sense, dramatic. After all, abjection conjures up the perverse and repulsive. Kristeva gives as material examples: corpses and shit. Do I really believe my body is abject—and moreover that students might experience my body as abjection? Or, is queering itself abjection? Is the queer subject always abject? In his 2007 book, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk and Subjectivity*, David Halperin traces abjection's path prior to Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. Halperin writes, “Abjection therefore has a particularly precise and powerful relevance to gay men as well as to other despised social groups, who have a

heightened, and intimate, experience of its social operations” (69). And I, my students’ teacher, am a member of one of these “other despised social groups.” And often, some of students are members of these groups as well. Whether one might call my body transgendered or intersexed is not clear. And the truth is I often do not want to contend with this reality, which only furthers the notion of abjection—a casting out of perversity, my queer and impossible nature. And if abjection, as Halperin asserts, is about social power and social experience (perhaps more so than it is about psychoanalysis), we need only look to popular talk shows that often display those of my kind preying on traditionally gendered and heterosexual innocents. We need only look at media representations of Thomas Beatty, the pregnant man, or the debates and discussions surrounding the gender of Olympic South African runner Caster Semenya. The headlines: “Tests show that controversial runner Caster Semenya is a woman . . . and a man!!!!” There is outrage, horror, exertion of social force: abjection.

*Driving through the back roads of rural Pennsylvania several years back, I stop at a rest-stop along route 28, a winding mountain road that takes me from graduate school back to the small town where I went to college. I have to go to the bathroom. I consider pulling over to use the woods, but am running out of gas. When I step out of the gas station bathroom, I find myself against the brick wall of the building, a forearm pressing into my throat. And when I look into his face, he is young and handsome and wants to kill me. I think of a vigil there might be at the college. I think of my mother who will wish I had done more to fit in. I think of the woman inside this man who will kill me. I think she is terribly beautiful.*

Halperin goes on to discuss the work of Jean Genet and focuses his attention on the abject as embraced by the queer, as a way of reversing its power to dominate or humiliate. My classroom is a room inside the social world; it is an extension of that world. So to think of my classroom, and my body, as a site of abjection is not dramatic, is not an overstatement of the social dynamics at work in the world and in the teaching situation. To my students, I am abject.

As I am to myself. As I must be to survive. But why? Why would I find value in pedagogies of abjection, in the abject? Why would I give my students the book *Gender Outlaw*, knowing how likely it is so many of them will cringe at Bornstein's mention of golden showers or butt plugs? Halperin, through his work with Genet, offers another understanding:

Far from glorifying domination, abjection achieves a spiritual release from it by derealizing its humiliating effects—by depriving domination of its ability to demean the subject and, thus, robbing it of a portion of its reality. As a result, social persecution loses some of its crushing power and changes its meaning (hatred is transformed into love). Only once domination has been defied through being resignified can it be transformed into a vehicle for attaining beatitude. (78)

In the abject itself, in the experience of abjection, is the possibility of changed meaning, of transformation, of resignification, of, finally, a kind of spiritual blessing. And Halperin echoes here the Christian term “beatitude” as a way of enacting the very resignifying he describes. There are layers of meaning here as to how this notion of abjection speaks to teaching, to my teaching. First, I value the abject experience and believe that experience is one that can happen in many ways—in literal social experience, in reading, in the discussion of ideas, in behavior and in writing. This value is, admittedly, quite personal. If I am to value my own life (and I do), I am to value abjection. Second, I believe that writing has the transformative potential of abjection. And finally, as the existence of Halperin's book suggests, gender and sexuality (especially when we think of abjection in social terms) exist at the contradiction of shame and pride. Abjection exists always in contradiction; Kristeva and Halperin are in agreement about that. And, in returning to my first layer of meaning, whereby I claim to value abjection, I then value, in my teaching and in writing (my own writing and my students' writing) the capacity to live, write and learn in contradiction. This is asking a lot of myself and of my students. In an earlier book, *Saint Foucault*, Halperin writes, “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily*

*refers*. It is an identity without an essence” (62). What could be more contradictory? What could be more disorientating? How can I understand or explore queer pedagogies if, according to Halperin’s definition of queer, it is a pedagogy without an essence?

*There is a Migratory Bird Treaty Act that protects loons from the harassment of humans. This includes violating low wake or now wake zones. The aggressive movement from boat wakes can wash away loon nests at the shore’s edge.*

#### **IV. PEDAGOGY OF MELANCHOLY**

In her essay “Melancholy Gender/ Refused Identification,” Butler describes a kind of grieving gender creates, which accompanies this sense of abjection I am interested in; she calls it “a mourning of un-lived possibilities” (32) in which gender is always already about loss—in this case Butler is talking about a compulsory heterosexual model in which one becomes a girl, for example, by not desiring another girl but then mourns the girl she is and therefore the girl she cannot have. This model means that succeeding at one’s gender means to succeed at not lusting after one’s own gender; one becomes a woman by refusing to want another woman. Desires not being met can certainly qualify as a kind of abjection in that when our desires cannot be met, there is a clashing between the world as it is and the world as we wished or thought it to be. Then, following, we must grieve that loss—the loss of the world as we wished or thought it to be in order to try to move the world as it is—whatever that means—into its place. This is not to suggest that there is “world as it is” but rather there are moments of seeing, flickers of clarity in which we are either affirmed or challenged in our seeing—or some combination of both. If we

are challenged and find that what we see destroys some other version or vision we had, we experience the melancholy Butler describes—the melancholy, the mourning of the person we are and the person we cannot be/ have. There is, or can also be, a kind of exhilaration in this loss. There is, or can also be, a kind of gaining—a layering whereby our prior understandings become part of new understandings creating a more complicated, more both-at-once vision. A simultaneously, perhaps even paradoxical, vision.

*Bird watchers have said is it virtually impossible to tell the difference between a female loon and a male loon. There is sometimes a difference in size, but nothing distinct to mention. Nothing that allows us to see the loon and know it.*

Many students, like all of us, have visions of the world, have visions of themselves inside it. And when they come into contact with texts/ bodies/ ideas that do not fit that vision, there can be great risk for them; they can lose vision, can lose some version of themselves they hold dear, can experience great loss. For example, in teaching Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (in which she lists over fifty privileges belonging to white people only and by virtue of only their skin color), I received the following response from one of my students: "I was brought up to believe all people are equal. I find it hard to believe that in this day and age that these privileges hold to be true. If they were true, I would have to feel pretty bummed out that my success was so fake." There is so much in my pedagogy, in my body, in the content of my courses that may have students "pretty bummed out" or that may get them feeling that their realities are at risk as "fake." The student's discussion of the possibility of being "bummed out" if what McIntosh says is true is a real sense of loss. If he reads the essay in a way that allows his version of equality to be challenged, he loses something: his own sense of "success," which is important to him as it is to all of us. By assigning this essay, by bringing

to class a contradictory identity, a moveable body, I put my students at risk. I ask them to purposely put their realities in danger and, in a sense, to embrace that danger. This is no small task, despite the fact that our identities and realities are always in danger. There is no immovable place, no permanent understanding, though we may proceed as though there were. We don't often want to look there, to find this danger and walk in its direction. And what is to say the risk will be worth it? What might we all (students and teachers alike) gain in spite of these abjections, risks and losses? This melancholy pedagogy in which we lose, again and again, what we believed to be permanent and stable visions. My gender performance, in this sense, undoes a version of reality even as it undoes me. Or, my gender performance might reaffirm what is already thought, reify those norms of recognition—in such case making my gender performance, again, abject.

Understanding how female masculinity might function inside a classroom can offer an approach to teaching. Kopelson writes, “Performative pedagogy is thus a ‘doing’ that disclaims ‘being’—or at least a doing that disclaims the idea of ‘being’ as singular, unified, and static” (25). This performative pedagogy might help students to develop critical and political positions from which to read and write if they are reading and writing in a classroom in which the instructor's body will not lie still on the specimen table of identity. The instructor will not “be” their identities. They will only perform their identities. It is important that teachers move, (even in the sense that Professor Hill moves) that we create moments of abjection from which our students can emerge, from which we can emerge.

*Fishermen are dangerous to loons. A loon can mistake lures and jigs for live prey. Loons die each year from entanglement in fishing line or from swallowing lures, which can cause them to die of lead poisoning.*

I mean not at all to compose a heroic narrative of how my butchness makes for good teaching. In fact, this inquiry began from my own frustrations and failures, from the difficulty and challenges of teaching in my body rather than from any promising pedagogical moments I might have. My butchness, in fact, like most categories of identity, makes for complicated teaching, for teaching that confuses. Teachers' bodies, our raced, sexed, classed, spiritualized, clothed bodies, when they become visible, or are made visible to students, complicate our pedagogies whether we choose to acknowledge how this might happen or not. As Kopelson reminds us, "*Queer* is a term that offers to us and our students an epistemological position—a way of knowing rather than something to be known" (25). This epistemological position is a moveable position, one that wavers; it may, in fact, not be "a" position at all, but multiple positions, ways of knowing rather than *some things* to be known. Our ways of knowing are inextricably linked to our ways of being, our becoming. In this sense, this project is both an epistemological and ontological meditation on pedagogy as it is also tied to a self—in this case, to me.

*The loon song is one that has inspired cultures for centuries. On northern lakes where they nest in the summer, loons utter long, drawn-out, wailing cries and screams at night. Early Inuit cultures buried loon skulls in graves. Because of their mournful song, the loon was thought to act as a guide into the netherworld.*

On my first day of every course, I walk in terrified, the shake of voice, the sweating, the stomach turning over and over at the thought of interpretation. My students need a pronoun with which to refer to me; their language demands it. Years ago, I would avoid the pronouns altogether until once, a kind, hard-working and well-meaning student (as most of my students are) does something on the first day he never quite forgives himself for. He's late for starters

and then says loudly to a classmate, “Did *he* give out the syllabus yet?” The classroom rings with discomfort. I can hear several giggles, several students shift in their seats. The other students have “figured out” by now that I am not a man—at least not in a way they are used to. The student sinks down in his chair. He does not look at me for weeks. He believes he has done something hurtful, I think. I suspect he thinks he has offended me, which (of course) he has not. These days, I begin with pronouns; I talk about my gender in those first few moments of introducing myself to my students. I try it comically and gently, *If you think you’re not quite sure about my gender now, wait ‘til you read these books on the syllabus.* They laugh, sometimes nervously. *My parents refer to me as “she,” you may do the same. But it doesn’t mean you know anything about how I throw a ball.* Again, they laugh, less nervously this time. We try to work it out together, the stories of one another’s bodies. We spend the semester “undoing” the texts we read, undoing the texts of our bodies. And there is risk, and sadness, and horror, and seduction and the sense that nothing is as it first appears. I assume things, too, about them; they teach me again and again that I cannot do so.

*Loons are very shy and wary birds that put on fantastic displays if a human or another animal gets close to the nest. The display signals extreme distress and is called penguin dancing. In this display the loon rushes forward across the water toward the intruder and rises with head drawn back and bill almost touching breast while its feet beat the water and create a wild spray. Humans triggering this behavior often don't understand that they have come too close to a nest and continue to come back and watch the display until the birds finally leave the area*

## VI. THE WORK OF ASSUMPTIONS

*The loon's red eyes, caused by pigment in the retina, allow them clear water vision. They can dive up to two-hundred feet deep for as long as ten minutes.*

Often, in beginning to talk with students about gender, I begin by asking them to notice their assumptions about what feminism is and what a feminist does or looks like. I ask them, "What are some stereotypes about feminists?" And this is a question they readily answer with (and these are just some of their responses): doesn't shave, is a lesbian, over assertive, loud, manly, finds fault with everything, militant, over-critical, and doesn't know when to shut up. And as we construct this vision of a feminist in our minds, as we look at this list on the board together, I can't help but straighten my tie and wonder if I might just follow up the list on the board by saying, "Well, now that you've met me." There is the sense that when my students arrive in my composition courses focused on sexuality and gender, they are reading my position from the moment they step in the door. It figures, after all, that a short-haired, manly, over-critical "woman" would teach a course that begins with feminism. My position is being read one of two ways by my students: 1. I am trying to "convince" them to be feminist radicals because I want them to think I am OK... in other words, my intellectual interests are reduced to personal investment only (and perhaps there is always some truth in this assumption for all teachers) or 2. Because my body inhabits the space that it does, I must be certainly the bearer of knowledge of all that is feminist and butch lesbian (perhaps there is some truth in this assumption as well). All semester, my students and I dance around one another's identity. They suspect me and I, in turn, suspect them. In her essay, "Identity Politics in the College Classroom, or Whose Issue Is This Anyway?" Katherine Mayberry suggests that "... the politicization of identity, knowledge, and

authority have changed” much about the way students and their instructors interact,” introducing an identity-based definition of *credibility* as an entirely new precondition of professional authority” (3). And in fact, I find myself wondering how I might begin to discuss my authority or my credibility with my students, to engage in a dialogue about the way we are reading one another as bodies in terms of gender and the assumptions we make about what we are trying to get one another to do. For example, at times, I suspect my students of being polite and refusing to assert their “real” beliefs in fear of literally “hurting my feelings.” But often, identity begins there, with feelings. Or I suspect my students of being over-resistant to texts because they feel threatened not so much by the text itself, but by me, by the female masculine body. At the close of my composition course, I gave my students the following prompt:

Return back to your papers this semester and read through my comments. Write a letter addressed to me in which you consider the following: What kind of writer am I asking you to be and why might I ask you to be this particular writer? What kinds of questions do I seem to be wanting you to ask? How do you feel about my challenges to your ideas, and where in the course did you see my reading of the text and yours as drastically different? Why might they be different? What about you or about me might cause us to read a text so differently? Use specific examples from my comments to make your points.

Let me say I was terrified to get these papers. But I felt, and still feel, that there is so much I have to learn about the relationship between my students and myself in terms of identity in order to teach them about reading and writing. One of my students, whose permission I have to use her writing but not her name, discusses what she calls our “totally opposite ways” of reading the following claim by Kate Bornstein. Bornstein writes, “In living along the borders of the gender frontier, I’ve come to see the gender system created by this culture as particularly malevolent and divisive construct, made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability to question gender, its own creation” (Bornstein 12). The student writes:

I think the whole reason that Bornstein doesn't really affect me as much with this line is because I want to keep my gender. Although you don't seem to go as overboard as Bornstein, it seems like you want things that go against what is expected for women, so it would make sense that you'd see gender as malevolent. What I want is to stay a woman, to play that role and maybe I said what I said about Bornstein because she wants gender to be "performance?" and I think there is something more internal, spiritual even, about it. I want to be a woman. I know that you probably know more about gender than me but I cannot believe that gender is 'a creation of culture.' I just can't.

This student, quite astutely I think, articulates something about reading that she may not have articulated before, that our reading of a text is somehow located in what she calls "want." She *wants* to be a woman and suspects I have been more "affected" by Kate Bornstein's book because I want something different from the world than she does. Of course, I did not have to tell my students explicitly that this particular text illustrates many of my own ideas about gender, but they have positioned me with the text—*partially* because I am the instructor and I have chosen the text but also, and more so, because my performance of gender, as the student says, "goes against what is expected." The student positions Bornstein as "going overboard" and positions me as perhaps a less militant version of Bornstein. She ends her response with the words "I just can't," which I think reveals another way that desire and the body become visible in the teaching of composition. Basically, in this short paragraph, the student comes to the conclusion that there is something about "want" and about willingness that positions a reader who is considering these ideas about gender. William Cooper, also a student in this particular composition class, writes:

Next to where I wrote 'Feminism itself might be a reason for inequality,' you wrote to me "In what sense?" And I don't know why but I felt like you were annoyed with me in a way, not that "in what sense" is a mean comment, but there is a possibility that you didn't know what I meant. OK, let me get this out right. If Kate Bornstein (and you I think) believes that gender is a myth and that it being a two-choice system is what creates all the problems, then wouldn't feminism also be setting up a two-choice system. OK, because if feminism is about women being equal to men then it's about women and men, which means gender has to

exist. I think you want me to agree with Bornstein and agree with feminism, but you haven't proved to me why I guess because the two things are saying reverse ideas. I know you're gonna say it's wrong, but I think it's true.

William Cooper articulates a contradiction in what he sees as two of the ideologies represented in my course and represented by me—perhaps by the very existence of my body itself. He had no idea how happy I would be to read his response. He assumes that I am trying to “prove” to him that feminism and this text, *Gender Outlaw*, are supporting arguments I want him to “agree” with. The student positions my emotional reading of his text, that I was annoyed with him when I wrote “in what sense?” He then ends by saying “I know you're gonna say it's wrong.” Of course, I think my question “in what sense” is a generous one, but I have to be honest in saying I did assume that he was suggesting that feminism creates inequality because women then want to surpass or be better than men. Perhaps I assumed he meant this because I read him as a man, as a white male college freshmen who is “probably threatened by feminism” never mind the queer theory in Bornstein's book. In actuality, William and I are concerned about the limits of feminism in some of the same ways. In fact, we are perhaps both “post-feminist” in that sense, both concerned with a kind of gender multiplicity.

*The loon is a waterbird. Loons build their nests at the edge of the shoreline. They bring up vegetation and reeds from the bottom of the lake. They rise up on the water to dry their wings and collect pieces of trees branches to bring to the nest.*

This assignment really changed my relationship with many of my students. As we discussed some of their responses in class, it became clear that with each excerpt we looked at, we became more human to one another; we became physical, intellectual and emotional beings—all of us having sets of assumptions shaping our interpretations, shaping our interactions. Of course, I don't discuss this assignment as a “magic trick” to composition but

rather one of the ways I was able to make the assumptions about desire, body and intention more visible, a way to address the question of my gender, and of theirs, and how these genders and bodies shape the texts we read and the texts the students write.

## **VII. NOTES ON TEACHING (THE TEACHER)**

Our histories are quite similar in terms of how we come into being, how we arrive or are said to arrive in the world. The body is the first text. There might, as it were, be a sonogram in which the doctor will use an approach, a camera of sorts to locate the presence or lack in the child's body as it is submerged in the fluid that holds in warmth and nourishment. The doctor will announce the presence or lack. What the child is, how the child is to be interpreted gets named into being. The first interpretative act is one acted upon us, one we cannot control or enter into a conversation about. We will then be born into a body and we ourselves will begin to interpret our world in this gendered body, this first trap of unconsciousness, unwavering, perceived as certain. A careful set of cultural rules will instruct us that our genders are natural, that they go always without question. We learn first what not to question. We learn first the anti-thesis of knowing, to accept without wondering, without asking or probing. We learn that these expressions of our named gender are natural. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, describes the process, writing: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (25). Expressions of gender are naturalized through the process I describe above, but they are not natural. They are named and contained into being.

*Usually only two loons inhabit one lake. They are territorial birds. They often return to the same lakes, but don't always continue last year's courtship.*

This is often where names come from; they come from a desire to contain wonderment. And it is here that my students and I must commit to teaching one another to wonder how we know what we know, what ways of knowing have led us to know what we know, and (finally) how we will enact ways of knowing that have the potential to make new knowledge about our names, about our bodies, about reading and writing, about the lives we imagine. The construction of masculinity, of the body, of a reader, of students, of the body of their teacher. For many of us, many of the ways of knowing we have learned are ways that cover the tracks of acquired knowledge, invisible ways of knowing that then appear naturalized; they appear as found knowledge rather than made. To teach, inevitably, means to engage with and be responsible for constructions of identity. And one of our first tasks is to expose that constructedness; however, that will not, in the end, be enough. As one of my students reminded me in an anonymous mid-term course evaluation when I asked what questions they were hoping the rest of the course would address: "I guess, what do we do if everything we know is just a bunch of spoon fed ideas about who we're supposed to be or who everyone is? It seems like we don't know anything then." This student reminds me of something very important; that is, it is not enough to expose identity as unstable or fragile, or to expose its constructedness. Something more needs to happen. The student feels stuck. I start to feel stuck. Yes, what do we make now of identity knowing full well what it has tried to make of us?

Perhaps the lyrical or the narrative of gender can tell us something about where or how to move from here. Just as this project seeks to sound off in a number of registers, as does identity. And each register is its own way of knowing. To know lyrically might be thought something

quite aside from knowing theoretically. To know narratively—something quite distinct from knowing politically. And so on. And when the lines begin to blur, I think we can begin to *make* new ways of knowing, ways of knowing (actual knowledge and teaching practices) that are in themselves unstable and fluid.

*It is summer. I have been swimming most of the day in a small lake in northern Maine. I am watching two dogs chase a loon out into the water. A man calls after his dog, Here Shelby. Shelby, come. And as the dogs move toward the loon, it sinks down into the lake. And the dogs turn back as if it had never been. Identity does sink down into the water, does disappear as we come closer to it. Still, we think we know what we've seen. We think if we return to the place where identity was, we'd hear it echo; we'd follow that sound to its origin, which, of course, is (as echoes are) only a memory of a sound having been made.*

## 2. ALTERNATIVE ORIENTATIONS: ACTIONS, LABOR, PRACTICES

Subversiveness, rather than being an easily identifiable counter-knowledge, lies in the very moment of unintelligibility, or in the absence of knowledge. If subversiveness is not a new form of knowledge but lies in the capacity to raise questions about the detours of coming to know and make sense, then what does this mean for a pedagogy that imagines itself as queer? Can a queer pedagogy resist the desire for authority and stable knowledge; can it resist disseminating new knowledge and new forms of subjection? What if a queer pedagogy puts into crisis what is known and how we come to know?

Susanne Luhmann  
From ““Queering/ Querying Pedagogy?””

Discourse is the path from one contradiction to another: if it gives rise to those that can be seen, it is because it obeys that which it hides. To analyse discourse is to hide and reveal contradictions; it is to show the play that they set up within it; it is to manifest how it can express them, embody them, or give them temporary appearance.

Michel Foucault  
From *Archeology of Knowledge*

I try to teach my readers to become conscious of their mental moves, to see what such moves produce, and to learn to revise or complicate those moves as they return to them in light of what their newly constructed awareness of what those moves did or did not make possible

Mariolina Salvatori  
From *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*

## I. HABITS OF MIND

*My third grade teacher, Mr. Schellhorn, shows me an anatomical diagram of dolphin. I remember its heart, and I remember him leaning in and saying: “They don’t breathe automatically. They have to remember to do it. Imagine if you could forget to breathe.” It stays with me for months. And that afternoon I feel short of breath, overly attuned to the movement of my lungs, unable to stop my mind from focusing on my breathing—suddenly perpetually aware of the nuances of my breath, its complicated rise and fall.*

The 17 students in the course I draw from signed up to be a part of a Freshmen Learning Community, which basically means they are taking three courses the first semester of their first year in college with the same 17 other students. Other than the title of the Learning Community itself—“Human Psyche and Sexuality”—I designed the course and the writing sequence with attention to queer pedagogy both by assigning texts that engage with queer studies (giving specific attention to what Jonathan Alexander calls “sexual literacy”) and by trying to develop, during the course itself, queer teaching practices or methods of instruction. While some of these methods might be extractable from chapter one of this book (in terms of approaches to the classroom, particular ways of imagining the body in the classroom), I want to move from the materiality of the body to classroom materials. But I begin with the body in order to implicate, present and complicate the life and body from which these pedagogies emerge. In a sense, I am moving chronologically. My body is the first my students see of me (whether that seeing is conscious or not); quite literally, they see a teaching body who enters the room. The next thing they see is the syllabus I have made, the writing *I* have produced for them. And I designed the syllabus and assignment sequence in this course as this body who writes this book, as a kind of loon.

In fact, as I will discuss in this chapter, I often ask my students to do the same—to begin where they are, to begin in their own bodies and identities. In a sense, I began thinking about this course there—how do I write assignments that begin there, assignments that both ask students to develop critical sexual literacy while at the same time keeping in mind that this course was a writing course? It fulfills the requirement of First Year Composition at a four-year college. Writing is the “material” I am institutionally expected to teach in the course. Why do I think queer theory can help me do this? Might gender, sexuality, the subject of sex itself actually distract my students from the important work of learning to write as an intellectual? Perhaps it might be useful here for me to situate my actual current institutional expectations where I have taught the composition courses I draw from here. The University of Pittsburgh currently describes, as the aims and goals of any Seminar in Composition course, the following:

### **Seminar in Composition at the University of Pittsburgh**

Seminar in Composition is the introductory writing course most undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh take during their freshman year to fulfill the first of three writing-intensive (“W”) requirements in the School of Arts and Sciences. Although sections of the course vary, all students in Seminar in Composition address a semester-long sequence of assignments demanding sustained attention to a complex subject. Each sequence is carefully designed to require students to do the following:

#### **Engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry**

Students in this course use writing to generate ideas as well as explain them. Through writing, students form questions and explore problems as they work toward nuanced understanding of a multifaceted subject. Sequenced assignments serve to deepen students’ engagement with writing and reading, assist them in examining their own experiences and observations, and encourage them to make productive use of their uncertainty rather than come to hasty conclusions.

#### **Address challenging questions about the consequences of their own writing**

This course approaches the essay as a flexible genre that takes on different forms in different contexts. Much class time is devoted to scrutiny of the purpose, logic, and design of students’ writing, which they are given opportunities to revise in response to comments from their teacher and peers. This focus on their own texts increases awareness of what is at stake in representing an issue or problem in one

way instead of another, thus helping students make more attentive decisions as they write.

**Compose thoughtfully crafted essays that position the writer’s ideas among other views**

Rather than merely stating their own opinions, students learn to write essays in which they develop informed positions that reflect understanding of the positions of others. Analyzing as well as summarizing the ideas and writing strategies in assigned texts, students compose interpretations reflecting close attention to their own and others’ specific language choices.

**Write with precision, nuance, and awareness of textual conventions**

Students work on crafting clear, precise prose that effectively uses a variety of sentence and paragraph structures. They are required to learn the conventions for quoting and paraphrasing accurately, responsibly, and adeptly. They are also assisted in developing editing and proofreading strategies that reflect attention to the relation between style and meaning.

As I look carefully at this document, I do understand it as an accurate reflection of what it is said to mean to teach composition at the University of Pittsburgh, and I take very seriously its values. I am also aware, as I look at the language and theory of composition above how very deeply I have been shaped by the institutional context in which I work. And I am aware of the different meanings it might have to teach writing elsewhere. However, I also read this document as reflecting a fascinating tension between the language of skills and the language of disposition, or what I might call habits of mind.

*The name “dolphin” comes from the Ancient Greek. The translation of the word turns out to be something like: the fish with a womb.*

Before I discuss this tension, I want to say a bit more about why I might like to call a set of aims or practices *habits of mind*, as this is an important question that is connected to theoretical considerations I want to undertake later in this chapter having to do with orientation. While a *habit* might be understood to be something automatic, something so automatic the term

is often paired with the word “bad.” Smoking, a bad habit. Biting your nails, a bad habit. Both examples, interestingly, that David Halperin gives of abjection. Many bad habits are abject. But we can also become aware of our habits; we can continue those habits with that new awareness or even form new habits. Unlike practices or skills, habits suggest inclinations, tendencies, even a kind of spirit. Habits might be understood to be difficult to change, and they might actually be; however, I want to consider the idea that habits (like orientations) are more mutable than we often imagine—and that habits of mind are more conceptual than skills or practices. It is true that there are skills and practices associated with writing and with the teaching of writing. Some of them, in fact, are mentioned by the document I provide above. But I want to consider the idea that these skills and practices might not be very useful if, for example, they were used and approached through a one-dimensional framework. That I can execute the “conventions for quoting” in an essay I have written does not mean I can engage with another author in a meaningful and layered way. The parts of the University of Pittsburgh’s Seminar in Composition document that interest me most are those parts that suggests certain habits of mind—*productive use of uncertainty, sustained attention, an awareness of what is at stake*. These are of few of the habits of mind I see above, and ones that are reflected, even if at times called something else, in my own teaching practices.

*Dolphins use echolocation to explore their environment in a blurred ocean world where using their sight is of little help. Their brains make rapid analyses of a complicated environment. Using their nasal clicks, dolphins fire off signals that reflect back to them as soundwaves, and dolphins measures the distance between its body and another by the time it takes for the sound of themselves to return to them.*

There are literally hundreds of books out there that intend to teach students to write or instruct students about what it means to write in the university. There are explicitly rhetorically

arranged readers such as *The Bedford Reader* and *Patterns for College Writing*, which give students a rhetorical taxonomic approach to thinking about and doing writing. These types of textbooks, grounded in the rhetorical tradition, are still best-sellers in the United States. Each of these readers does ultimately propose certain habits of mind, though they rarely call them that, or rarely call attention to the habits of mind they support or endorse. *The Bedford Reader*, for example, describes its own taxonomy as follows: “each of the ten chapters explains a familiar method of developing ideas such as narration, description, example, cause and effect, and definition (Kennedy, Kennedy and Aaron 3). Often composition and writing textbooks focus on “familiar methods” or traditional taxonomies that aim to categorize and label kinds of writing, asking students to practice one kind of writing at a time. I do not want to argue there is no value in teaching in this way, and of course there are a number of successful textbooks that resist these taxonomies—for example David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading* or more recently Richard Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer’s *New Humanities Reader*. Both of these textbooks ask students to describe and name the kind of writing they see and the kind they might do. And I do want to consider alternative habits of mind we might cultivate as we think about our teaching and as we ask our students to think about their writing. David Rossenwasser and Jill Stephen have edited and composed an interesting writing textbook entitled *Writing Analytically* in which they do explicitly call attention to particular habits of mind—in fact Rossenwasser and Stephen do refer to “habits of mind” in a chapter called “Counterproductive Habits of Mind” in which they write to students:

Most of us learn early in life to pretend that we understand things even when we don’t. Rather than ask questions and risk looking foolish, we nod our heads. Soon, we even come to believe that we understand things when really we don’t, or not nearly as well as we think we do. This understandable but problematic human trait means that to become better thinkers, most of us have to cultivate a more positive attitude toward not knowing. Prepare to be surprised by how difficult

this can be. Start by trying to accept that uncertainty—even its more extreme version, confusion—is a productive state of mind, a precondition of having ideas. (18)

While it would not be my approach to cite a “human trait” as a reason for our resistance to uncertainty, I do think Rossenwasser and Stephen are raising an important point—that resisting or ignoring confusion or uncertainty does not make for strong written intellectual work. I want to read Rossenwasser and Stephen as quite purposeful in their word choice in this passage, and I want to pay particular attention to the words “cultivate” and “state of mind, a precondition of having ideas.” I did begin thinking about this course by thinking about the habits of mind I wanted the course to explore and try on, habits of mind that seemed to be essential to good writers and even more particularly to queer theorists *as* writers. Habits of mind can be cultivated; and cultivation is in itself a process, one that must be repeated. Without repetition, there is no cultivation. In the assignment sequence I will discuss in this chapter, I want to consider how those assignments ask (or sometimes fail to ask) students to cultivate particular habits of mind, and how that cultivation might lead to particular successes and failures of writing. But before I talk more explicitly about these assignments, I want to spend some time considering one other way of thinking about these habits of mind.

*I failed one test, to my memory, in grade school. It was a geography test whereby we, as students were meant to label the continents and some important countries inside of them. I remember doodling on the test, tracing over the lines that were the boundaries between one place and another. I could remember so few of their names. The words for each country empty of meaning, missing their contents. Other words I could put things inside. First learning the word “sarcastic” from my brother Michael, when I heard the word, I could put my brother inside of it, his telling me from the top of the hallway stairs: “it’s when you say one thing, but mean something else.”*

## II. ALTERNATIVE ORIENTATIONS

Sara Ahmed, in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, offers me another way of understanding habits of mind. She begins her book with a discussion of *orientation*. She asks, in her very first sentence: “What does it mean to be oriented?” (1). She considers that orientation has something to do with “how we reside in space,” or “to be turned toward certain objects” (1). We might think of habits of mind as orientations. And if orientations have something to do with space, and as Ahmed reminds us “queer theorists have shown us how spaces are sexualized,” then in this sense orientations are always sexual, always the body in position, in relation. Asking someone to change or consider alternative habits of mind may actually be as intimate and confounding as asking one to consider an alternative orientation. For example, Rossenwasser and Stephen are asking students to be oriented *toward* rather than *away from* uncertainty. I use this example because I am asking, in my own way, the same shift in orientation from my students. This understanding of orientation shapes much of the syllabus and assignments that follow. Take this shift in thinking alongside the sexualized and “queer” content of much of the course, and there is no way around the fact that what I am asking students to do is quite difficult, even abject (as my last chapter points out), and certainly controversial. After all, can one just change one’s orientation? Isn’t orientation used often to mean *either you are or you aren’t*? You’re either down with confusion, or you’re not. You can’t *make yourself* see confusion differently. What if you’re *just not attracted* to confusion? What if you were *born that way*?

*I dress up in airports. The airport is already such an unstable and uncertain space. We are without homes, however temporarily, and because of this sense of movement and uncertainty in the travelers, we hold tight to what we know: our bags, our cell phones connecting us to*

*certainties, our social graces, our tickets leading us out of transitional space. So in Detroit I decided on the men's room, knowing how the men do not look up in their restrooms; they look only at the sinks and urinals they are using. Usually, I pass. I have the sense that my body feels male to them, though I don't know why. But when there's not much space between the sink and wall and I (being socialized as some sort of woman) put my hand on a man's back just for moment to indicate that I am passing behind him, the smoothness of my performance breaks down (as it often has in the women's room). He turns quickly around and pushes me backwards. "What the fuck?" He says. "What the fuck?" He says again. We stare at one another. We both cannot tell what we see.*

While habits of mind, or orientations, are not writing itself, I want to argue that without certain orientations, writing in a critical and engaging way is not possible, or at least less possible, without these habits of mind. So what are they? How do they create or cultivate the conditions under which strong writing can grow? What do they have to do with grammar, punctuation, and argument-making? Why are queer approaches or sexual literacies likely or compelling orientations? I want be clear that I do not know what exactly queer pedagogy is, nor do I want to make the claim that queer pedagogies are the *best* ways to teach writing. What I want to highlight is what Queer Theory and queer pedagogies can make possible for the teaching of composition. This does not mean to suggest that Queer Theory is the best or only way of thinking about composition, and it's certainly not to suggest that uncertainty is the sole property of queer kinds of thinking. Composition scholars have been grappling with uncertainty for some time, implicitly or explicitly. But perhaps when uncertainty is valued and expressed through queerer understandings of identity and relation we might begin to imagine new possibilities for writing and for the teaching of writing. And I approach this writing, as I approached the teaching of the course on which it is based, with the same orientation toward uncertainty I ask of my students. "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (Butler, *Undoing* 28).

*Dolphins make several sounds, though they have no vocal chords.*

As I try to return to the documents of this course—its syllabus, class transcripts taken by individual students in the class and student writing—I am in a sense reading them for the first time, reading them for both what I thought I was telling students and what words now seem to stand out as touchstones for the course. Surely, in the course description and a piece of writing I call the “instructor’s statement,” I might find the particular language for the habits of mind and orientations I value. I want to read for my own key terms, paying close attention to the possibilities and impossibilities of my own pedagogical positions and concerns. The course description reads:

This course is perhaps unlike most courses you have taken. It will ask of you a kind of composition that may feel at times uncomfortable, strange or even impossible. The course content is structured around constructs of gender, race, sexuality, the body, writing, class, politics and art. The assignments in this course will ask you to access parts of your consciousness you may not even know are there. They will require you to think critically about gender and its relationship to various cultural and personal identity categories and constructions. The assignments will also ask you to revise, challenge and expand what you know of as “papers.” As you know, “papers” are assignments given by instructors for students to “complete.” I encourage you to think of the writing in this course as prompting you, daring you, even at times provoking you but never to “complete”—only to compose (like a musician, you might say, or a painter, but not at all like a “student”). If you think you might find it interesting to reconsider all you have learned about writing thus far, all you have learned about bodies, about gender, about sexuality and about the world in which you live, you are sitting in the right course.

I am struck immediately by my own perhaps naïve ambition; the course seems to promise (or hope for) a rather life-changing experience for students, my desire shining through despite ten years teaching and learning experience that tells me courses are rarely life-changing. I find in the third sentence a list of subjects I call the “course content”—a list consisting of “gender, race, sexuality, the body, writing, class, politics and art.” At first, I wonder if a one-semester course could do justice to all of these “subjects” at once, or if they are subjects at all. I notice the complicated relationship between what I want my students to know about and what I want them

to be able to *do*. In one sense, I care less about the knowing about and more about the knowing to do because I see knowing and being as a kind of doing.

*The land ancestor of the dolphin is said to have looked like a wolf, hunting in shallow waters and eventually evolving: forelegs became flippers, hind legs became fluke, the fur fell away and nostrils became the blowhole from which dolphins do their conscious breathing.*

But I remind myself again: what writing course is not about the ideas on this list? We do not often acknowledge the possibility that every writing class is, explicitly or implicitly, tied to this list. Every writing class is about identity: the identities of the students, the teacher, the dynamics between the various expressions of those identities in writing and in the classroom. To say otherwise would be to fool ourselves into thinking that our pedagogies, our teaching choices were about something other than ourselves.

*I was lucky enough as a kid. I got to take a class in 7<sup>th</sup> grade called “Human Sexuality.” Mrs. Berger was our teacher, and asked me to stand in the hallway as punishment. I was no able to say “penis” and “vagina” in unison, along with the other kids, without laughing. “Sexuality is no laughing matter,” she said.*

It’s not a surprise to me that my course description seems to value writing as a kind of artistry, asking students to “compose” rather than complete assignments. This language has to do not only with the fact that I am a writer, a poet, but also has to do with the fact that I see myself as a maker, as composing identities *and* composing the writing that represents/ reflects those identities. And I am both interested in and suspicious of the ways I am asking my students to try *me* on, to become the kind of maker I see myself becoming. And I describe this process as one that will be uncomfortable, strange and even at times seemingly impossible, acknowledging,

I hope, the difficulty of reading and writing and the difficulty of becoming something other than what we might already understand ourselves to be.

I am particularly interested now in the verbs I have chosen to use: revise, challenge, expand, provoke, dare, prompt, reconsider, encourage, and think critically. And while several of these may seem benign—seem the goal of any writing teacher—it is the provoking and daring that seem to speak to the “danger” of this course, the possibility for provocation and the opportunity to, playfully I hope, accept the dare. Frankly, I am asking the students in this course to be brave, to look into the face of that which brings them discomfort, fear, bewilderment and even anger. It is a kind of affective, as well as political and intellectual project. This is, I think, a lot to ask, though I have to say, for me, it is an imperative asking.

*I kept a journal in tenth grade. I said, “The other kids who are supposed to be in honors English said Ms. Zuccaro’s class is hard and that she’s strict. I think they only think that because they don’t like poems and stories. Just this week Ms. Zuccaro read a passage from Street Car Named Desire, the one where Blanche says that deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. She says it is the one unforgivable thing. And you could tell Ms. Zuccaro felt the same way; her eyes teared up a bit when she was reading, and so I like her. I like teachers who have feelings, not the ones who pretend they don’t. What’s a kid supposed to think that to grow up means to give up feeling? Grown ups pretend a lot I think. Anyway, this Ms. Zuccaro wears her heart on her sleeve. Ain’t her fault if some honors kids who don’t like poetry think she’s strict. Wanting more from people isn’t the same as being strict. And Ms. Zuccaro likes me I think cause I want more too. And anyhow, that’s really why Holden is so sad too, cause he wants more. And why shouldn’t he?”*

Looking back now at my course description, there is a moment I am troubled by my own writing—puzzled by what I mean and how I mean it. I write: *The assignments in this course will ask you to access parts of your consciousness you may not even know are there.* I am troubled by my own presumptions, as I often am, that students do not know themselves or that there are parts of themselves they do not know are there. On one level, this seems innocuous enough—all of us are in some way in the dark about ourselves, groping in that dark to touch a self we might

come to know. However, my implication that this part of consciousness is already there waiting to be discovered seems, ironically, to go against my own theories and claims about how knowledge is made and produced. My regret here is not so much that I am asking students to go searching for themselves but more about where I am asking them to search. This is a tension I want to read for in the course materials and one I struggle with. Like gender itself, our notions of ourselves are both already there *and* always in the process of being made, a contradictory and paradoxical relation between what we experience as internal and what we experience as external—a question again returning us to orientation, our relation to ourselves and to the world existing simultaneously and inextricably.

The “instructor’s statement” that follows the course description in the syllabus is my attempt at telling students more explicitly about my own interests in queer pedagogies and about what they can expect as far as what I value and what I do not value. What I want is for my students and for myself to attempt to begin in agreement about these values, or at the very least, both accepting that these values are what counts in this course, what they can count on, in a sense. I also try, in this statement, to negotiate a kind of queer authority. I subscribe neither to a critical pedagogy model (in which I am the guide who leads my students into the light) nor to a model whereby I pretend to have no authority—or pretend that my students and I are “equals.” Institutionally, and quite honestly, socially, that is not possible, which is not to say that I am the one who always has authority—the location of power shifts, but I am not afraid to hold it, temporarily, to express, in sometimes more solid terms than I prefer, a kind of certainty about what is valued. Of course, even in that momentary certainty, there is always a kind of paradox:

While I feel it is my duty to create a safe and open classroom environment, I do feel compelled to tell you that I also feel that it is my job to make you intellectually uncomfortable; it is your discomfort and unease that will educate you. I am a scholar of “queer pedagogy” and my teaching style and method is

greatly informed by this field of interest (which we may discuss at various times this semester). By remaining in this course, you agree to spend this semester considering the idea that that which brings you discomfort, that which you might find unthinkable is that which you most need to read, re-imagine and (un)learn. You also agree to treat every member of this class, including yourself, with respect and kindness. We will discuss many difficult and sensitive subjects this semester, and you must be able to remember that it is one another's writing and ideas that are subject to critique—not one another's character or background. As an instructor, I value difficulty and complexity; I value discussion, community, awareness, creativity, rigor and passion. Consequently, I do not find apathy, disinterest, dismissive-ness or reduction to be of value. This semester, it is my hope that we will learn a great deal from one another and that we will also enjoy one another's input, energy and company. If you feel at all unsure as to whether you will be able to discuss and consider the subject matter of this course in a mature, inquisitive and active way, perhaps this is not the course for you. If you feel up to the challenge and responsibility, then I look forward to the distance we will travel together from now until the end of the semester.

I once heard this instructor's statement described by a first-year graduate student TA (who did not know it was mine) as "the S/M syllabus." This description actually seems quite apt if we consider what this actually means in terms of power and if we consider the ways Kate Bornstein situates the power relation in an S/M "playing" context. Bornstein explains that "Most players agree that power is shared, with the top in control but only within the bounds agreed upon and often requested by the bottom. Some say there is a sublime moment when top and bottom together and at once have all the power and none of the power" (122). Bornstein goes on to describe S/M play as "safe, sane and consensual," unlike, she says, "gender," which is none of those things (123). Perhaps this is an uncomfortable moment; perhaps a comparison between how power works in S/M playing seems unsettling, inappropriate even, however uncanny the resemblance might be to teaching at times. But the connection does help to illuminate and understand the paradox of my trying to "create a safe and open classroom," and at the same time demanding a significant amount of risk of my students. In this sense, we must trust one another as players, must, as Bornstein puts it, work "within the bounds agreed upon." This statement is

the beginning of those bounds, which are, in some ways, pushed on and moved and redefined by both my students and myself.

*Surprisingly, when dolphins give birth to a newborn dolphin, there is a kind of midwife called an “Auntie” dolphin, which may be male or female and assists in the birth. This is usually the only other dolphin, other than parent dolphins, who is allowed near the newborn.*

My list of values is very connected to the habits of mind I began with in this chapter. And their relationship to writing is something the course aims to explore and establish. These two documents together, along with the department’s list of goals for a Seminar in Composition I discussed earlier, are essentially the only “rubric” students have. This in itself can make them intellectually uncomfortable, especially those students who have come from rubric-centered writing curriculums where they are asked to demonstrate skills and illustrate competence rather than exhibit or practice some abstract “habits of mind” and I am asking them to trust the process that these changes in orientation will result in new and strong writing, writing that will presumably earn them academic merit and even professional strength. And often students, quite importantly, distrust. They look at me and at the course with the same suspiciousness with which I sometimes look at them. The trusting always a process. And it is my hope that the course does accomplish these more tangible goals, but does not concern itself with them directly, or at least rarely directly. I want here to examine what I see as the habits of mind of this writing course as I designed it through the assignments in sequence and through some of the student writing in response to those assignments. And in order to consider those assignments, it seems useful to begin with the first set of materials of the course: the course texts—that is, the course texts that prompt the more primary course texts of student writing, which I will focus on more primarily in the chapters that follow this chapter.

In her essay, “Unresting the Curriculum: Queer Projects, Queer Imaginings,” Marla Morris writes, “A queer sensibility concerns the reception and reading of a text. The text is a site of interpretation. Thus, there is nothing inherently queer about a text, even if one may read a text queerly. As Alan Block (1995) points out, reading constructs the reader as well as the text. Reading creates the reader: reading queerly creates a queer reader” (Morris 276-277). It is with this complicated understanding of reading that I begin my thinking about the reading my students will do in a writing course. Morris’ claim that “there is nothing inherently queer about a text” may seem at first erroneous. For example, Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, is certainly a “queer” text—it is a book about a transgendered person who interrogates and debunks traditional and stable notions of gender. Certainly, this text is queer in the sense that it is *about* queerness, or can be found in the GLBTQ section of your bookstore or library. However, Morris is concerned with queering as method, with the idea of reading a text (regardless of its subject or location in the bookstore) queerly. If “reading queerly creates a queer reader,” then my one of the goals of my course might be to create more queer readers—to shift students’ reading orientations, or to value different kinds of reading and writing than may have been valued before. This queer reader is not necessarily *a queer*; but this reader is reading queerly.

*A mother dolphin might whistle to her newborn for days consistently, helping the newborn dolphin identify, with more certainty, his family’s call.*

Reading queerly (and writing queerly, which I will discuss in chapter four), requires the habits of mind I try to articulate in my course description, instructor’s statement, and in this project. As *queer* habits of mind, they are, at times, difficult to pin down, but we can do so

momentarily, provisionally. If we cannot do so at all, there is little ground on which to stand, or little, really, we are able to say. The habits of mind I want to advocate are, I hope, visible not only as I describe them, but also in the very writing of this project—its approach or style. Uncertainty, confusion, fluidity, self-reflexivity, multiplicity, embodiment—all tendencies, positions I ask students to inhabit, even if only temporarily, even if I know that ultimately they (and I) will fail at keeping up, that there requires, for all of us, a moment of stability—a syllabus, as assignment from which to respond, a due date (however moveable), or a the name we might give to even the most unstable reading. Queer pedagogies cannot extricate themselves from definition, despite the term *queer* being, by definition, a resistance *to* definition. But, I might say that in order to queer *queer*, we must be able to teach and write along with that contradiction—the temporarily stabilized fluidity, the momentarily singular multiplicity. These paradoxes signal a unique relationship between Queer Theory and Composition Studies, both “disciplines” that spend a great deal of scholarly time trying to name and rename their histories and trying to decide, or undo, what is included inside them as disciplines.

*No two dolphin whistles are the same pitch. Their whistles function as signatures, names. Because of these signatures, dolphins may come to know one another even from great distances.*

The intersections between Queer Studies and Composition studies have been explored for over fifteen years. In a recent *CCC* article, Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace offer a kind of survey of that work in their essay “The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship.” Alexander and Wallace discuss the important political projects taken on by queer compositionists as they describe what they see as three movements in this area of inquiry: “confronting homophobia, becoming inclusive, and queering the

hetero/homo binary” (300). I honor and appreciate the political work of these three movements, yet I am primarily interested in the affective, creative and intellectual work Queer Theory offers to Composition. I do not mean to suggest the political and the intellectual are separable pursuits (or that my concerns are not political—they surely are), but I do want to explore queer(er) possibilities for *writing*, for teaching *writing*. So far the scholarship in this “queer turn” has largely been about the movements Alexander and Wallace describe—about combating heterosexism, about including GLBTQ voices and students in conversations about identity and composition, and about troubling the gay/ straight binary. The course I designed surely has components of these movements; however, it is my primary goal to extend queer impacts on composition by bringing queer theorists themselves in the conversation and by investigating the possibilities of queer pedagogies that are not necessarily attached to *queer* texts or *queer* people. Few of the texts Alexander and Wallace note as touchstones in this queer turn take queer theorists as the center of their inquiry. In fact, few of them cite queer theory at all. And as Thomas Piontek asserts in his book *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*, “the relationship between queer theory and gay and lesbian studies has been anything but simple and harmonious” (2).

*Dolphins have a limbic system, and are said to have emotions, and even, some levels of consciousness about those emotions. Some have even argued dolphins to be compassionate beings, conscious of even the fear and playfulness of others, humans even.*

It is later in the article where Alexander and Wallace talk about queer compositionists developing, along with their students, “a new understanding of what it means to take literate agency in a postmodern world” (301). It is this last gesture forward where this book and this course wants to intervene, or interfere. I approached this particular composition course with a

concern that students “take literate agency.” And in a sense, the course itself might be viewed as an inquiry into what it would mean to do such a thing. And what does this literate agency have to do with queering as a methodology? I would contend that the most celebrated and interesting writers have queer methodologies, non-normative approaches to body, identity, reading and writing. And this course seeks to teach students to do the same—to become provocative, creative, queer and literate agents “in a postmodern world.” While Alexander and Wallace discuss this literate agency, they do not focus particularly on what agency might mean in a queer context; it is important to think about how we might understand agency (our own and our students’) or what a queer understanding of agency might be. Butler puts it this way: “That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility” (*Undoing* 3). Butler’s understanding of agency here leaves open the possibility that agency is both possible and constrained, empowered and limited—or to put it another way, that limits are the conditions from which agency might emerge, however impossible that may seem. After all, while I want my students to become the “literate agents” Alexander and Wallace mention, I also know the paradox that is the condition of their agency: limitations designed by me, assignments written by me, habits of mind required by my course, texts chosen by me. I become part of my students’ paradoxical agency.

*I ask myself why I was so fixated on making sure that my dolls were ok that I made them enough food to eat in my pretend kitchen. I remember naming my baby doll Katie and saying phrases like, “Do you have enough to eat?” or if she was crying, “It’s ok baby. Mommy’s right here.”\**

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\* from Laura Cadge’s “Cinderella and Racecars”

In addition to Bornstein's book, there were three other main texts of the course: *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) by Michael Warner, *Tootsie* (1982) directed by Sydney Pollack, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989) by Peggy McIntosh and a collection of music selected by me as a text for the course. The disc of music included some "famous" songs ("Respect" by Aretha Franklin, for example), some popular music of the last decade ("Cater 2 U" by Destiny's Child, for instance) and several more underground tunes ("My I.Q." by Ani DiFranco among them). The students also read small sentences and paragraphs (which will appear later in chapter four) from some of the major queer theorists and philosophers of our time—Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, Martin Buber, Edward Said, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Gayle Rubin, among others. While many of these texts might be said to be queer materials, some of them would not likely appear necessarily in a Queer Theory course. And I was very interested in what might happen with those less than queer (or unlikely to be described as queer) materials once students had learned to engage in the process of queering, to practice queering as a habit of mind.

I began thinking of the sequence of assignments in this course as being informed not only by Queer Theory and queer materials, but also as teaching students a *way* of thinking, a way of thinking I have been calling "habits of mind," a complicated and queer lens through which to imagine what they see, read and write. It was my sense that this particular approach might create possibilities for writing, queering the essay itself as an academic task. I first saw some of the possibilities for this kind of work in *Ways of Reading*, the "textbook" from which I taught my first four composition courses at the University of Pittsburgh in 1999. And I think of my own teaching project in this course as a hybrid, informed by composition and Queer Theory simultaneously and dialectically. I would agree with Bartholomae when he writes:

A sequence of assignments is repetitive. It asks students to write, again, about something they wrote about before. But such a project allows for richness; it allows for the imagination that one thing can lead to another, that the world can give and give. This is an idea hard to pin, difficult to say, and, perhaps, offensive to some. (190)

Certainly, I would first acknowledge that this course might prove “offensive to some,” asking students to repeatedly come back to the body, to sexuality and to identity. What I hear Bartholomae saying in this passage is a reframing of revision so that aside from having students return to the same paper over and over as they try to reshape, revise and edit that particular piece, revision can also be a return to particular ideas or to particular habits of mind. In my course, students are asked to return to themselves, to identity, to fluidity as kinds of revision. The queerer, the more flexible our thinking becomes, the more we are able to “write, again, about something [we] wrote about before,” but this time we write it queerer, rich with new possibilities. The assignments in this course were repetitive in that they ask the students to consider, again and again, the context and contingency of their own thinking, reading and being; this self-reflexivity is part of the habits of mind that are asked to inhabit as they read and write. The repetition is not merely the returning again and again to a given subject, but the repetition, more importantly, is a return again and again to these habits of mind. Rather than only attaching the course’s assignments as some sort of addendum to this dissertation, I want to move through some of the assignments in sequencing, noting the repetitions, noting the queer possibilities, potential, and, of course, failures. I want to begin here in the voice of the body (some version of my own) that composed these assignments, and in the coming chapters turn to the student voices as they respond to and grapple with the project at hand.

*So as not to die in their sleep, dolphins rest one side of the brain at a time so the side of the brain that is wakeful remembers to breathe.*

### III. BECOMING ORIENTED: ACTIONS, LABOR, PRACTICES

*In high school, I had a job at the local roller rink. It was, for the most, my job to regulate the speed of the skaters during public skating sessions. The worst part of the job was evening skate: this is when each song was designated to a particular group. There was “girls only skate” and “boys only skate.” There was “couples only skate” and “athletes only skate.” It was my job to blow the whistle, and say, “Hey you, off the floor, couples only for this skate.”*

In her essay, “The Question of Social Transformation,” Judith Butler argues that “theory is itself transformative,” but also that “something besides theory must take place, such as interventions at social and political levels that involve actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice, which are not quite the same as the exercise of theory” (204). I want to frame this sequence of assignments as part of the “actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice” that are both the effect of and reason for theorizing. So then what actions, labor and practices (another version of those habits of mind) do the assignments value, or even devalue? In what transformative directions to they attempt to lead students?

The assignments I draw from in this chapter were the first five shorter writing assignments given to my students during this course. I have not changed any of the language, trying as best I can to preserve my intentions, my theoretical influences, my failures and assumptions. The longer essays students composed will appear more fully in the chapters that follow. For the purpose of this chapter, I want to try to articulate the logics and various habits of mind and orientations informing the course. I want to make visible what aspects of Queer Theory and queer pedagogy shape my understandings of assignments and of students as writers. After reading both Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master’s House” and Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (the first two readings in the course),

students were given the following assignment as their first formal writing assignment in the course. The assignment reads:

Track your responses as you are reading Peggy McIntosh's article on white privilege. How are you responding to the article, and more importantly, why might you be responding the way that you are (here I am looking for something about YOU, not about Peggy McIntosh)? In other words, what about you might be causing you to respond this way? What connections can you make between Peggy McIntosh and Audre Lorde? What do those connections help you to see? How can you take a "queer" position towards these texts, meaning how can you position yourself in relation to them in a way you consider unusual, maybe uncomfortable? What do these texts say about you? Why should you care about these texts at all?

Looking back, I can read this set of questions as brave, or, as brazen—or both. The first questions I ask my students are, in a sense, quite personal ones—ones that ask them to embrace a habit of mind that suggests their reading practices and interpretations are about *them* and not only about the text itself they are reading. It also asks them to trust that I can hear their answers. And while I did ask these questions, and while I think I would ask them again, I am aware of the parts of this question that require a kind of personal disclosure about their responses to notions of privilege. The questions also suggest that what we read is about us. And this can seem, quite literally untrue. We might even say some people read to escape from themselves, or even that we read to find out about things *other* than ourselves. I want to entertain the possibility that both the escape and the search for what is *other* than ourselves is always about us—that even when I myself am completing some sort of required reading for a course, that reading is about me. I do not mean to suggest the book I am reading is about me, but that through my interpretations and responses, my *reading* is always about me.

*My mother had been sneaking me to hockey practice for weeks, telling my father she was taking me to what was called, in this particular Catholic suburbia, "Religion" (when children gather at a neighborhood house and some volunteer parents tells stories about Jesus). I learned more in*

*the locker rooms than on the ice. I was alone in there. I was the only “girl” on the local ice hockey team. I’d stand in front of the full-length mirror. My body changing with each knee pad, each shoulder pad, the black hockey skates, and finally the blue and yellow jersey. I could make the little girl in me die peacefully, even knowing I would have to revive her. For my mother’s sake, I would have to breathe back into the little girl; I would have to push on her chest until I could hear her heart beat. She would learn a bible verse on the way home. She would recite it for her father. She would dress up as his daughter.*

There are a variety of ways teachers have tried to ask the kinds of questions that disorient or shift how a student reads or looks. And many of these questions ask students to think about themselves as they read. Amy E. Winans, in “Queering Pedagogy in the English Classroom: Engaging with the Places Where Thinking Stops,” poses these questions: “How do I feel and what do I know about this topic? Where does my knowledge come from? What is unknown to me? What is unthinkable to me and why? Questions like these are central to queer pedagogy because they help students learn both *that* knowledge is created and *how* knowledge is created” (104). It is interesting then to pose these questions with/ against other important questions that have been asked by composition assignments. Bartholomae and Petrosky, in *Ways of Reading*, encourage students to ask: “Where am I in this? How can I make my mark? Whose interests are represented? What can I learn by reading with or against the grain?” (282). My first writing prompt asks students to think a lot about themselves reading, to take responsibility for their reactions to a text—noting the ways they are responding that belong to them and *not* to the text itself. To think of oneself as “making a mark” on a text is to think of oneself, in some sense, as relating to a text in one direction. I had hoped my assignment to be dialectical, asking students to consider their relation to the text, to consider who they imagine themselves being or becoming as they are reading it. Both Bartholomae and Petrosky, and Winans, are concerned with students finding themselves *in relation* to the text. However, Bartholomae and Petrosky’s question *Where am I in this?* is quite a different question from the ones Winans asks. Theirs is

an orienting question, one that asks students to find a location, to orient themselves in relation to what they are reading. This is not an unproductive or uninteresting question to ask, but it is a question that asks students to find a location and to “make a mark” on the text from that location. Winans’ set of questions, on the other hand, is more overtly epistemological *and* ontological: questions of knowing and being. She begins with an affective question: *How do I feel and what do I know about this topic?* In a sense, this question is quite connected to Bartholomae and Petrosky’s question of *Where am I in this?* It is asking students to think about their response and relation to the text. But Winans’ follow up questions take the inquiry a bit further, asking students to think specifically about their *knowledge*—where it comes from and what it means. She asks students about what they *do not know*, marking this question as being equally, if not more, important than what they *do* know. Winans’ uses the word “unthinkable,” making the suggestion that there are things that, for each of us, are unthinkable, *and*, quite ironically, that we can think of those things that are unthinkable *if* we ask ourselves to do so.

*In tenth grade, my Social Studies teacher, Mr. Gish, breaks it to me not so gently, standing six feet tall in front of the overhead projector, which he uses to say everything. Everything he was going to say glowing in the light of the screen. Christopher Columbus. Bulletpoint. Was a famous explorer. Bulletpoint. The Nina and the Pinta and the Santa Maria. Bulletpoint. Is known to have discovered North America. Bulletpoint. Did not discover North America. Bulletpoint. Brought disease and assaulted the natives. I’m sick with imagining myself in the first grade. I had drawn pictures of his boats. I had drawn him beautifully in a green hat, looking like a magical harmless little leprechaun, standing proudly on the shores of the United States. This is the first time I will know what it feels like to be historically implicated.*

Deborah P. Britzman, in her essay “Is There a Queer Pedagogy?” puts it yet another way, “The question a reader might ask is: who am I becoming through the interpretive claims I make upon another and myself” (163). This question, of course, is echoed in my above assignment when I ask: what about you might be causing you to respond this way? Looking back, I wish I

had seen Britzman's language again just before writing the assignment because, my question seems a bit more static than I would have liked, suggesting that there is something about a reader, something that is a thing and not a process, which causes them to respond in some specific way. Britzman's question is, in this sense, queerer than mine; she marks the interpretative process as a kind of becoming, a moving process.

As Queer Theory has imagined identity as a constant state of becoming, I want to and try to, to varying degrees of success, imagine my students as readers and writers in much the same way. The question that directs students' attention to their reactions and who they are that might effects their reactions is a question of becoming; it is a question that invites an affective as much as intellectual project. I ask my students to assume all texts are saying something about them. *What do these texts say about you?* The question is complicated. It is not a literal question, not a question that means a text about 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of homosexuality is literally about me, for example. But, of course, as I read this text, and respond to it, my reading becomes about me. I do not assume they should care about what the texts, or their reading, might be saying about them. *Why should you care about these texts at all?* I myself don't always care. This first question tries to signal to students that the course is about them, is somehow about their responses; however, it is not their project to describe their responses. It is their project to contextualize and interrogate their responses, looking closely at the material conditions of their lives that inform their reading and writing practices. I began with the hunch that to see oneself reading, or be asked to see oneself reading, might cultivate the habit of self-reflexivity, one that interferes with reaction, one that calls students' attention to the act of reading itself and disrupts the act of writing. Bartholomae writes, "I think a good assignment teaches by interfering. It interferes with a student and his [sic] writing" (185). He writes this in an essay about

assignments, one in which he is examining Tolstoy's notions of writing and teaching. I read Bartholomae's notion of "interference" as a kind of interruption; for Bartholomae an assignment that interferes is one that interrupts the student as she experiences "all those available phrases" . . . that turn her "vision into an occasion for cliché" (186). Or, put another way, if composition teachers want students to resist reliance on cliché, to push on the already available ways of thinking and writing about a given matter, it becomes our burden to write assignments that interfere with the processes of reading and writing, assignments that demand something other than what is already available, assignments that ask for the *unthinkable*, assignments that interrupt even a student's vision of herself. Queering is a particular kind of interference, an interference that calls attention to the reader, and in a way to the text as well, as movements, as kinds of becoming.

*It's no fun to be yellow. Maybe I'm not all yellow. I don't know. I think maybe I'm just partly yellow and partly the type that doesn't give much of a damn if they lose their gloves.\**

While Lorde's and McIntosh's essays are more explicitly about race than they are about gender or sexuality, the course begins with an attention to normativity and the privilege and abuses associated with normativity. Students noticed of themselves, for example, feelings of defensiveness, guilt, anger and even righteousness. Students noted their refusals and affirmations, and did some rather interesting thinking about where those responses had come from—citing their own various racial and gendered identifications, and in some cases even their parents' identifications, as reasons for their reactions. Jennifer Bracken, in her response writes:

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\* from J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, as said by Holden Caulfield.

Reading [Peggy McIntosh's] article was hard, but writing about it later is even harder. There are so many things in this article I wish I could deny, but I can't. The article makes me feel very uncomfortable with myself, even now that I have read it through numerous times, because I must look at myself in a perspective I'm sure others have seen that I didn't even know existed. (1)

I read Bracken's response as an attempt to try on the habits of mind of the assignment. Bracken is both aware of her own inclinations ("I wish I could deny"), but at the same time able to imagine not only how she sees herself but how "others have seen." This piece of writing is taken from a one single-spaced page response; it is not "an essay" per se. Part of my goal with the shorter assignments is to take away the notion of the "essay" as something students know or have done, to call it something else for a moment, to give them practice. In this course, we called these shorter writings "compositions." Another student writes, "I can hear my dad as I read and he's saying stuff like, 'don't listen to that liberal bullshit' and 'this is America, everyone's equal.' And like all daughters, I am part my dad, but I am also part myself" (2). One way to read this student's writing is through the lens of Bartholomae's notion of interference—the student becoming conscious of "all those available phrases . . . that turn her "vision into an occasion for cliché" or that turn her vision into her fathers. What amazes me about my students, time and time again, is their capacity already, here in their first assignment, to become and take on contradiction: the student becomes both her father and herself as she reads. Another student, Kelsey Fagan, describes her initial "defensiveness" and asks, "who was [Peggy McIntosh] to tell me that even though I don't perform acts of hatred against people of different races that just by living in the world that I do that I am supporting a form of racism?" (1). Fagan goes on to articulate the her feeling of being "tricked"—the sense that no matter what she individually does, "systems make it not matter" (2). I am struck again by another student's capacity to articulate contradictions, to struggle with them on the page—her actions both do and do not matter, she is

both not participating in racist acts and part of a racist system. In her reading, she is becoming, as we all are, paradox.

Those reactions and insights about their own becoming through their “interpretive claims” became an element of their second assignment as they moved on to read *Gender Outlaw*, perhaps the most radical of the texts they would encounter, not only in its particular theoretical arguments about sexuality and gender, but also in its unapologetic explicitness (open discussions of sex acts, pornography, sex changes operations, etc.) as a means through which to describe gender itself as a violence done to us. In this assignment students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

In your syllabus, I make the following claim: “it is your discomfort and unease that will educate you.” As you read the first assignment in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, mark passages where you are having difficulty. Perhaps your difficulty is one of understanding, perhaps one of discomfort, perhaps some other type of difficulty you’d like to address. This assignment asks you to consider your discomfort. What is making you uncomfortable and why? Is it at all connected to what made you uncomfortable about the first two essays we read? I also want to remind you about some of the ways you responded to McIntosh and Lorde. Some of you described your responses as guilty, angry, defensive, enlightened, shameful, etc. How is this reading experience different and why? How do you position yourself in relation to this book? What does the book make of you? Who do you become when you read it? If this book is about gender itself, what (so far) is Bornstein trying to say about gender? How is she saying it or what is her writing style? If what she is saying is true, what does that say about you or your own sense of gender identity? Remember you cannot answer all of these questions. They are here as guiding prompts to help you think through your reading process, the ideas you are coming into contact with and your responses to those ideas. You should quote from Bornstein during your composition and try to engage with the ideas in the text.

After their first assignment, one of the things that came up as we discussed a few student papers in class was the idea of what it meant to “engage with a text” rather than just quote from it. And while this is an idea we worked on repeatedly all semester, I want to focus here on one aspect of “engaging” with a text that this assignment highlights, and that aspect of engagement has to do

with difficulty. I cannot read this assignment without noting its indebtedness to the projects of Mariolina Salvatori and her work with students on difficulty—projects that theorize what difficulty means and how a reader and writer might engage with difficulty in ways that make new creative and critical readings possible. In “Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition” (1996), Salvatori describes what she calls a “difficulty paper” in which students are asked to write a one-page description of “any difficulty the text they have been assigned to read might have posed for them”(448). My assignment asks my students to do the same, to describe and think about what is difficult about the text, about the act of reading it. Salvatori discusses this assignment as one on which she “repeatedly relied . . . not as a means to expose my students’ inadequacies, but as a reflexive strategy that eventually allows them to recognize that what they perceive as ‘difficult’ is a feature of the text demanding to be critically engaged rather than ignored” (448). I would also say that what they “perceive as difficult is a feature” of their becoming, their process of being themselves that is also “demanding to be critically engaged rather than ignored.” The culmination of their attention to the difficult of the text, the difficulty of becoming the reader of that text and that difficult of what both they and the text demand or expect makes for a complicated reading, and ultimately, a more complicated way of writing about that reading and about the readers they are becoming *as they read*.

I thought of this assignment as a kind of interference, queer interference. To understand what might be the difference, I am reminded of Eve Sedgwick’s claim that “something about *queer* is inextinguishable. Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root—*twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (xii). I want to read Sedgwick’s definition of *queer* beside Bartholomae’s earlier claim

about sequencing assignments as being “repetitive,” a kind of recurrent or eddying. And I also understand Bartholomae’s discussion of interference to be connected Sedgwick’s linking of *queer* to *troublant*. In this sense, I am quite drawn to Bartholomae’s sense of what it means to teach a student to write, to think about writing, to move through a repetitive and spiraling set of assignments—assignments that are kinds of eddying movements. And of course, Bartholomae even goes on to tell us this idea may be “difficult to say” and even “offensive to some.” It is at this moment of possible offense, at this moment of *athwart*—a word in English that is a more aggressive and even perverse notion of obstruction or “interference”—where I want to bring attention to the queerness of this assignment, asking students to re-interpret their understandings of their own genders through the lens of a radical transgendered thinker who has told them, even if rather gently (if this is possible), that their genders are unreal, made up, wild and elaborate illusions. And I am struck, again and again, by the notion of “becoming” in these assignments—something I must admit I had not realized repeating to the extent that I did. *Who do you become when you read it?*

*Dolphins and tuna often travel the same sea routes; they agree on the directions, on the cartography of the ocean. But the dolphins, despite their sonar senses, can get caught in the tuna nets. The struggle can cut them fatally, or if they struggle too long, the entangled nets can suffocate them.*

In *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, Moya Lloyd offers her reading of Butler’s sense of “becoming.” She writes:

One of the merits of the idea of becoming a gender is that it suggests that gender is not to be thought of as imposed on subjects, as it is sometimes characterized within feminism (as when authors talk of women being “culturally constructed”). Consequently, as a way of thinking, the idea of becoming a gender poses a challenge to the idea that gender is passively produced by patriarchy or forced on subjects by the phallogocentric symbolic. Becoming implies, rather, that

gendering is an achievement of some kind that gendered subjects themselves engage in . . . gendering the self involves a “purposive and appropriate set of acts, the acquisition of a skill. It is a project, a skill, a pursuit, an enterprise, even an industry. For these reasons, the concept of gender as becoming introduces the idea that gendering, in part at least, is a self-reflexive process. (38-39)

In this sense, I want to read my assignments, and propose a theory of reading and writing, as a similar kind of *becoming*. After all, writing has long been, problematically and otherwise, described as an achievement, a set of skills. And compositionists have long been engaging about what those skills are, how to teach them, whether they can be taught, whether they can be called skills at all. Becoming, however, is a contradictory kind of project—one in which one is at once a constructed subject and an agent of one’s own construction. My question to my students about who they become when they read is an attempt to get at the heart of this contradiction—that they are at once constructing a text and being constructed by that text, that they are at once constructing a self and being constructed by whatever self they had constructed before. Becoming is a constant statement of movement, transformation. It is, as Lloyd notes, a “self-reflexive process.” I ask my students in the course description to think of themselves not as students completing assignments, but as composers, makers, agents of their own making even in their constructedness. In this sense, one of the shifts in orientations and primary habits of mind I want to give precedence to is for the course to be “becoming oriented”—oriented toward becoming, in Butler’s sense of what that becoming means.

As for students, very few of them answered the question “who do you become when you read it?” directly. But we spent some time in class talking about how the responses they did write were already an answer to this question. For example, Krystin Moltner began her response like this: “The source of most of my discomfort is the inability to know how to respond to this book. I was taught how to multiply numbers, how to write formal essays, how to set up an

experiment or an equation—but nothing I have learned thus far could have possibility prepared me for how to react to the things Kate Bornstein is saying” (1). Moltner volunteered to share her opening with the class, and wrote this, her first sentence, for us on the board.<sup>3</sup> I begin by asking: *Who is Krystin becoming in this sentence?* There is some silence. Perhaps because the question is difficult, perhaps because it feels strange to draw conclusions about who Krystin is becoming. After a few minutes, Danielle says, “Uh, she’s becoming a person attached to form?” This is not an answer I expected, but its possibilities seemed promising. *What do you mean?* I ask. Danielle explains, “Equations, set ups, numbers, essays, all that stuff is things fitting into forms.” We spend some time in a class discussion about what features (using Salvatori’s understanding) of Bornstein’s text might lead us to become attached to form, to become a person clinging to forms. This discussion concluded with Johnnie Hart noting, as students packed up belongings: “It’s a lot easier when you think about who Krystin is becoming as temporary, like we’re not actually saying who she is.” And of course, we are not positioned to say who Krystin is, or even who she might be becoming, but we may be able to describe her becoming as it is reflected in her reading. And Krystin says, walking out, “It was cool to hear what I was doing.” Becoming, after all, is also a kind of doing.

Certainly, this sense of becoming reflects also my understanding of revision. In the next assignment, I ask students:

Look carefully at your first composition assignment. This assignment asks you to close read your own writing. Pick a passage where you feel you can interrogate or question yourself in some of the ways we were questioning passages today in class. What more did you need to define or say? What could you have said instead? What's more complicated the second time around, looking at it now? You may use my comments in the margins to help you do this, or you may choose to address parts of your writing that I didn't address. It's up to you. This assignment

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<sup>3</sup> The class discussions I describe in this project are drawn from transcripts of class discussions. The students in the course took turns recording transcripts of each class meeting, as best they could.

is not "tell Stacey what's wrong with your paper." It is a chance for you to push your own thinking and writing further, for you to try to give your writing the precision and attention it deserves. Ultimately, you need to try to answer the questions: *what do I sound like? What kinds of things do I say? Why do I say them? Who do I become when I write one way or another, or when I read one way or another? What advice do I have for myself after these first few weeks of class?*

I want to ask students to see revision not only as a process of looking back at their own writing, but also as a process of looking back at themselves in order to make self-reflexive moves explicitly *about* their own becoming—becoming a gender, becoming a reader, becoming a writer. One way to think about becoming in the context of this prompt is to think about how language might be said to reflect, contain (or, mostly, to fail to reflect and contain) our becoming. Asking students to see their writing and interpretative moves as a kind of becoming is also asking them to think about the connection between language and ontology, a connection quite embedded in the work of Queer Theory as a discipline. And it is important to queer understandings of pedagogy that students see themselves as a becoming, a contingent arising. If students begin their reading or writing by valuing only fixity and certainty, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to compose engaging prose. They will write five-paragraph essays giving very solid evidence about what appear to be very solid things. This is not a becoming; it is, rather, an *already became*. The next assignment in the course, then, asks students to *become* on several levels by both imitating the style of another writer and by inhabiting some of the voices that may have contributed, or tried to contribute, to their own becoming. The assignment is in response Jamaica Kincaid's short fiction titled "Girl." The assignment reads:

After reading Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," try to write a short one single spaced page essay that imitates hers. Hers is a list of instructions (that seem to be in the voice of a mother or an authority figure) about what it means to be a girl. You can choose any identity category you like. So you could call the piece "Girl" or "Boy" or "Gay Man" or "White Girl" or "Christian Boy" or whatever. Then try to give a

list (like Kincaid's) of instructions one might get on how to be this identity. You can get creative and specific with it. Notice the images in Kincaid's piece. Notice the detail. Try to imitate the style and specificity of her short essay. Try to have fun with it.

Students, by this point, had been writing about their becoming as something happening in the present, for the most part. They had been writing about the selves in my class who were reading, and thinking less about the events, experiences and ideas leading up to that self. If we take to heart Luhmann's description of queer pedagogy (which appears as the epigraph to this chapter), any one interested in queer pedagogies would have to ask certain epistemological questions about how we come to know. Luhmann asks: "If subversiveness is not a new form of knowledge but lies in the capacity to raise questions about the detours of coming to know and make sense, then what does this mean for a pedagogy that imagines itself as queer?" My assignment above—and it was my hope for many of the assignments in this course—is one way of answering that question. Subversiveness may, at first glance, seem like a political goal (and of course I do not want to try to argue that it is not, or that I don't have political concerns about reading, writing and the literal circumstances of our world), but I want to read this notion of the subversive as a significant habit of mind, an orientation that can lead to compelling and complicated writing in the context of this course. And if we take Luhmann at her word that subversiveness "lies in the capacity to raise questions about the detours of coming to know and make sense," then this assignment tries to call attention to those "detours" of coming to know, tries to (through the imitative form of the assignments) ask students to "raise questions" about these detours. Students seemed, after the last assignment that was geared toward revision, to see this assignment as a revision as well. One student, Iggy Kelly, said in class: "It's like we revised our papers, and then after doing this Kincaid thing, we had to revise ourselves—or at least face how we became ourselves. Something like that." While I have not included any of the student

writing of this course in this particular chapter in hopes of providing all at once the orientations and habits of mind that informed the course design and assignment sequence, I do want to include here Iggy Kelly's piece entitled "White Roman Catholic Boy." Kelly writes:

Take Communion: This is his body, this is his blood; no this is not cannibalism, it's figurative and sacred; Go to Confession; Do not lie in Confession; Do not bring action figures into Confession; No, I will not be Shredder from Teenage Mutant Turtles®; Barbies® dresses as nuns are not appropriate either; No I will not be holy Ken®, either; Where did you even get the priest garments that small? You sew? What are you, a pussy? I do not wear a dress! Do not call what I wear a dress, dresses are for women; There are no women priests; The brides of God are nuns; No, you cannot marry one; No, you cannot be one; No, they cannot divorce God; Yes, divorce is allowed; No, baby priests are not made by priests and nuns; Stop asking stupid questions! Listen to my sermons; Do not sleep during my sermons; No, that is not the reason the seats are so hard; this is not a black church, we do not clap to the hymns; No that does not mean we do not have fun; Well, not that kind of fun; Fine, no fun in church; You worship in church; Worship is not fun, it's necessary; many things in life are necessary, few things are fun; Sin is not for fun; Sex is not for fun; Sex is for procreation; Do not masturbate; You cannot procreate with a tissue; Do not even try; God creates life; God is not going to create a tissue man; God created man out of clay, yes, but that does not mean he might do it with a tissue; It just doesn't work like that; Yes, God can do anything; he is the creator of heaven and earth; He is the Almighty Father; no, I am just "father"; Well, you should respect God more than you respect me; You must respect me; You must honor me; Yes, you must honor your mother and father; No, I am not your actual father; God is not your father, either; You are a child of god; No, that does not mean he is your father; He is the Father, and the Holy Spirit, an the Son at the same time; You cannot be more than one thing at a time; You cannot be more than one thing, you are only as God made you; Do not wear a dress, that is not how God made you; Abortion is wrong; War is wrong except sometimes; Abortion is always wrong; Love thy neighbor is right; Loving thy neighbor like that is a sin; Prostitution is wrong; I don't care what the Popes did with prostitutes; the Pope knows the will of God; Okay, so he doesn't always listen; You need to listen more; Boys do not wear makeup; Christ is not wearing makeup in that picture Alter boys do not wear dresses; Alter girls do not wear dresses, either, unless that's what they have on underneath; No, you may not wear a dress underneath; I will know and God will know; God is not Santa Clause; Yes, he sees you when you are sleeping, yes he knows when you've been bad or good; No, that still does not make him Santa Claus; No, Jesus is not wearing a dress; What is it with you and dresses? I don't care if Jesus was black, God is not black; After Confession, pray the Hail Mary prayer; Do not pray to Mary, pray to God; Go to mass on Sunday and Holidays; Do not eat before you go to mass if you want to receive Communion; No, you may not have seconds on the body of

Christ; No, you may not pop out for a bite to eat in the middle of mass; If you don't die right after Confession, you are probably going to burn in Hell.

Of course one of the first things to say about Iggy's prose is to note the ironic, sharp and elegant writing of this student. Iggy is a strong writer. Iggy has an interesting sense of "becoming," enacting for his reader the contradictions of all becomings: *You cannot be more than one thing.* This message about fixity and singularity is one that came up for all of the students—whether they were writing about being a part of a kind of marginalized identity or being a part of a kind of privileged category. Many of the students seem to recognize and offer commentary on the contradictions, paradoxes and impossibilities of being what they were expected to become, given the names and identities they had been given; some wrote about gendered expectations, religious expectations, class status. I read each student, like Iggy, as having a sense that these categories failed, even when they succeeded. Queer Theory and queer teaching practices seemed to offer the students a way of contending with those contradictions, so that instead of focusing on the parts of their becoming that seemed solid, they *raised questions about the detours.* They challenged even their own assumptions, or exposed even their own confusions about "coming to know and make sense." Following this assignment, we considered the following quote (a passage I refer to in this chapter itself) from Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* for an entire class period. I wrote on the board: *That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility.* This is largely the way Queer Theory texts appeared in the course—as brief and excerpted materials up for discussion on any given day. This appearances not only gave students a chance to practice close reading as a group, but it also gave them the opportunity to consider the grammar and logic of Queer Theory in relation to what might be possible in their own writing. The "close reading" I refer to in the context of my class is a way of referring to a sustained attention to the moves and language of

sentences or short passages of sentences, and a way for students to see, in one sentence the shifting possibilities of what is there in the text and what it might *mean*. Anne Berthoff puts it this way:

Close reading teaches that the transactions with the text are always tentative and subject to the pragmatic maxim: "If we take it—metaphor, syntax, word, line—this way, what difference would it make to the way we read the rest of the poem? the opus? the age?" Close reading is entailed in critical reading. It is not an elitist, nose-to-the-text, words-on-the-page pedantry but the way of attending to the interplay of saying and meaning. (677)

This passage from her essay "Reclaiming the Active Mind" helps me to think about this "interplay of saying and meaning." Her attention to reading that is "tentative" is also part of my understanding of close reading. To be clear, the passages I offer students on the board, which are often short but complicated and layered passages, are not close reading because they are out of context; it's merely that the context in which we read them is the course itself. Shifting the context is not necessarily part of Berthoff's, or even of my, understanding of close reading, but I think it could be—the *opus*, the *age*. We look at Butler's sentence about agency closely, grammatically, and semantically. We try to find out what she *could* mean and what that meaning would then *mean* for the course, for writing, for gender, for our lives. Another way worth thinking about close reading in the context of the course I describe is connected to Joseph Allen Boone's conception in *Libidinal Currents*, where he writes that both the act of sex and the art of writing "are not only overpowering but expressions of absolute powerlessness, enacting the intense human desire to let go—to be released, to yield to an "other" (a lover, a text) that ceases to remain other in the imaginary intercourse that is constitutive of sexual and fictional exchanges alike" (1-2). While I don't think Boone's sense of sex and reading is the only way to conceptualized their relationship, I do find his claim fascinating. He agrees with Berthoff and

with Salvatori, in fact, that reading is an exchange, a kind of conversation, but Boone layers the understanding, linking reading itself to sexuality, which inevitably takes reading back to power.

*We give words power to have power over us by depending on them to define us—in defining us, though, these words limit our scope on the world.\**

The shorter writing assignments that are the focus of this chapter try to follow the habits of mind and orientations I value—contradiction, interference, repetition, becoming, self-reflexivity, sustained and returning inquiry. At this point in the course the students were to view the film *Tootsie*, a comedy classic 1980’s gender-bending film starring Dustin Hoffman. It is at this point in the semester that something troubling, and quite interesting happened. As students moved from the texts we were discussing—their own and the authors we were reading, something changed in their reading when the film was put in view. The discussions surrounding the film seemed reductive. Students were interested in seeing the film as “ground-breaking” and “troubling the norms” as Kelsey Fagan put it in her response. In watching the film, what became apparent was that there seemed no moment where students wanted to trouble the ways normativity was reaffirmed or perpetuated even as it was seemingly disrupted. It seemed that as I turned the students’ gaze from the more “intellectual” texts of the course to the more popular representations they see everyday, it became more difficult for them to find moments to disrupt, or interfere in the film’s logic. I don’t mean to suggest that a student needs to find this film troubling in order to write about it, but I am suggesting that if the troubling aspects are not visible, then it will be difficult for the students to write papers that are nuanced and complicated. If the only thing to say about *Tootsie* is how wonderfully it shows the breaking of gender norms,

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\* from Amanda Cardo’s essay “All About Them Words”

the essays writers could write are minimally uncertain, and surely those essays would not be raising questions about knowledge or exercising the kinds of habits of mind I have outlined here. It is at this moment that I would write what would prove to be the most troubling assignment of the semester—perhaps the one I wish I could most revise. I gave students the following prompt:

The following quote is from the “TeachWithMovies.com” website, which is geared towards teaching students probably a little bit younger than you. The website says:

*Tootsie* is about a man becoming a better man by experiencing what it's like to be a woman. The film explores the different ways in which people conduct themselves and perceive life, based on their gender. It also leads viewers to think about some of the differences and similarities between men and women.

The TeachWithMovies.com Learning Guide will show teachers and parents how to use this hilarious film to teach boys not to mistreat girls and to teach girls to be less tolerant of male misbehavior.

Write a response to this website in which you tell the authors of the above passage why the film is more complicated than the portrait they have painted above. You might do this by having an argument with the quote (both what it says and how it is written), by pointing out other things (having to do with gender and sexuality) in the film that the un-critical eye might not see, or by close-reading the above quote to provide an interpretation of what it would mean for girls and boys to use the film as “instructions.” You might think back to your own work with instructions (in your longer essay or in your shorter imitation of Jamaica Kincaid). What is contradictory, complex or even dangerous about the film’s “instructions” about how to be a “man” or a “woman”?

I would not be so naïve to say that the assignments prior to this one were not leading assignments, but I would also say that this assignment is the most leading of the group I have offered so far, asking students to take an already established position in relation to a text written about the film, a text that had, in some ways, taken the positions many of the students had taken in class. My intentions seem good enough—that I wanted to students to see the film in a more complicated way than they had upon first viewing, that I knew (or thought I knew) their first readings of the film were not going to produce compelling and creative essays about the film. However, the assignment seemed, ultimately, to fail to follow my own rules about uncertainty,

and about the students having self-awareness about their own readings. I did not, for example, ask them who they were *becoming* while they watched, or who the film supposed them to be. I did not ask them what the film wanted, or how it might shape both conventional *and* subversive notions of gender. I noticed, through this assignment and through some of the other work in the course I want to discuss, how difficult it is to cultivate the habits of mind I am asking students to adopt or consider. I notice, again and again, that these habits are a process, a continual reinvention of what seems to be right in front of you. In this sense, my teaching is no different from this scholarship on teaching you are reading. I try, with earnestness and intention, to keep the ideas moving, keep them slipping from my grasp as I reach for them. But there are moments the ground does become solid, even if this solidness is fleeting. In this sense, both the course and the theoretical tenets of queer pedagogies call attention to both the vital need to disrupt normativity *and* the essential need to develop and understand norms—even if only to disrupt the norms again in the end. Perhaps Judith Butler says this best when she writes:

My difficulty will emerge not out of stubbornness or a will to be obscure. It emerges simply out of the doubled truth that although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose. (205-206)

Of course it is at these moments that I return again to my own investments in this particular course and in teaching in general. I know, always, that there is a part of these queer methodologies and pedagogies that belong to my own desires—my desires to *queer* understandings of this world so that I might live more safely inside it. My assignments, then, are not objective, not merely a set of intellectual practices I believe in as ways of teaching writing, though I do believe in these intellectual practices; my assignments reveal themselves, perhaps most especially in this fifth one, as trying to orient students in the direction of what might be a

more “livable world,” as Butler would call it, for a great number of people. In this sense, the course is highly politicized, and quite connected to the very roots Alexander and Wallace describe in their essay. I say this not as the confession of a queer teacher who is invested in queer subjects or queer lives; after all, every teacher is invested in their version of what makes a livable world and their version of what makes a productive thinker, a compelling writer. I say this to keep in my mind, as I try to write about and think about my teaching and my students, the ways a particular lived body frames an understanding of pedagogy. I say this to offer the same self-reflexivity I ask of my students. I talked about this assignment with my students. I asked them: *did you notice anything different about this one?* And Danielle offered an interesting answer: *I don't know about the question, she said, but when I starting answering the assignment, it felt like there was nowhere to go.* Nowhere to go. No movement. No opportunity for movement. The question that positions the students already (however much time or however many number of revisions it might save them of some particular essay) sets the students up to stand fixed and solid far longer than a queer pedagogy would aspire and far longer than a compelling and complicated essay would allow. Uncertainty, like the dolphin's breathing, is not a reflex. We can, as it were, forget to do it. But it is imperative that we do.

#### **IV. QUEER(ER) METHODOLOGIES**

Asking students to think queerly, in order to read queerly, and finally to write queerly is, in a sense, asking them to try on a new identity, a queerer reading and writing self. And as is often the case in Queer Theory and in the study of identity, none of these categories of thinking, reading and writing can be separated out from one another. There is no such course that *only*

*teaches writing*, whether a person might claim a course to be so or not. Even if there are no texts in a course other than the texts students themselves produce, this course is still about reading, about thinking and interpretation. And in the course that is the subject of this book, students are asked to inhabit and engage with queer ways of doing these seemingly familiar practices. In the Foreword to Susan Talburt and Shirley R. Steinberg’s book *Thinking Queer: Sexuality, Culture and Education* (2000), William Pinar, the editor of *Queer Theory in Education* (1998), tells us, “The appearance of ‘queer thinking’ in the field of education is recent, its formulation in an early stage, even as the political hour feels late” (x). While Talburt and Steinberg’s book was published nearly a decade before I am writing this book and nearly seven years before the course this book takes as its material subject, the formulations of queer pedagogies and queer thinking can still be said to be in these early stages. Part of the reason for this lies in the description Alexander and Wallace provide of the movements in this queer turn in composition, and I take as part of the project of this work to move from queer subjects, queer materials to queer methodologies, queer ways of knowing that I want to argue can ignite and inspire queer ways of writing.

*When I was in preschool, I went through a phase where I would only wear dresses that twirled. My mom said that every morning I would get up, put a dress on, and always make sure that when I spun in a circle, the dress twirled. If the dress didn’t twirl, I wouldn’t wear it.\**

Why would we want to write queerly? We need only imagine the queerness of those texts we most celebrate—their contradictions and complexities, their refusal to signal

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\* from Danielle Pennington’s “Pink Dresses and Blue Jeans”

monolithically, their violations of form, their even at times perverse disruption of what it means to write a novel, an essay, a poem. We respect writers who write queerly. And it puzzles me why so many course readers and syllabi asks students to write in ways they would never want to read. And as I think about this approach as a methodology, as a way of teaching writing, I am reminded of Ann Berthoff who says in her book *The Making of Meaning*:

Although a method can take the form of a list of steps, such a list is not necessarily a method. Like language itself, method is reflexive; it is dialectical by definition: *meta + hodos, about the way* . . . Without an understanding of dialectic as the heart of a method, we are doomed to see one after another promising technique disappear without ever having been given a fair chance. (51)

I cannot, or perhaps I would not, offer a bullet point list of the steps one takes in order to perform the promising techniques of queer pedagogies. To make such a list would be to make linear what is not linear; it would be to suggest as whole what is already incomplete; it would be to formulate notions that slip through my fingers as they take form. The nature of writing in Queer Theory means to me that one writes with a deliberate conscious intention to disrupt oneself, one's reading, one's teaching and text. I can say that I hope to shift my students' orientations, to scandalously encourage them to be queerer than they are—queer thinkers, queerer readers, queerer writers. And it is my contention that queering as a method holds a very important and powerful place in composition studies, adding to an already layered and complex discussion of how and what we teach when we teach writing. As Bertoff says, “method is reflexive” and that “dialectic” is at its heart. When Queer Theory becomes more integral to composition studies, when Queer Theory's relationship to writing is dialectic and dialogic, what our students say and write may surprise us in new ways.

### 3. BECOMING LIQUID: READING AND WRITING LIKE WATER

The highest motive is to be like water.  
Water is necessary to all living things.  
It asks nothing in return.  
Rather it flows humbly to the lowest level.

Nothing is weaker than water,  
yet against those things which are strong and hard,  
nothing can surpass it, nor stand in its way.  
May we all learn the way of water.

From the Buddhist “Dedication of Merit”

#### I. QUEER LITERACIES

In a sense, without queer interventions in sets of dominant discourses—about gender, about philosophy, about sexuality, about identity, and about teaching—many of us, and our students, might be living lives we do not recognize or cannot articulate. I begin with gender, as we all do, and as my courses do as one possible line of inquiry in thinking about queer interventions in writing pedagogies and in thinking about how students might develop sexual literacies that have the potential to offer them alternative ways of looking at the world and their writing within in. As Jonathan Alexander tells us, in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, “Learning how to talk fluently and critically about sex and sexuality composes a significant part of becoming literate in our society” (2). Alexander’s book focuses

on what it means for students to have or enact sexual literacy. And I read his discussion of literacy as a layered one—one where to “talk” about or look at, say, an advertisement or film, is a particular act that makes up the layers of literacy. And like Alexander, as a teacher of composition, it is my belief that this “talking about” and “looking at” are part of a constant literacy process, one at which reading and writing are at the center. Alexander seems to use the term literacy as, at times, interchangeable with fluency or understanding. And while I do not necessarily think that literacy *is* fluency and understanding, per se, I do think Alexander is pointing to a very complicated and important aspect of what it means to read and to write compelling prose. As the focus of this chapter, I want to consider literacy as bound to notions of thinkability. I am interested in exploring the ways that what is thinkable, or imaginable, is part of the process of reading and writing. And for the purposes of the course I designed, we might say that I am asking students to consider their own gender literacy, one of the first literacies most of us learn, practicing as children telling the *difference* between boys and girls, studying the rules and markers of this sacred difference.

In Tai Chi practice, there is both philosophy of movement and movement itself—not to be misunderstood as separate. We practice, in our movement and in the world, the principle of non-dualism. This refers to things that appear distinct while not being separate. It is inseparability, inextricability. The body stays balanced through this principle after learning to root. The body is simultaneously one whole and its parts. When I block, I block with my whole body though it may appear that the arm or hand is doing the blocking on its own.

One of the first essay assignments in my composition class asked students to write a history of one of their identities. I asked them to talk about how they learned what it meant to *become* some identity. They responded to this assignment after reading Kate Bornstein’s *Gender*

*Outlaw*; this essay assignment was done after the shorter writing assignment I discuss in chapter two. The assignment grew out of my interest in queering culturally valued binaries by investigating the very taken-for-granted gender literacies. In a sense, the assignment asks students to tell a story they may not have thought of *as a story* before. The stories of our genders can seem obvious, invisible even, to many students—except for those few students who have not had this luxury, students whose gender has not been taken for granted by others, students who have visibly and perceptively *failed* at their genders in the view of others and have known that this particular sense of failure was indeed connected to notions of gender. I point to the importance of this failure being *visible* to others because, in the end, I believe we all fail at our genders—that gender is set up, in fact, *so that we fail*. No one, after all, can be a complete and perfect man, or a complete and perfect woman—at least no one I have ever seen. But if the failures of gender are not visible *as* failures, then gender is not a story, gender is an *is*. In other words, gender is imagined as specifically *not* a story, not a becoming; it is thought to be an *is*—to be, rather than become. If students can become curious about this invisible story of how one *becomes* a man, or a woman, or some other identity, they can perhaps begin to understand something about the ways identity and knowledge is made—not merely to expose identity *as* made but to see and articulate *how* it is made. Part of the project of any teacher interested in queer pedagogies is to first call attention to the literacy practices that have been taken for granted as natural (so much so that these ways go without question) without our full knowledge, consent, or even conscious participation. I am interested in the ways my composition courses engage with queer theory, which in turn seems to invite queer theory to speak back to the work of teaching composition and even to the work of writing itself. I take the work of composition to be the work of fluid, nuanced, embodied, and conscious readings and interpretations. This work

embraces bodily, readerly, and writerly contradictions as moments of productivity rather than problems. And I take writing to be a reading. In other words, in the act of writing, students are reading—both offering a reading and *doing* a reading.

*Several doctors have told me they can “fix my voice” or “thin out my hair follicles” with female hormones. There is, of course, no medical reason for this. Though it seems to make them feel better to offer me a gender consolation prize. I am hard for them to look at. They wish I would shave my legs, or grow the back of my hair at least down to my shoulders. They do not know why they feel this way.*

In the first longer essay assignment in my course, I ask students to consider the following prompt:

We have talked extensively thus far about the makings and complexities of identity in terms of race and gender, specifically. We have heard from McIntosh about the category of privilege, from Bornstein about the socially constructed nature of identities. Begin to think about how your race and/or gender identity has been made, constructed—by yourself and others. This assignment asks you to tell the story of your own making: for example, how you became a “man,” or how you became a “woman” or “neither” or “white” or . . . the list could, of course, go on and on. You should seek out the origins, instructions, influences, decisions, forces, and complexities of the makings of whatever identity you choose to write about. You should quote from at least one of the relevant texts from class at various moments in your paper in order to try to put the story of your gender-making, for example, in conversation with Bornstein’s. This assignment, please understand, is not: how did you become the great woman you are today? This is not a success story, or a tragedy, or a tear-jerker film about your destiny; this paper is a careful analysis, study and reflection on the way you have come to know about some aspect your identity—the epistemology (remember this word?) of your identity. The titles might be something like “The History of my Woman-ness” or “A Long White Journey,” etc. etc. Your writing should illustrate: your understanding of the texts from the course you are working with, your ability to quote from and close-read passages from at least one of the texts we are working with, your willingness to ask critical questions of yourself, your level of consciousness while you write, your ability to write in a “voice” that is NOT generic or spoken by the infamous “Paper God,” and your composition of creative and complicated prose. Good luck. And try, as much as you can, to get something out of this process. As Amanda reminded us in class, writing may be able to lead somewhere else, somewhere we might not have thought it could lead. Remember what Annie Dillard said, it’s “a surgeon’s probe” not a scalpel.

In reading this assignment again now, I notice first the language of the course itself—the terms my students and I, together, develop in order to talk about writing. While I often choose most of the readings and assignment due dates prior to teaching a composition class, I do write my assignments *during* the semester. My students write, and I in turn, write back. I am drawn to writing assignments in this way because it allows a kind of movement and conversation during the semester. Different sets of students develop different vocabularies, and I find it useful to use the vocabulary of the class, rather than only a vocabulary *I* might give to *them*—though, of course, there is some of that going on as well. For example, I offered them the word “epistemology” as something worth talking about and thinking through as a writer. But my students gave me the term “Paper God” as a way of describing a “voice” they often hear, or voice they sometimes believe a paper for a course should “sound like.”

*In many places, and for centuries, Tai Chi has been learned by observation. A student shows up and begins to watch the sifu practice—imitating or tracing the teacher’s movements. The student may do this a long time without knowing the names of the moves they are doing, without knowing their martial applications, and without an understanding of breath or energy work. All of these layers of knowledge are essential to the practice of Tai Chi. As beginners (and this could last as many as twenty-five years), students imitate Tai Chi.*

There are things I wish for this assignment now. While, for instance, I use the word “become” when asking students to tell the story of their identities, I see now that this “become” could signal a finality—as in you “become” some identity and now you *are* that identity. I wish, in retrospect now, that *I* had written even more reflective of the ways I was asking *them* to write. And I am aware, especially now, after having taught the course, of how complicated what I am asking students to try to do actually is—it’s difficult, not just because writing is difficult, but because it is hard to remember, to remind oneself again and again, to undo stability—or at least

to mark it as momentary. Despite the various ways I see myself struggling to write an assignment in some of the same ways students struggle to respond to them, my students always surprise me, always destabilize my assignment further and respond as, in many ways, my teachers. Part of the follow up work to this assignment was to write a reflection that thought through what it was actually like to write this essay and why it was difficult. I asked them, after they turned in these papers and expressed some struggle in writing them, to write a response to the following:

Many of you expressed difficulties in writing your first paper. Some of you talked about the specific challenges of trying to recall or remember things from your past that might have constructed the various identities you wrote about. Write a one-page reflection in which you discuss your difficulties with the assignment. What was most difficult and why? What does the difficulty reveal to you about the identity you chose to write about? Can you imagine ways to deal with those difficulties as a writer? Was the assignment even possible? What is missing from what you wrote? What do those absences mean?

One student, Amanda Cardo, responds:

I knew Bornstein was right to say that gender is non-consensual. I know that no one ever asked me if I wanted to be or liked to be a girl, but I think the paper was so hard because **I had never even thought to even ever ask the question** if I liked it or not. And it was hard to write a “history” of how I learned to be a girl when **I don’t know how I learned to be**. I just **never really thought about it**. It just was. Which is weird because kids ask questions about everything like why is the sky blue and where do babies come from and all of that, but what kid asks what being a woman means? She doesn’t ask, she just watches and learns. **But I don’t think that makes being a woman a made up story that isn’t real.** (Emphasis Mine, from *Reflection on Essay 1*, Assignment)

There are several interesting and valuable things happening (or perhaps beginning to happen) in Cardo’s thinking/reading/writing that seem to highlight the relationships between queer theory and composition pedagogy. Cardo calls our attention to reading practices and strategies of interpretation that *prevent* her literacy even as she is trying to enact it. Cardo notices that her strategy for reading her own gender has been one of acceptance, absorption and

unconsciousness. *It just was.* These strategies are *one* way of reading, one way of reading that prevents the kind of critical and inquisitive reading practices that help shape articulate and complicated writers.

There are possibilities rising out of the above student text that Queer Theory might call our attention to in a particular way. And I want to consider first the notion of “thinkability.” Cardo seems interested in the fact that she had “never even thought to even ever ask the question” and that she “never really thought about it.” I want to first suggest that we understand Cardo’s response not as casual but as a serious interpretation of her difficulties with the assignment. Cardo observes something about Bornstein’s text (that its claim that gender is non-consensual is true in some way) *and* something about her response to the text (that she had never considered this possibility before). She notices the ways in which the process of gender-making has been invisible, and she begins to articulate some of the conditions of its “invisibility.” Queer theorists have long been interested in ideas of thinkability, legibility, and possibility—as have writers; after all, what kind of writers would we be if we could not imagine what seems unlikely, disparate, even impossible? Part of what I consider to be my job as a teacher of composition is to disrupt the terms of possibility and thinkability and to ask students to participate in practices of reading and writing that question the stories we all tell ourselves about identity, stories in which we craft our identities (or the identities of others) as thinkable or unthinkable. Literacy, for me, means that more must become thinkable, readable, including the idea that what is unthinkable is not there. Certainly identity is quite connected to whether that identity can be imagined and by whom, to whether the identity is recognizable and of course whether such identity is even possible (to say, to name, to think).

*To practice Tai Chi is to transform the body into the water it already is. This cannot necessarily be taught. Its layers are felt and experienced by the student. Sometimes this understanding is fleeting.*

Judith Butler has deep concern about and has done quite complicated thinking about these connections. She writes, in *Undoing Gender*, “the articulation of the possible . . . moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable” (28). If we think about Cardo’s response to the assignment as trying to “move beyond what is actual and present into a realm of possibility,” what good does that do us as teachers of writing? And what good does it do Amanda Cardo for me to think about her work in this way, or respond to it with these concerns in mind? I would like to suggest that these question are deeply connected to questions of imagination. In this sense, I think of literacy as inextricably linked to imagination in that what can *be* imagined is what one is able to consider or question. If we cannot even imagine ourselves asking a certain kind of question about ourselves or the world, this lack of imagination can become a lack of literacy, can become the prevention of the very literacy I want to foster in my students work. What I am trying to describe is quite cyclical. One needs an ability to imagine possibilities beyond what one already knows, but in order to learn to do this, one needs to imagine possibilities beyond or outside of what one already knows. What is Cardo able to imagine and why? How can I facilitate what she is able to imagine? How and why would I want to encourage her to not only ask the questions she had “never even thought to ask” (an issue of interpretation, of being taught which questions to ask of a text), but also to encourage her to explore the *reasons* she “never even thought to ask” (a question, perhaps, of epistemology)?

What Queer Theory and sexual literacy (or perhaps in this context we might call it gender literacy) offers to the teacher in this composing moment is a way of thinking about and

responding to Cardo's writing, a way that highlights and values how she has come to know, or even how she has come *not* to know. It is common practice to think of literacy as resulting in a gaining of knowledge or forming new knowledge, but we must also consider the possibility, as Cardo calls us to do, that being literate in gendered cultural norms (or other types of often unquestioned versions of normativity) means learning how to *not know*, how to *not ask*. Or, put another way, it means to practice a literacy that precludes other possibilities for knowing and being. This is a literacy, but it is not a queer literacy, not a literacy that leads to the unthinkable, the unimaginable. It's not, then, that many of us are sexually illiterate; it's that the literacy practices we have learned (however invisibly) when it comes to our bodies, when it comes to identity and gender and sex, are practices of *not knowing*, practices where to know *means* quite literally *to not notice, to accept without question the conditions* given to us, the conditions of our very possibility. For some of us, particularly those of us who are queer, or who live outside the terms of these conditions of possibility, teaching students to become more conscious about these invisible literacy practices is not merely a matter of stronger and more complicated papers (though it can help to produce or encourage those); it is a matter of survival.

## II. LIQUID INTERPRETATIONS, FLUID LITERACY

One way of thinking of the kind of literacy I am arguing for is by thinking about literacy practices that approach the world as a solid (something fixed, stable, simple) and thinking of practices that approach the world as a liquid (something fluid, mutable, difficult to pin down). While I understand the process of reading and writing as always *both* solid and liquid at once, for the purposes of my teaching I focus my attention on fluidity. If this particular culture has taught

us that gender belongs to the solid category, this means it need not be read or interpreted. We might hear Cardo again: *It just was*. But becoming literate in the current moment might have more to do with fluidity; it might have more to do with coming to terms with the idea that nothing, even that which appears so convincingly solid (like gender), is solid. It is all a kind of fluid, and to see the world as a moving force, to see a text this way, to see ourselves and our writing this way is to engage in a kind of reflective literacy. Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it this way:

The real question is whether one sees the function of reflection as bringing something to awareness in order to confront what is in fact accepted with other possibilities—so that one can either throw it out or reject the other possibilities and accept what tradition de facto is presenting—or whether bringing something to awareness *always dissolves what one has previously accepted*. (34)

While I am resistant to Gadamer's notion that we might "either throw out or reject," because this seems to be a pretty limited way of understanding what might happen at the moment we encounter a text, I am interested in the moment we come into contact with what challenges, affirms, resists or does not fit in with our prior knowledge of ourselves or others. Certainly, both Bornstein's text and my assignment seem to call up this moment in Cardo—the moment when "bringing something to awareness" begins to disrupt her view of gender. This moment of disruption is a crucial one in which Cardo begins to see what she reads, even if she reads herself, as difficult to pin down. However, Gadamer questions whether what we ultimately "decide" (for example, whether Cardo decides that gender is a non-consensual sham or whether it is still "real" or some version of both or neither) in this process of "reject or accept" even matters. Can we be in the act of literate understanding if this act has *not dissolved what one has previously accepted*? In other words, if my students don't end up subscribing to some different notion of the world, then have they done any real interpretative or writing work at all? In thinking about Queer

Theory and the possibilities of queer pedagogy, I am most interested in this verb "dissolved"—to cause to disappear or disperse. And I think if we are defining "dissolve" in this way, then Gadamer is correct in saying that we are reflecting even if our previous understandings have not been "dissolved"; I do not want to *dissolve* my students or to repeatedly ask them to adopt the worldviews of the texts they might read. For me, this kind of dissolving is never even possible; the former understanding of world or self never dissolves in this way, never disappears to be replaced by another. However, if we understand the definition of *dissolve* as *to make or turn into liquid*, suddenly I find myself able to insist that interpretation always involves this "dissolving," always involves movement—the kind of movement solids are not capable of. Our former understandings (for example, Cardo's understanding that being a woman was something that "just was") will never, ultimately, disappear, but when they become liquid and fluid as opposed to solid, it makes them moveable; it makes them open to flowing, to evaporation (which is a *not* disappearance but a change in form). They are, then, in however small a way, transformed in the various ways that something which is not solid might be transformed. It can make it nearly impossible to interpret or understand if our previous understandings are solid, unable to be moved or reshaped. The act of writing is a liquid act, a fluid act. Queer pedagogies have the potential to address and enact this very fluidity. And if students begin with some of the most "sacred" solids we are—bodies—other transformations might seem almost obvious. But how do our perceptions or ideas or identities become liquid? Is it a predisposition? Something learned? Something suffered? Something that can be taught? I am arguing here that it *is* possible to teach students (and to teach ourselves) to "become liquid," to approach literacy as a fluid process.

One of the first texts my students encounter—the text Amando Cardo responds to at the start of this essay—is Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*. Bornstein posits a complicated argument for

gender *fluidity*: “the culture may not simply be creating roles for naturally-gendered people, the culture may in fact be creating the gendered people” (12). While the notion that there are gender *roles* is one I find most of my students to be familiar with, the suggestion that biological gender may also be “created” is a more complicated claim, one that can begin to dissolve scientific truths that, now, feel so self-evident. So, if Gadamer encourages (and I do as well) reading to be an exercise in “dissolving,” what better way to do that than through an argument that attempts to make liquid one of the things many of us find most solid and obviously solid—gender. There are men and there are women. End of story.

*I remember only a few class discussions from high school, but I defended Holden Caulfield with certain passion—despite his obvious sexism, his arrogance and all around bad attitude. “He lies all the time,” many students said. But I remember not reading the lying as lying. I remember reading Holden saying: “It’s partly true, too, but it isn’t all true. People always think something’s all true.”*

But when students read Bornstein, or if they allow themselves to *read* Bornstein, the body itself can seem at risk, understanding is at risk, the notion of self is at risk. Readers can become disrupted—personally, politically, educationally, even physically—by Bornstein’s assaults on the meanings of bodies. *Gender Outlaw* requires its readers to do a great deal of work in order to question, interrogate and explain some of our most cherished assumptions; the text itself moves around on the page—the sections moving (as this text I am writing moves) from interviews, to quotations from others to scenes from comic books to photos to lists of elaborate sexual ribbon systems to descriptions of Bornstein’s own life. The text itself can make visible the act of reading, the strategies of interpretation we are used to using as we read may not work—formally or otherwise. Students are often jolted by the text, surprised, even offended—perhaps at the crux of what is thinkable and what is unthinkable, with the very paradox of what it

is possible to think about, and therefore write. And it does seem to me that much more needs to be written about the risks, limits *and* possibilities of teaching right at the crux of what is imaginable. Imagination, after all, is also something most of us teaching writing hope see rising up in our students' work.

I want to highlight that what I am describing as *fluid* literacy is not one where I want my students to arrive at the conclusion that gender is constructed, though this might happen. The constructed is not the opposite of “authentic” or real, though the constructed is unavoidable (Cardo seems to recognize this to some extent); it is the constructed's “how” that I must teach in order to encourage the kinds of writers/readers/thinkers who will move into a world understanding both the power and paradox of their own agency and who will become agents of queerer, more deliberately disruptive literacies. Queer pedagogy offers a particular epistemology, illuminating both an introduction to and an example of the kind of methodologies that expose the “how” of knowledge-making, identity-making, even literacy-making. To guide Cardo towards revising the assignment she reflects upon, I might try to pose questions that help her to imagine the “how” of her “I don't know how I learned to be.” Students sometimes learn how to address the question of how they come to know through *evidence* or *support*, but Cardo's search for evidence of how one *becomes* a woman is not a simple one; it's not matter of finding the passage to quote from; it's not a matter of research; it is a matter of contingent arising, a matter of positioning and understanding the writer as one involved in the act of making possible what seems impossible.

*To learn Tai Chi is also to learn to be present—to be entirely and concentrated in one moment. To be a mirror to yourself, or a window. I have heard poetry described in this way.*

Queering literacy, then, involves understanding literacy as bound to seeing and articulating possibility, even when there seems little room to do so; it involves troubling the very binaries on which our first experiences with literacy are based. Cardo, after all, does write the assignment that tells the history she fears she cannot find. She is enacting the very literacy she fears she cannot describe, though she enacts it in a surprising way. Here is a longer excerpt from Cardo's first essay in response to Essay # 1 I described earlier. She titles the essay "All About Them Words," and writes extensively about what words *do*. For me, the essay, in many ways, reimagines my assignment, responding in ways I had not anticipated:

To be transgendered is to decide consciously to not subscribe to one side or the other of the "bi-polar gender system," as Bornstein affectionately dubs it. This is looked upon by the dominant culture as "queer" because transgendered is neither of the two acceptable genders. "People are genuinely afraid of being without a gender," says Bornstein (58), but transgendered people take that fear and transmute it into an action that pushes past borders of definitions. People are afraid because to not have a gender identity is not to be recognizable by the dominant culture, and to not be recognizable by the dominant culture can have consequences of not being accepted, of not being wanted. This fear is real for many, I know it is for me. So I, like many others, crawl into the box-like definition of gender and holed myself up there for a long time, cramped but happy because I had the company of others who did the same. I considered myself a "tomboy" at times, but never a boy or man. Here language and words fooled me by convincing me that there is a very solid, impervious line between man and woman, and one could not be a little bit of each. No one could be a man *and* a woman at the same time.

But everyone *is* a little transgendered. Everyone does something that can be seen as a little queer, a little different from what is expected of their gender. There is absolutely no denying it. Girls burp loudly at dinner or get in fist fights, which falls under the definition of "man" or "manly." Some guys wear perfume and style their hair and enjoy babysitting, which I've found seem to be covered by the umbrella definition of "womanly." These little aberrations tend to be overlooked or classified as just little "slip ups" and not considered important to the identity that lies below them, but what does this say about language? That the terms "manly" and "womanly" aren't all-inclusive or exclusive, because someone who is "womanly" by definition can commit something "manly" and still be considered "womanly" or a woman. Language fails us here because it denies the fact that even with a solidified definition of woman or man, deviations in actions or notion can change the definition. This then makes definition obsolete, doesn't it? How can something have a solid, reliable definition that is constantly

changing? It can't, which begs the question: why rely on language and words so much?

So where does that put me? What influenced me to be who I am today? Words did. I pledged, we all pledged, our lives to them, to definitions that keep us confined, and within those confines I belonged to a group that made me feel welcome and cared about. In feeling cared about, accepted, I didn't question the box I was in; rather, I enjoyed the company I kept. My family made of a word. At the same time, though, I did question the borders of the box by being a tomboy, by playing ice hockey, by getting in fist fights and by partaking in more "masculine" activities because I was bored with the activities that were limited to women. Language changes because we change, ideas change, morals change, and word's meanings change. So, gender can change, apparently literally as well as gender as a concept. I was made into a woman by words, words of my parents, of the television, of books, of my friends and foes, fellow women and opposing men.

Now, I am Amanda, inevitably influenced by words because they are our only means of describing what is truly going on in our heads . . . words are all we have, but they can only do so much to say what we really mean.

I am struck by Cardo's turn to language, and as I read through the papers that responded to this assignment, Cardo's explicitness about how language shapes identity is unique. And, at first, I wondered if her philosophical inquiries were also a way of avoiding the *story* of her gender as the question puts it. But rather than imagine Amanda as not telling that story, I begin to see the ways in which her paper explains why it is a hard story to tell using the language available, and the ways in which her paper gets to the heart of the question. When I say that responding to this assignment, or writing itself, is a matter of contingent of arising, I have in mind some of the moves Cardo makes in this paper. Cardo struggles to hold many aspects of the self in mind as she writes, acknowledging her fear ("I know it is for me") and her "cramped but happy" position inside the "box" of a gendered life. One way to read Cardo's essay is as a kind of response to this "being cramped" and as a way for Cardo to write her way out of the box—not to become something other than herself, but more to continually become herself: "Now, I am Amanda." And her read her saying of her name at the end of the piece as a kind of contingent arising. She is Amanda "now," and Amanda is an identity that more easily moves and shifts. Amanda is a

writer who moves and shifts. This paper not only thinks about how gender is made, but also about how a world is constituted through language—an idea that I take to be one of Queer Theory’s primary pathways of inquiry, a pathway, that is always complicated by Queer Theory’s imperative to contend with the body as it expresses our genders, desires, and renderings.

I must admit to flinching as I read: “But everyone *is* a little transgendered. Everyone does something that can be seen as a little queer, a little different from what is expected of their gender.” I flinch because this moment happens frequently in my courses—the moment where many students decide that everything and everyone is queer. And my response itself is a contradiction: I am both interested in their finding the queers in themselves (and everywhere), especially as readers and writers, but I am also conscious of how easily the term loses its meaning once it points to everything, even though Cardo is not wrong—it does point to everything, to all of us. But still that “everyone is a little transgendered” seems reductive, solid in a sense, even as it describes us all as *not* solid, not solid genders. It’s more that everyone is a little transgendered and also that everyone is not. And I read Cardo’s final sentence as grappling with this paradox when she explains that words “can only do so much to say what we really mean.” I want to help my students extend the reach of words, to help them say what seems unsayable. And I want to consider that when Cardo writes about “what we mean” that she suggests not only what we mean *to say* but also what *we* mean, how we come to mean. Just in Cardo’s asking: “How can something have a solid, reliable definition that is constantly changing?” I hear the questions of the course, the questions of *my* life echoing in her essay. Yet her paper, in a sense, answers this question, struggling to find the language to describe definitions that can change, solids that can transform to liquids, a once woman who is becoming Amanda, who is both tomboy (boy) and woman. And I think this articulation of possibility, this

doubled truth makes her paper a *queerer* piece of writing, a piece of writing that engages with the complex work of being present *as a becoming* as one writes, keeping the self in view as she writes.

William Spurlin explains that *queer* “functions as a mode of analysis and as a strategy of opposition that circulates in culture and disrupts not only normative ideologies pertaining to sexuality, but . . . the family, childcare, the body, health care, censorship, health and reproductive politics, citizenship, national affiliation and neo-imperialism” (10). Spurlin’s extensive list highlights the ways in which “queering” becomes a “mode,” a way of looking at the world—and perhaps also a way of reading and composing a world. Cardo, I believe, enacts this composing above, trying to work inside the contradictions of language and being. Spurlin connects this mode to “opposition” and “disruption.” Queer pedagogy offers some alternative ways to understand opposition (resistance) and disruption (a kind of liberation from what has been thought) as I have tried to begin outlining here—ways of understanding these terms as situated and complicated. Literacy, then, if we understand it as connected to interpretation to the work of Gadamer, must contain some aspect of interruption. I am reminded of David Bartholomae’s statement, which I first visited in chapter two: “a good assignment teaches by interfering. It interferes with a student and [with] writing” (185). I want to offer an understanding of literacy that hinges on this interference and bring Bartholomae’s significant assertion into contact with the particularly queer understanding of gender and interpretation I have offered here. In this sense, queering literacy might mean to interfere with readers’ understandings of gender, and consequently interfering with readers’ ‘understandings of themselves—their bodies, their interpretations, their reading and their writing. My assignment tries to interfere with Cardo’s understanding (of writing, of gender, of herself). Cardo’s response also interferes with my

understanding (of story, of queerness, of my own affective and embodied investments in my courses). In this sense, my students and I, ideally, interfere with one another. I understand strong writing as writing that disrupts normative understandings, that calls into question something that seemed not a question at all, writing that, grammatically and structurally, struggles to articulate its own ideas.

I want to understand more about how to ask students to engage with what they have not yet thought, to try to compose what seems un-composeable, to say those things they cannot say, to see (of themselves and of the world) what has thus far been invisible, to see, to use Cardo again as an example, womanhood in some new and not-before-imaginable way. Doing so, I believe, can *teach* not only the ability to imagine possibilities or the ability to *dissolve* into liquid what we see, but also situatedness, positioning, a particular kind of questioning that enables students to read, interpret and write in more creative *and* critically conscious ways. In this moment, students (queer identified or not) can enact queerer literacies.

### III. QUESTIONS, DIFFICULTIES

In “Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques,” Britzman asks:

What if one thought about reading practices as problems of opening identifications, of working the capacity to imagine oneself differently precisely with respect to how one encounters another, and in how one encounters the self? What if how one reads the world turned upon the interest in thinking against one’s thoughts, of creating a queer space where one’s old certainties made no sense? (55)

Certainly, we can imagine Britzman’s questions here to be deeply connected to how I have tried to explore Gadamer’s use of the term “dissolving.” Britzman suggests that queer pedagogy has

something to do with “thinking against one’s thoughts.” So, the first step, then, is to create a situation in which it might be possible for students to see, read or witness something that puts their “old certainties” into question. I am interested in the kind of thinking it might enable to provoke, locate and discuss moments of “thinking against one’s thoughts” in student writing. Does Cardo, in the short excerpt I have used to try to ground this essay, have any moment of thinking against her own thoughts? In a sense, we might look at her entire response in this way. Cardo struggles in “thinking against her own thought” that *woman* is not “a made up story that isn’t real.” The assignment does ask her to think against that thought, to imagine that her way of thinking about gender (something real, stable, not “a made up story”) is a way of thinking that exposes those “old certainties” to which Britzman refers.

*My relatives were always trying to give me my gender in the form of dollhouses, Hello Kitty blankets, pink things, yellow things, Barbies, the beloved Cabbage Patch Dolls. I wanted them to give me another version of gender, and sometimes, usually in private, someone would. My mother: a hockey stick. My grandfather: a baseball hat. My brother: advice. “This is how you punch back,” he says. “Right. Like this. This is how.”*

Judith Halberstam suggests that a queer theorized teaching practice might start by:

refusing the schemata of identitarian institutional positions (lesbian teacher, heterosexual students, for example) and proceeding eccentrically. By this I mean that the queer teacher may take up an *eccentric* position in relation to queer material and position herself as always implicated in *and* outside the topics she is teaching. (emphasis mine, 271)

Geometrically, the word *eccentric* can imply two circles or spheres, at least one of which contains the centers of both. But the word always implies that the center is in question (the center of one circle is within another but not necessarily the center of that other circle)—hence the term’s use as a way of saying someone or something is unusual, strangely paired or peculiar. For Halberstam to suggest that the queer pedagogue position herself as decentered, as both “in

and outside” the materials she teaches means that a queer theorized teaching practice is the practice of decentering. As Winans also suggests: “Ultimately, queer pedagogy entails decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring the facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation” (106). If we are to ask our students to question the processes by which identity/writing is made, if we are to ask our students to decenter themselves in relation to the materials of our courses, our teaching must embody this very decentering—not merely *apply* the concept of decentering to teaching.

I also want to think about “how deeply and 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” (Alexander and Gibson 8). I think our teaching of composition asks us to do the same. It asks us to “strain against and celebrate our double binds” (Monson and Rhodes 90); it asks us to engage with paradox, with difficulty, with the ambiguous blurs of articulation; it asks us to bring questions of the body back to writing. This engagement is a pathway through which teachers of composition can move towards goals I actually think those of us in composition do, generally speaking, agree about, goals of teaching embodied, reflexive, complicated, nuanced and fluid writers—writers who exercise habits of mind that might more likely lead to more imaginative, bolder, queerer compositions—and queerer notions of literacy itself. After all, as Mike Rose aptly puts it:

To acknowledge our collective capacity is to take the concept of variability seriously. Not as slots along a simplified cognitive continuum or as a neat high-low distribution, but as a *bountiful and layered field*, where many processes and domains of knowledge interact. Such a model demands more not less from *those of us who teach*, or who organize work, or who develop social policy. (emphasis mine, 216)

To take “variability seriously,” to take difference and how we think about difference seriously, then, is to understand variability as existing in this moving field; it is to understand literacy as fluid, as a series of variable moving processes that exist in this layered field. This is what makes it possible for us to continuously define and redefine what literacy means. Without this movement, this revision of understanding, we would be left with the kind of reduction and simplification Rose continuously warns us against. And of course there is great responsibility that falls on “those of who teach” if we are to accept this complicated, fluid and variable notion of literacy and try to teach in ways that embody it, and do so with a kind of queer and conscious abandon.

*I am eating lunch at a small sandwich shop in Rockland, Maine where a young boy has been reading over my body with his eyes. He looks inquisitively at my face, then chest, then legs. I keep looking down at the wheat grains, crumbling into small traces of bread- dust across my lap. Finally, he turns to the resident interpreter of environment for clarification: “Is that a boy or a girl, Mom?” His mother dutifully replies, “It’s none of your business. Eat.” He does eat, but only after saying, “I think it’s a boy.” I cannot say for certain whether I classify this child’s reading of the text of my body as a mis-reading; I know only slightly more than he does about how to interpret my own gender performance (the text of myself). I do know that these scenarios (which are repeated in one way or another every time a body is seen or even heard) mark quite clearly the ways we might construct processes of interpretation. The tools the young boy has to guide his interpretation, in a sense, fail him. He has sets of rules that lead him to interpret a body in either one way or another.*

When readers come into contact with bodies, the process of gender interpretation is usually, for the most part, invisible. We interpret another’s gender with subtle ease and move on to treating that person in congruence with the gender interpretation; however, when the ease of that interpretation disappears, we might move on to a more serious method of analysis. Richard Palmer, in his book *Hermeneutics*, writes, “Analysis is interpretation; feeling the need for analysis is also interpretation” (23). The fact that the young child feels the need for further

analysis reveals a great deal about what our primary interpretative tool is for "analyzing" the body. Gender is first and foremost, and it often frames, and therefore appears to explain, readings of that body. Our method of interpretation for gender, however, is limited and, as Palmer also suggests, sometimes our method of interpretation "delimits what we shall see." The child in the sandwich shop has a specific interpretative method, using a strategy that will help him, say, explain and translate the bodies he sees. In this case, we might call this traditional perception of gender interpretation a kind of pre-understanding of the body. In my own pedagogical work and thinking with my own students, I think both Queer Theory and my experience as a queer person offer particular ways of thinking about the notion of pre-understanding. In this sense, one of the first challenges for a writing teacher, and perhaps for many teachers, is asking students to learn to sit with or even relish in challenging their own pre-understandings. It is my contention that to be able to enact this consciousness, to write as a writer aware of her interpretative limits and as a writer who pushes on her own limits: this is to enact composition—composition as opposed to kinds of writing we might call something else, or might not. I agree with James Slevin when he writes, "I understand composition as a response to the difficulty of writing" (Slevin 13). Slevin describes, in this one sentence, a particularly interesting way of thinking about how composition got here in the first place, and he cites its origins as a "response to the difficulty of writing," which is to acknowledge not only the struggle for ourselves and our students as we try to "compose, but to acknowledge also the ways that reading and writing are difficulties, are already a problem. Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue offer a compelling way for students to put pressure on the field of constraints in which they read and compose, to push on their interpretative methods. In *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*, they examine the relationship between a student's difficulty and "a

possible rule and strategy of interpretation” (xxvi). This relationship suggests not only that the student be aware of when their reading might be a way of making their limits visible but also how those limits call up a “strategy of interpretation” that also has limits and constrains.

#### IV. GENDER AND OTHER FAILED BINARIES

Johnnie Hart, a student in the composition course I draw from throughout this project, writes in response to a question about Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*: “Kate Bornstein’s book threatens what I know about my gender identity because the book makes me feel like my gender doesn’t exist. Like I have put my money in a fake bank of what Bornstein calls ‘either/or’” (1). I distributed these two sentences as the basis for a class discussion during the fourth week of the semester. I chose Hart’s passage because of what I saw as a productive site of discussion—his use of metaphor, his verb choices, his reference to Bornstein’s notion of “either/or.”

I began the class with one question, not knowing exactly where the question might lead. I asked my students: *What kind of bank is this that Johnnie refers to in his response to Composition # 2?* I record their answers on the board: *The kind where your money’s not there when you go to get it*, says Amanda. *The building is not even there*, answers Iggy. The class goes on to imagine the various ways a bank might be fake. Many of their reasons have to do with the idea of investment. I write the word on the board: investment. *What is Johnnie afraid he has invested in?* I ask them. *Either/or*, several students in the front row point out. *What’s “either/or”?* I answer with another question. Danielle says, *It’s like you had a choice of two accounts at the fake bank, and neither one of them is an actual account. Your money is gone.* I ask them what kind of accounts Bornstein might be putting pressure on for Johnnie, for all of us

really. They dutifully answer my most reading comprehension-like question. Johnnie says, *The man and woman accounts, the gender binary*. I write the words on the board. *Binaries*.

Underneath that, I write: *man*            *woman*. I ask them for more binaries. They play along.

This, our final list:

man	woman
gay	straight
pro-life	pro-choice
Republican	Democrat
urban	rural
wealth	poverty
good	bad
beautiful	ugly
soldier	pacifist

*What do you notice about the list?* Here, the class erupts with ideas. It is difficult from the transcript (taken by one of my students) to tell who is speaking. But collectively, they do notice first that the opposites are not really opposites—that, for example, some soldiers might *be* pacifists, or that the definitions of what is considered wealth are “subjective.” They say the list “does not leave room for the in-betweens.” They find fault, in a sense, with binary thinking. And finally, it’s Amanda who calls out what she sees as the culprit. *It’s a trick of language*, she says. The room sort of pauses. No one seems quite sure what she means, but they seem interested in what it might be. She notices the construction of “pro-life” and “pro-choice” as reducing to two things no one would disagree with. *Who doesn’t like life and choices?* she astutely asks. *Are those the only ways to think about abortions?* Finally, Kelsey chimes in, pen in hand, ready to record my answer: *So, binaries are bad?* I ask them to keep the list some place where they can see it for the rest of the semester. I jokingly ask Kelsey if she is asking a binary question about binaries. She laughs. It is time to go.

*This class reminds me of agility exercises in lacrosse practice. It makes me remember what it was like to try and run backwards. No one's used to it.*

To say merely that binaries are “bad” might be to offer to Kelsey, and to all my students a new binary, replacing their binary way of thinking with thinking in binary terms *about* binaries. In other words, it would offer them only a new kind of knowledge to replace the old. And as Patricia Collins writes, in *Black Feminist Thought*:

Alternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. (219)

If we take Patricia Collins to heart, which I do, telling my students that binaries are “bad” or problematic or whatever nuanced academic way I might answer Kelsey’s question is not enough. What a queer pedagogy needs to imagine, hope for, create a space for are ways of knowing that “challenge . . . the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims.” These knowledge claims are then not only used by the powerful, but reinforced by all of us, tacitly, unless we can find ways to intervene in this inheritance of hegemony. In this case, the knowledge claim is: there are men, and there are women. It is not enough to say this is not true, or even to show the scientific “evidence” Bornstein provides of it not being true. Together, we must find another way to know gender, an alternative way to write about gender, a more complicated way to write about anything. My students bring up this list numerous times during the semester. In a sense, it both grounds and unsettles them.

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\* Anonymous Student, Seminar in Composition Mid-Term Evaluation

*What I am pointing out is that unless you are home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.\**

As an instructor of composition, I see both my students' (and my own) binary interpretations fail. Some of the least productive workshops I have ever led, as a teacher of writing, have begun with my own binary askings: *What are this paper's strengths and weaknesses?* for example. A question I remember asking quite a few times in my first year as a writing teaching, one I had heard my own teachers ask in the past. This is a question that only leads to its own failure *as a question*. Either my students and I make false binary categories of strong writing and weak writing, or we end up circling back to the fact that the question itself is a trick, a shortcut, a reduction of complexity. But if a teacher of writing cannot say what the strengths and weaknesses are of a given paper, what can this instructor do? If we cannot say that some given person is either a man or a woman, what can we say about this person? If we begin with the assumption that a binary question produces binary answers, or that a binary argument leads to problems for its composer, what then can we teach students to do if we do not teach them to take one side of "yes or no" argument, if we do not teach them to say whether their writing, their bodies, their ideas are either *this thing* or *that thing*? It is often my own body that teaches me what I might do instead.

*I spent the first year of my Tai Chi practice learning to stand. In Tai Chi, it is called rooting—the process by which one learns to imagine the roots of trees growing out of the bottoms of the feet and deep into the ground. The body then bends and sways, its branches move in response to*

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\* from Robert Frost's "Education by Poetry"

*wind or force. But the feet are rooted, positioned, firm in their standing. The body bends as it roots.*

Teaching students to write, in one way or another, does lead to a discussion of teaching them what an argument is, what taking a position means, a kind of rooting. This is not easy, nor is it a simple for scholars of composition to articulate. Many of us have thought to think of this teaching in terms of academic discourse—imagining ourselves trying to lead our students to participate in the conversations of the university. Dave Bartholomae, in “Inventing the University,” writes: “The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (60). I think it is a misreading to understand Bartholomae’s assertion as a conservative or elitist academic assertion. And I am interested in the idea that learning to write is a “trying on” of what may at first seem queer or unwearable. The larger project for me becomes: what are these “peculiar ways of knowing”? Which ones of them are most valuable? Why do these ways of knowing even matter? Who gets to say? And what are these languages in which we write? These questions can be answered indefinitely by an infinite number of students and scholars both in and outside the institution of the university. Bartholomae’s list does not end with “knowing”; he also suggests students of composition try on ways of “selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.” I do not understand “our community” to mean some institutional location only, but I take Bartholomae to mean a community of critically thinking persons who care about complexity and about writing. Bartholomae’s list, to me, calls my attention to just some of the layered components of writing. And if part of the goal of my composition course is to queer as kind of knowing, then following Bartholomae’s suggestion, I must try, with my students, to

imagine queer kinds of selection, evaluation, research, conclusions and arguments. This is something I deeply value.

*I distrusted Mr. Shellhorn, my third grade teacher, right away—his dark mustache, his hard full chest and thick-rimmed glasses. I never raised my hand to sit on his lap during “John Brown Jallopy.” I didn’t raise my hand to turn the pages of afternoon stories. No matter how hard the other children laughed at his character voices, no matter how many times he praised my drawings and even my handwriting, I would not budge. I would not, as it were, love him. Then the science fair. And I hate the other students—their maps of constellations lighting up on cardboard, their mud mound volcanoes erupting over the desktops. I don’t want to make anything. I don’t want anything to explode or light up. I don’t want the bad-smelling oak tag, the construction paper dry against my fingers. I would rather make up math problems sitting on the radiator. For a few days, Mr. Shellhorn leaves me there. He doesn’t ask what my project will be. But by the time the light up planets begin to show he’s back there with black construction paper and a handful of orange tissue paper. He folds the black paper in half and cuts for what feels like a half hour, moving the big “teacher scissors” in curves and inside out holes. And when he opens the paper it’s wings. He glues the orange tissue paper behind them. “It’s a monarch,” he says. “Their bodies are perfectly symmetrical. Do you know what symmetry means?” And I’m still not budging. “I don’t care,” I answer, directing my stare through the back window towards the school lot where the cars are lined up in a green blur. I do care. I want to know what symmetry means. I like the sound of it, how his teeth joined at the ‘s’, his lips touching at the ‘m’ and curling together to end on the ‘try’ of the word. I do love him, you understand. I do make five more butterflies when he goes. And as for symmetry, the dictionary said, “match exactly.”*

Like Judith Butler says of gender—that it is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (1). I believe writing is also this practice. For who is every prepared to write? We offer students outlines, brainstorming, writing moves, but those of us who write know that the writing is still improvisation, still an invention, an impromptu composition that begins in the middle of something else. The constraint comes in on us from all around—the context for the writing, the expectations about what writing is and what kinds of writing matter, even our ideas of who we are—identity itself. In this sense, we are no different from our students. However, I do think Bartholomae is right that there is something about critical scholarly language and thought that we are asking students “to try on.” The mistake I think we make (and I know I have

made it) is to assume we know what ways of reading and writing actually do “define the discourse of our community.” We might do best to begin thinking about the teaching of writing the way the poet Richard Hugo does. He says, in an address to his students, “Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don’t teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write” (3). I quote Hugo here not to align myself with expressivist notions of what it means to teach writing (though I do value many of those notions), but to be clear about my own anxieties about teaching writing from a queer perspective, about teaching students to value the moves of queer theory or value queerness itself as part of learning to write and to think interpretively about the writing of others. Am I teaching them to “write like me”? Is that what all writing teachers are doing? Is that bad?

*Once a student of Tai Chi has learned to stand, and has learned to bend and move with the feet rooted in the ground, the student may begin to learn what is called “push hands”—Tai Chi’s version of sparring. One student places her hands against the teacher’s hands. They move slowly together. The teacher will pull on the student’s hand should she lean forward, should she pull up the roots from her feet. The teacher will push on the student’s body should she lean back. The push and pull is a tender reminder; it calls the student’s attention back to rooting, to their position of balance.*

There are some who believe that to teach the “peculiar ways of knowing” to which Bartholomae refers is to teach students to make certain discursive and rhetorical moves. For instance, Gerald Graff has suggested in *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* and elsewhere that students are kept in the dark about participating in academic discourse at the university. He writes:

One of the most closely guarded secrets that academia unwittingly keeps from students and everybody else is that all academics, despite their many differences, play a version of the same game of persuasive argument . . . The first step toward

demystifying academia is to start being more explicit about the academic centrality of persuasive argument, as did a high school teacher with whom I work, Hillel Crandus, and his students, who coined a useful shorthand term for it: “Arguespeak.” (22)

While I would agree with Graff that as teachers of writing, we should (where it is possible to do so) be explicit with students about moves that are valued in academic discourse, I am unconvinced that “the centrality of persuasive argument” or “Arguespeak” actually does the work of helping students understand what thoughtful, nuanced, complicated and engaging prose might look like (or how it is made). I am not, despite how complicated and fluid I conceive of my teaching project, interested in mystifying my students, in making them believe writing is a kind of magic and that I cannot tell them how to do it. I can tell them many things. No matter how queer my classroom or assignments are, I still teach my students *things*, rules, skills—how to MLA cite, how one might work a quotation into the text, how to use dashes and semicolons. There are things about writing we can, quite explicitly, teach. However, some aspects of teaching writing are necessarily implicit, process oriented, so connected to reading that one cannot simply *show* a student how to write sophisticated, questioning, complex prose that is compelling.

Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff have published a composition textbook that tries to suggest ways to implement or strategies that one might follow should one subscribe to the above claim. The book is called *They Say I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing* (2007), and it provides formulaic sentence structures and templates for students to follow. The textbook frames these templates as representative of how moves are made in academic writing. In the chapter, “Yes / No / Okay, But,” Graff and Birkenstein provide some sentence structures for students to fill in of complete while telling students that “whether you are agreeing, disagreeing, or both agreeing and disagreeing, you need to be as clear as possible” (61). There is a part of this

kind of writing instruction I really value—the part where we, as teachers of writing, try to become more explicit with students about the moves of a complicated writer and also the part where students try to imitate the writing they see. However, I find the notion of disagreeing and agreeing can often set up a binary for students; and I would contend that this binary is still set up even if students take Graff and Birkenstein’s option of “both agreeing and disagreeing.” Are these the options: agree, disagree or both? After all, even the book’s title is a kind of binary: *they say, I say*. Of course this is not the only kind of writing in the book, but there is either explicit or subtle dependence on binaries to explain or demonstrate how to write. The book also values and demonstrates a kind of clarity that may be valuable in many writing contexts but not necessarily in all. I am skeptical that binary choices and clarity are at the nexus of introducing students to writing in the academy.

*Sometimes my father let me be his son, let me pour the concrete for the basketball court in the yard, spent all afternoon showing me how to shoot a lay-up. First, from the right side, which took months. Left right left shoot. Then from the left side, which took years. Right left right shoot. I still can't go to my left in a full court game.*

What I am suggesting here is that composition courses as I imagine them—courses in which reading and writing are at the center of concern—might find value not only in imitation or in learning certain rhetorical moves, but in helping students gain a personal, intellectual, theoretical, and operational understanding of the ways in which binary thinking can become a barrier in achieving those “peculiar ways of knowing” that lead to complicated and compelling prose—the kind of writing we hope to write and teach students to compose as well. And moving out beyond the scope of reading and writing practices, I do think that a push on binary thinking is

also to move towards multiplicity. And to move toward multiplicity is to live in a world with more possibility and “possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread (Butler *Undoing* 29).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that: “That’s one of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 8). I am interested in teaching, assignments and writing that can’t be made to “signify monolithically.” In other words, the assignments don’t *mean* in one way, don’t signify singularly. Cardo’s essay is interesting to me in this way; her essay does not “signify monolithically.” It, instead, tries to contend with its multiple significations through a study of language. Cardo focuses, and her sentences reflect, the “lapses and excesses of meaning” that are part of queering. Queer Theory, for me, is a useful way of getting to the “lapses and excesses of meaning” to which queer can refer. And as I assert in chapter one, these lapses and excesses of meaning can lead to difficulty, or to abjection. The echo of Kristeva again: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience” (*Powers* 4). Teaching students to write like the *criminal with the good conscience*. This, I believe, would count as the kind of “peculiar ways of knowing” celebrated in writing that is considered critical, scholarly or artful.

*The girls’ locker room is not safe place for a “girl” like me. And there were only so many times I could cut gym, or head off to the “Gifted and Talented Reading Group” in place of gym. The gym part was humiliating enough, watching the boy students throw baseballs smacking into gloves while the girls’ half of the room was lined with step-aerobic boxes. Up and down on the box. The embarrassing music, ending with the locker room where several of the girls had developed their own language; this enabled them to talk about me at full volume while I pulled*

*the wet shirts from my androgynous body. Iway earsway e'sshay away uygay and Eshayouldshay otallytay otnay angechay inway erehay. I later found out this was Pig Latin. Translations: I swear she's a guy and She should totally not change in here.*

## V. WRITING AND CONSCIOUSNESS

*Teaching is the collective version of meditation. Rare. Occurs in a kind of stillness that moves. Nietzsche's notion of planetary motion: "The wisest man would be the one richest in contradictions, who has, as it were, antennae for all types of men—as well as his great moments of grand harmony—a rare accident even in us! A sort of planetary motion—" (51). How planets spin or even orbit, but are in themselves whole; they give off the appearance of being still. Being awake requires that we detect even the most subtle, the most nuanced movements; it requires that we hold (in our bodies and our minds) open spaces for contradiction, which may, in the end, turn out to be the only truth there is; it requires we can sense that the Earth is spinning despite its appearing still.*

Students already know what consciousness is or have thought about what it is. I found this out in the first few days of my composition seminar when I asked the question: *what is consciousness?* I was trying to help students understand and read the values in the course description and in my instructor's statement, trying to think with them about what I might mean. I recorded the following off the chalkboard after class. This list was entirely comprised by my students:

- awareness
- lack of ignorance
- openness
- being ready and alert
- actually thinking about what you are doing
- receptive
- awake
- thinking clearly
- mobile
- living in the moment
- fully experiencing

a state of mind where you can join pieces of information and make connections  
the ability to respond  
educated  
a state where the body can respond to stimuli  
ability to reflect

We can see, most obviously, from this list, that students do equate the notion of consciousness with notions of wakefulness, movement, education and clear vision—even that some of them associate consciousness with the body response or with reflection. I am very interested, also, in one student’s claim about consciousness having something to do with “living in the moment.” A kind of historical approach, or ahistorical depending on how we interpret this response. I understood this student to mean something about being present in the current moment, perhaps even related to what another student said about “fully experiencing.” The current moment itself is dissolving, is already fluid. Gadamer writes: “It seems, rather, to be generally characteristic of the emergence of the ‘hermeneutical’ problem that something *distant* has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now” (22). I take Gadamer’s description of the “hermeneutical problem” to mean that to be in the act of becoming a reader or writer, one must build a bridge between the past and this moment, one must understand oneself as connected to and situated within in their histories, bringing that “something distant” (history, their respective selves) closer. I am thinking here about students reading essays on male privilege in 2009 and thinking about the ways in which they see male privilege in 2009 as distinctly different from or separated out from the ways in which male privilege may have functioned in 1915 or 1950. We read, at times, with historical amnesia. And this often prevents the kind of consciousness I hope to achieve when I read, and when I guide my students through reading and writing. Cultivating this consciousness is the path through which writers can become aware of their interpretative limits in order to turn them to water. The current moment,

of course, is always inextricably linked to the moments that preceded it and the moments that follow. So I try to unpack this notion of “living in the moment” with my students. I ask them if “living in the moment” means being connected to the past or “forgetting the past” in order to be present. We spend a few classes considering this. Something “distant,” as Gadamer suggests, needs to be “brought close.” History needs to be brought close. The history of gender brought close to the history of our “personal” genders. The linking of a historical and political institution with a life lived.

Many students began to become more versed in ways of discussing gender that were less shaped by the mythologies of binaries. Several students showed up in class with their psychology textbooks from one of their other Freshmen Learning Community courses. One of my students, Danielle, made me a photocopy from the chapter titled “The Self.” Iggy joked from the back as I looked at it. *If the guys who wrote that textbook were in this class, they’d have called that chapter “The Selves.”* The other students laugh, as do I. And as my students became more playful and fluid with their understandings of gender and identity, I wanted to write an assignment that asked students to engage with the limitations of binary thinking by writing about something other than gender and sexuality—not because their writing about these issues was less important but because I had the hunch (or hope) that the work we did together, especially on the holy and sacred gender binary, would be “translatable,” would be useful in thinking about how to encourage students to “try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community”—in this case, we might define “community” as a discourse of queer theory, or queer thinking. However, these “peculiar ways of knowing” may or may not become ways of writing. In fact, my students and I struggled with thinking about this distinction between non-binary thinking and non-binary writing.

One student, Marie, visited office hours part way through the semester, just before we were to begin writing Essay 4. She has a question about a comment I made in the margins of her last paper (Essay 3). I wrote, rather unconsciously perhaps, “So, what’s your argument about this?” in the margins of her paper. She wants to know what I mean. She says, sort of frantically, “I thought we weren’t supposed to pick one or the other position.” It struck me right then that there were so many other words (like argument) that, for my students, had binaries built into them. For Marie, to make an argument is to “pick” from two ways to think about, or interpret, what she reads—perhaps to, as she later elaborated, “agree” or “disagree” with an author. I tell Marie the next class will try to help her understand my comment. I begin class with the following question: *What is an argument?* Their first responses make me feel guilty for setting the trap. Laura says, *You mean like a fight between two people?* I respond: *Why two?* The class laughs. Jenn tries to re-approach an answer, *It’s when you don’t agree with something or someone, then you have an argument.* I write *agree* and *fight* on the board. Danielle asks me, *Wait, are you talking about an argument paper?* I ask: *What’s an argument paper?* Tearsa says, *Yeah like before I took this class, I wrote argument papers. But they don’t like those in the psychology department either.* The students laugh again. They have, also, their psychology class in common. Johnnie kids, *our high school money is no good here at the college bank.* We all laugh. I ask them whether Kate Bornstein or Michael Warner could be seen as writing long argument papers in the form of books. And they’re somewhat stumped at first. *It’s hard to know,* says Iggy. *These books are kind of circular, but I guess Michael Warner is arguing things or trying to say certain things.* I ask them: *Do you think it will help to look at a place where Warner (we had this book with us) discusses someone else’s work to see if he has an argument in the way we’re talking about?* They agree and we go searching. We look closely at a place

where Warner is quoting from Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex." We read it twice. *He's using her*, Johnnie says. A few giggles from the back row. *For what?* I ask. *Like she's some kind of magnifying glass*, he says. The class sighs a sort of amused sigh. They have learned to expect and decode Johnnie's use of metaphor. I do, however, think the idea of the lens is useful and one we would return to. We look for more. We find a number of ways, far more than two, that Warner engages with others' work. We think together about how to imagine these ways as kinds of "argument"—just not the kind where one agrees or disagrees with, say, Gayle Rubin. After all, part of the "peculiar ways of knowing" Bartholomae discusses in "Inventing the University," at least in composition, might mean learning how to move around, fluidly, among other voices, how to make arguments that do something more nuanced, more complicated than agreement or disagreement, how to "try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes" (Bartholomae 60)—maybe even in the same essay. Some students were already doing this. Some struggled not to see it in Warner, but to see it in themselves.

The first time I thought that fluidity in gender might be somehow inextricably linked to fluidity in writing was in reading *A Room of One's Own* when Virginia Woolf writes that: "the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it is incandescent and undivided." While it was, I think, part of Woolf's project to position women writers as having nothing to do with womanhood at all in order for these writers to be read and heard *as* writers, there is also more to be done, more to be understood about what her assertion might offer our understanding of what it means to teach writing. But I also hear Woolf saying that the androgynous mind is not a middle point between male and female, or between masculine and feminine, but rather a disruptive and perpetually shifting perspective from which writing (and I would also say teaching) must take place. This perspective exists not between the binary poles of gender, but lacking relation to

them at all—this refusal is not a reductive humanism; it is, in fact, the enactment of a consciousness in flux, a pedagogy that cannot remain still long enough to be named or fixed. The androgynous mind then is a mind in flux, a mind always at risk of losing itself, remaking itself, a mind seeking to say the unsayable. I am aware of the various ways my own body is implicated in this particular theorizing about the teaching of writing.

*Our foyer has a funny smell that doesn't smell like anyplace else. I don't know what the hell it is. It isn't cauliflower and it isn't perfume— I don't know what the hell it is— but you always know you're home.\**

For Essay 4, I tried to be careful in the language of the assignment not to merely ask students to “apply” what they had learned. I tried to communicate the assignment as a kind of moving, or translation of the course from its context to others—a version of Hart’s “watery thinking.” My students’ responses to this assignment seemed to echo and try to grapple with that first discussion of binaries, and the coursework that followed, in interesting and generative ways. I am interested in working with the following student excerpts not as models of excellent papers, not as the thoughts of straight students, gay students, etc., and not as moments where I can politically critique or expose my students lack of consciousness. I am interested in working with these excerpts as possibilities for queer pedagogies and as generative moves towards positioning these students’ work within the larger context of the project of the course itself. What kind of writing is here? How is the student engaging with the work of the course, with binary thinking, with interrogation of the kind Sedgwick describes above? I begin with a student who struggled in the course at large. An inquisitive, quiet student—one who had a difficult time breaking

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\* from J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, as said by Holden Caulfield

through some of the hollowness, a kind of lack of substance—composed an interesting essay in which she recognizes a moment of schooling that could have helped shape the hollowness I describe. The following is the introduction to her Essay 4 entitled “Binary Blindfold.” I have this student’s permission to use only her work, and not her name.<sup>4</sup> She writes:

What side are you on? It’s got to be one or the other,” my high school government teacher said during a debate on the death penalty. “I’m not sure, somewhere in the middle?” “That just means you don’t know what you believe,” a helpful classmate told me. Why was it that I had to choose one of these two positions? Does picking one side of an issue mean that you understand it more? Those staunchly for one side of an issue don’t necessarily comprehend what they believe. After making a choice as to what they believe, they are relieved of thinking about it. Beliefs can act kind of like a blindfold; you can only know about what you have already seen, so adamant people will just blindly follow what they already chose to believe. Complicated questions never have an easy answer. It’s either a woman’s right or a baby killing scheme. It’s either kill those who kill or side with them. Republican or Democrat. And on and on. (1)

It is not hard to hear the echo of our earlier conversation about Bornstein in class in reading this student’s introduction. But she has done far more than repeat that conversation. She has, in a sense, recognized herself in it. She remembers a moment in her education in which binary thinking was being constructed and encouraged. She remembers the power in it—that her classmate points out that to not engage with binary thinking is *not to know* what you believe. Here, it might be useful to think back to Bryson and de Castel’s notion that a queer pedagogy means, partly, “*to intervene in the production of so-called normalcy in schooled subjects.*” A queer pedagogy, of course, values this classmate’s *not to know* as another way of knowing altogether, a way that may not end up meaning *not to know* at all. The student uses this moment in her education to bring her reader to an important moment in her essay. She asks, “Does picking one side of an issue mean that you understand it more?” She engages, here, with a crucial epistemological and hermeneutical question, the question of whether understanding is

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<sup>4</sup> She is cited as Student A.

connected with falling on one or another side of a binary. For example, some students, in their first reading of Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*, proposed that Bornstein was "just confused" about whether she was a man or a woman. This student was among those students. But as the context has changed, as she discusses this memory from high school, some new way of knowing, and of writing, seems to emerge. She says those who choose one side or another of an issue become then "relieved of thinking about it." I am interested here in the student's notion that a binary "relieves" us of *thinking*. She proposes here just the opposite *argument* of her classmates' statements of "just confused" because to be relieved of thinking seems, for the student, to end up in *not to know*, the very place she was accused of being in her history class. Only now she begins to imagine the "not to know" as not a lack or deficiency but as a site for productive thinking—as opposed to the sold binary position where others are "relieved of thinking." This, I do think, is a significant shift in epistemology. And for this student, it was also her first time writing an introduction that was striking and fluid in its form *and* content. She is able consider fluid ideas while composing a more fluid prose. Finally, she makes two more quite interesting moves. The first, quite possibly connected to our class interest in and amusement with Johnnie Hart's constant turn to metaphor, when she writes: "Beliefs can act like a kind of blindfold." She then moves back to refer to the list she informed me later she had taped to the side of her computer monitor. I sat a long time with this statement about beliefs—partly because it was so interesting to me and partly because the language of "belief" had not directly come up in class. We had spoken of arguments, of opinions, even. But I was struck by what might be implied in "belief" and in how the student might connect it to binary thinking. It seemed she had arrived at the conclusion that to think in a binary way was not to *think* at all, but to *believe*. Perhaps the way we think of religion or morality as "belief." The paper that evolves out from this

introduction struggles; the writing slips in and out of binary thinking; it, at times, moves seamlessly, and at other times, seems to get stuck.

*It's 1984. My father is a Republican and likes to watch Meet the Press in his blue button pajamas most Sunday mornings. I am seven years old. And every Sunday he asks (as if it were actually possible) which man I will vote for (in this case Walter Mondale or Ronald Reagan). And each week he is more frustrated with my refusal to say. After all, what a parent wants to know is whether you will repeat or resist their compositions of the world. They want to know, early on, what kind of reader and writer you might be. "You have to choose before the country's election day, you know?" he says. What I have been doing, pushing my spoon in and under my Lucky Charms and milk, is an endless wavering. At this age, I hadn't yet pushed on the assumption that I had only two choices, but I did sense that deciding was a kind of mythology, that what we deem "indecisive" is not weakness. I didn't think of myself as weak.*

Later in the paper she writes, "I question binaries and 'facts' that people 'know.' Just being able to see the binary doesn't always help me avoid slipping into that kind of thinking" (6). This student acknowledges first the difficulty of "slipping into that kind [binary] of thinking" even though she is aware of it; she is able to see herself as moving in and out of binary thinking. And I encourage her in my comments to notice which moments she seems most attached or most likely to "slip" into this binary thinking? I asked her to think about the metaphor of "slipping": what is she slipping on? What happens when we slip? Is it connected to balance? What does those connections tell her about writing? She ends the paper by saying: "As to talking with my friends about this, I just recommend that they take this class to see what it is about. 'But is it a good class or bad class?' they might want to know" (6). Not only do I appreciate this student's sense of playfulness and humor at the close of her essay, I also value how she has through the image of telling others about our class, captured the very problem itself—the problem of slippage. In this sense, all of us can tend to slip on the very fluidity we are trying to value.

*I think about my father, there in the living room, a stone of interpretation. He nods when Reagan speaks. He says, "what a wussy" at Mondale who wears blue suits, which my father sees as, and I quote, "pretty boy" and "fashion queen." What would it have taken to ask this father to lift out from his body, from his suburban house and color television in order to be able to see himself not reading, not risking? What is at stake for him? What is at stake for all of us? We live in a culture that sees wavering as weakness. You need only to look at the current discourse around the 2008 election to see this—who is a flip-flopper, who is worse than a flip-flopper. There is even a web-site, "bothwaysbarack.com" in which you can read that it is impossible to hold two positions at once, that both at once-ness (a kind of androgyny of its own) is a betrayal of strength and decisiveness.*

Another student, who also elects to be referred to anonymously,<sup>5</sup> tries to engage this assignment in another way. Her essay entitled "Did I Say That?" functions as a kind of retrospective about her writing thus far in the course. The object this student understood as "outside the study of sexuality and gender" was her own writing in the course. So, her paper, while it quoted from several of her own writings *about* gender and sexuality, was about her former papers. She begins her paper with a discussion she borrows from her psychology class about "parapraxis," which she defines as "errors in speech due to the unconscious mind" (1). She writes, "We try to hide some feelings and opinions, but if we feel strongly about them and are not carefully monitoring what we are saying or writing, they can be revealed" (1). The student moves forward to examine closely one moment in her own writing and then one moment of interaction with a friend. While the student seems to still be moving through what "parapraxis" means or what moments might count as such a thing, she makes a compelling, and self-implicating, interrogation of something she had written during the very first in-class writing prompt in September. She writes:

My sentence said something along the lines of, "When my mother uses the word queer to describe me, I do not believe she is *accusing* me of being a lesbian." If I had considered this sentence more carefully, I probably would have revised it or

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<sup>5</sup> She is cited as Student B.

taken it out of my paper. I don't consider myself homophobic, or anything, but I think this revealed my feelings that being a lesbian would be something to be accused of. Normally we get accused of crimes: things that are wrong. (2)

Firstly, this student is engaged with the binary in a very different sense, and certainly less direct sense than the prior student. The spaces she is moving between, the binary she is trying to move around inside is a binary of the self. The excerpt above, in a sense, is the student wondering about, moving around in whether she is homophobic or not. She is aware that thinking of lesbianism as something to be *accused* of is something that she might have wanted to “take out” of the paper she had written. But she is also aware that she doesn't “consider [herself] homophobic.” Of course, for her or for me to solidly answer this question would be to go against the very request of the assignment and would be more in line with the “subverting homophobia” goal outlined by Malinowitz. I am aware, as I am writing this, that her comment about not being homophobic can be read as that cliché: “I'm not homophobic but . . . I am about to say something homophobic” (a way of reading in line with the Bryson and de Castel reading of their students at the start of this paper). But I want to offer this student far more credit than that. She uses the assignment as a pathway through which she interrogates the self. This is no small task, and comes with potentially great risks for her. She is aware of her instructor's queerness, of the two self-identified queer students in the class; she is aware that a homophobic viewpoint would probably not be of value in class, but she still makes an effort to understand her own homophobia—to understand that she could both not consider herself homophobic and yet speak in the language of someone who is; this person is, of course, also herself. Binary thinking could never arrive here at this paper. It would have never produced a contradictory self. This paper does. She writes later in the paper, “When we accidentally let one of our hidden opinions come out in our writing or speech, we have made a mistake in revealing it but not in thinking it” (5). I

sat quite some time with this sentence, feeling at first a kind of resistance to it. Of course, it's a mistake to think of lesbianism as something to be accused of. But as I read it again, it occurs to me how complicated the statement is in the sense that *thinking* cannot be a mistake in the same way *revealing* our thoughts through speech or writing can. The thinking is more automatic, less deliberate, not always of our own control. In a sense, it does seem from our work in this course, that queer pedagogies may construct the spaces through which *thinking* can become less automatic, spaces where students can intervene in their own thinking, spaces without which alternative ways of knowing cannot develop or emerge.

It is useful here to consider a student who struggled with the course because the non-binary thinking was not something that intrigued her but rather something that repelled her in a sense. Her thinking, to use Johnnie Hart's term, was resistant to becoming "watery." It remained a kind of stone. She writes, "Nothing really happens to me when I read Bornstein. Her or his ideas are too far out to do anything to me" (2). Of course, the text has already "done" something to this student. We can notice first that she refers to Bornstein as "her or his"—knowing that Al has transitioned to Kate and that the class had settled on calling Bornstein by the pronoun she suggests she prefers: *she*. The text has caused her to become stone, to become the reader who cannot be moved or repositioned. This student's response is brief and continues in much the same way throughout. I could, of course, situate the student as not having completed the assignment by claiming that "nothing happens" (something that students might see as not a "valid" answer in the course); but in a sense, "nothing" is something that happens. The question this student never gets to hear herself ask (at least in this piece) is: why is nothing happening? She puts this "nothing" on Bornstein citing her ideas as "too far out to do anything" to her. In the endnote, I write:

I agree with you that Bornstein's ideas seem very far out in terms of what we are all used to with regard to gender. I am less interested in the "far out-ness" of Bornstein's ideas and more interested in the "nothing" that is happening to you. For me, when someone is saying something that seems far-fetched or over the top, I do feel things and think things that aren't nothing. Is that true for you? Can you try to further investigate this stance you are taking?

Is this the part where I tell you that next week this student says, "Oh yes, I see what I am doing now. I am attached to my binary thinking"? Instead, she focuses her final course reflection on neutrality. She explains: "I have been mostly neutral about gender. While other students spend a lot of time arguing, I think it's best to stay neutral." And something startles me about this language of neutrality and about how a student could walk out the doors of this particular course feeling neutral; after all, I had tried to disrupt them, to provide a safe classroom for discomfort. Then she says, in her final sentence, "This class certainly makes you think about what's out there and how there's always more than you think and how scared people are of whatever it is. Terrible things happen when people are scared." I notice something I noticed in that "nothing is happening" response—the metaphor of distance. Everything is "far out" or "out there." There is nothing "right here" for the student to touch; yet still she gestures at understanding. She mentions the "terrible things" she has learned can happen in the name of binary thinking. She does not, however, imagine human beings or specific identities or ideas "out there." She only imagines "whatever it is." I am interested in this student's writing not at all as a failure of pedagogy (I do not think of teaching in terms of successes or failures), but an instance of gesturing towards the possible, even if resistantly; the student knows there are possibilities. She does not, however, go on to articulate them. And because she does not articulate them, she is not writing the un-writeable, or imagining (at least not in her writing) what these possibilities might mean for her or for others. She is not yet entirely aware of "what's out there" might make possible for her thinking, her reading or writing. When the exercise of non-binary and

complicated thinking is still “far out” and “out there,” it is difficult to imagine, or even frightening to imagine. So we look at it only a few steps from where we began. And sometimes that’s as “far” as we are able to go. And from that distance, we can only hear so much.

*I never did decide between Mondale and Reagan. I never did finish interpreting Meet the Press, though I am sure I might be ready now. At my father's funeral, all his friends say how sturdy he was, how predictable and sound. It would be a lot to ask anyone to risk this—to make his being vulnerable, to leave it out overnight in winter to see if it will freeze, or crack. In this way, the risk is terrifying because always lurking behind the act is the possibility that what we know about ourselves, about the world is fragile, fragmented or not made of dualisms. And we do not always know what will happen then unless we can manage to do it once, and then recover, rebuild and re-imagine.*

I am acutely aware, as I try to understand the work of this course and the specific mergings of Queer Theory and composition in the classroom, of the difficulties of the project I have undertaken. Unlike current critical and feminist pedagogical projects, I do not have a rich named history to consult, though I expect queer pedagogies have been practiced in various ways for at least as long as feminist pedagogies. However, so often, after reading texts on critical, feminist and some other radical pedagogies, I find myself not only looking for the student writing in those texts but also looking for its specific connections to the teaching of composition. And primarily, I continue to look to my students for these answers. Binary thinking is built into not only our thinking about gender, but, as I learned from my students, is also built into our thinking about *thinking* and about writing. My students repeatedly reminded me that their binary understandings of gender were “actual and present,” but they were endlessly willing, in their writing and thinking, to move into that “realm of possibility,” to develop new ways of thinking about gender. And for the students to be able to imagine their identities, and others’, as more

fluid, more like water than they might have thought made it all that much easier to imagine writing this way as well.

Queering gender at the start of a composition course may make certain alternative epistemologies possible, may leave room for students to explore the various ways they have learned to think about themselves and about everything. A queer pedagogy for composition cannot necessarily be understood as or developed by “applying” queer theory to the composition classroom; it seems more than those connections arise out of the practice. In this sense, my students are still telling me, with each time I move through the course documents, transcripts and discussion boards, what queer pedagogies allow, what writing might turn to water in my hands. In returning both to the epigraph and to the metaphor my student, Johnnie Hart, offers in his response to the course, I hope to highlight the ways in which we all need a kind of striving to “be like water,” or as Hart puts it our thinking might “become watery.” It is not something to be achieved or arrived at, but a way of moving towards a kind of moving, a becoming.

#### **4. HOW TO WRITE LIKE A QUEER: COMPOSITION IN DRAG**

##### **I. THE PROBLEM OF STRUCTURE**

In some ways, the title of this chapter is a contradiction. By definition, the moment I say what it might mean to “write like a queer” or “write in queer way,” the terms and definitions would shift. “Queer” works like a sheet of ice—whatever we put there slips and slides and becomes impossible to pin down for more than a temporary moment. I hope this meditation on teaching and writing to be one of those temporary moments, a moment where while the ice remains ice, we might slow down the slippage enough to look closely at what it makes possible for the teaching of writing. Amy E. Winans contends, “crafting a queer pedagogy entails disrupting binary models of sexuality [and gender] in ways that engage with power, rather than obscuring such models within a language of tolerance with which we might seek to ‘cure’ homophobic students” (106). Here, I understand Winans as being concerned with something that I am also concerned with, something I discuss in chapter three: the problem of stable notions of gender and sexuality. I think that one aspect of pedagogies that might call themselves “queer” is to disrupt these models of power, in particular those models of gender and sexuality that confine our identities and our abilities to see more complex webs of possibilities as thinkers. However, one thing that can get left out, or at times tagged onto the end of discussions of queer pedagogies, is the connection to our primary project as teachers of composition—that project being to teach

students to write. I am interested in the question: what might the concerns of queer theory bring to the surface for students in terms of writing itself? Or, put another way, what might queer pedagogies make visible or possible in the teaching of writing as an art form, skill, process, and way of thinking. I use all of these descriptors to characterize writing because I believe writing *is* all of these things at the same time, or can be.

*I feel that my biggest hurdle in my writing, and what I had to learn about most, was the way in which I think on the page. I had always thought of thinking and writing as two separate things—first, I think, and then, I write. One of the best things I’ve learned though, is that this processing order isn’t necessarily right in all circumstances.\**

To think about these questions, I want to offer an account of two class meetings. The students, at this point in the course, were reading Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*, a book that attempts to trouble all forms of normativity and includes Warner’s opposition to gay marriage, discussions of the Clinton scandal and NYC’s zoning laws with regard to sex toy shops, and an in-depth analysis of how sexual shame operates. As someone concerned with queer pedagogies, I am interested in my students considering Warner’s ideas about normativity and queer thinking. However, I am also deeply invested in what my students can learn about writing as they consider the relation of normativity to writing itself *and* the relation of Warner’s ideas to his writing style. On this particular day, during this class meeting, I began casually, not really even imagining that class had begun, just by asking them what they thought of Warner’s book. And whatever my class

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\* from Jessica Poli’s “Laughing in the Paper God’s Face”

plan was for that day, here is an account of what happened from there, instead of whatever my plan might have been.

*I did try to be a real girl. In the eighth grade I swore, to my father's new wife, that I would give up my brother's old jeans, that I would stop swearing, that I would blow dry my hair in the mornings and stop tucking it back underneath what she and my father called "a ball cap." I couldn't bear it very many days. The kids at school were not so willing to let me change identities before their eyes. "You look weird," Greg Blackstein said. "Where's your Yankee hat?" Jodie Lipkin asked. They wanted to know where I had gone. They wanted the rules of my old identity, one I didn't so much shed as I left back at the house, tucked away, where it was safe.*

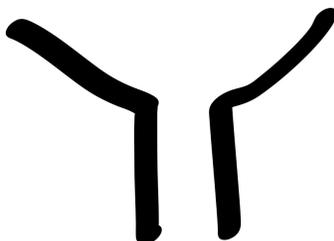
As she sits down in the front row, Laura says: *this book drives me a little crazy, he talks in circles.* "That's an interesting analysis of Warner," I say. "What makes you say circles?" It appears that Laura is still relaxed. She usually doesn't talk much in class but possibly because it seems like class hasn't officially started yet, she offers an explanation. "He just keeps looping back to the same stuff over and over and then changing it. I get all confused a lot. I mean, essays are supposed to have structure, at least that's what I learned." By this time, if I remember right, most of the students have arrived. I say, "Laura and I have just been talking about writing structure." They all sigh a bit, as would I if a teacher said that to me. Who wants to talk about structure? It's all so boring and rule-driven and formulaic. At least that's what I thought in my own high school and early college years. I ask them to start: "Who knows something about structuring an essay?" Johnnie raises his hand. "I don't know if I know anything," he says, "but I can tell you what I've been told." "Yes, tell me," I say. "Tell me everything you have been told." Johnnie says, "An essay's gotta be organized, and this guy isn't really organized as far as I can tell. I mean, that's why Laura said he... what'd you say...he talks around stuff over and over." Tearsa raises her hand, and asks, "Shouldn't books just be a longer version of essays? If Michael Warner took the state test on writing I took he'd get a big fat zero." They all laugh a bit. "How

do you get a high score on one of those tests?” I ask. Kelsey says, “You follow the five paragraph flow chart.” “What’s that?” I ask. “Is it an actual chart? Can you draw it for me?” I hand Kelsey the chalk. She goes to the board and draws five boxes, each connected by a line and numbers them.



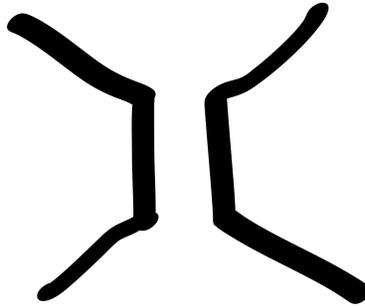
**Figure 1.** Numbered Boxes

Danielle chimes in, “I thought it was supposed to be the funnel method.” I ask Danielle if she can draw that model. She goes to the board and draws a funnel, wide on the top and skinny on the bottom.



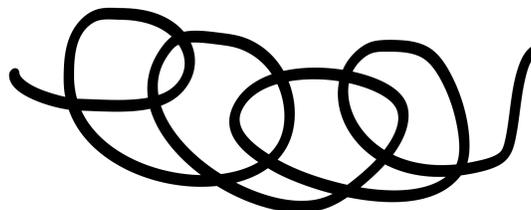
**Figure 2.** The Funnel Method 1

Johnnie adds, “I think it’s supposed to get wide again at the end. I prompt him to the board, and he adds another upside down funnel to Danielle’s. We all pause a moment, looking at the two drawings—one a series of boxes connected by “think” lines, the other an image of two funnels pressed together at their tips.



**Figure 3.** The Funnel Method 2

“Okay,” I said, “if you had to draw a model of Warner or Butler’s writing, what kind of model would you draw?” (Butler was someone they said also seemed to talk “in circles”) “Iggy, you draw it. What do you think it looks like?” Iggy walks slowly to the board, probably because I have just put him on the spot to do something that seems impossible to do. Iggy draws a sort of looping pattern on the board, circles crossing over and into one another.



**Figure 4.** Looping Pattern

Kelsey says, “That’s not really that different from the flow chart. Those lines are meant to connect the paragraphs just like those overlaps are supposed to.” I am fascinated by what’s on the board and by the possibilities it begins to offer in talking with students about structure, about how an essay is “structured.” I respond, “You say it’s not *that* different, does that mean it is slightly different?” “Well, yeah,” she says. “How?” I ask. Johnnie offers that *lines are different kinds of connectors than overlaps*. “Different how?” I ask. *Well lines are*, he laughs, *linear*, you

*know like straight thin things, like in a line.* “And...” I push him a bit further. *And overlaps are,* he laughs again, *overlaps.* I am compassionate and, of course, amused by this struggle—not because I am above my students’ struggle to name what we are seeing here, but because my students and I, at this moment, are having the same struggle—the same difficulty to articulate what a writer *does* (performance) rather than what a writer *says*. We go on, in our discussion, trying to describe the differences in these models. Students notice that, in what they started calling the “Warner Model” of loops and overlaps, it seems like the writing begins anywhere, at a sort of arbitrary point. Then Johnnie says, “It’s arbitrary, but not.” Tearsa says at one point, trying to illuminate how the overlaps are different from lines, “Warner’s model is like a revise-as-you-go kinda thing.” We spend this class and the next trying to describe Warner’s model, to articulate his structure. The students also describe the five-paragraph flow chart, noting its thin linear connections, its “boxed in” content. We talk about what it might mean for the “funnel” method to “boil a subject down” and then broaden it out again. We were, in some ways, talking about form and containment. And to write like a queer, at this moment, temporarily and problematically, meant to write like Warner or Butler, to write like a queer theorist, to write in a series of loops and overlaps that begin and end in a seemingly “arbitrary, but not” place.

*Even the bones in the human body are made primarily of water.*

In the next class, I told students to compose their next essay assignment using Warner’s model as the structure or “formula.” Marie asks as we are ending class: “So we write our own way, but we write within a model?” *Yes*, I said, as though I were some mysterious Zen master who puts his shoes on his head and walks out of the room. I must admit to not liking myself when I do this. It’s a cop out. It’s because writing is impossible and possible to teach. It’s

because I both can and cannot teach them to do it. It's because I both know and do not know how to write myself. These contradictions are another reason I find queer theory and queer methodologies to be so compatible with writing and the teaching of writing: queer theory is always in the business of contradictions and paradoxes. Paradox and contradiction are the conditions under which writing is structured. It is our burden to find a way to teach students to write under these conditions whereby both their agency *and* their writing is, to return to Judith Butler's language, "riven with paradox."

*We must maintain certain social responses based on our gender; we must maintain certain looks and levels of hygiene based on our gender; we must maintain our identities as a member of one particular gender. It is all maintenance, and maintenance is boring, tedious and dreadful.\**

## II. MOVING LIKE A QUEER

Before students took on this difficult challenge of structuring their essays in the "Warner Model," I wanted to spend some time in class discussion considering with them the moves Warner makes as a writer. I asked them to pay attention to his moves, to try to mimic or imitate them in their own writing. This is a similar project to the one Mariolina Salvatori describes when she writes, "I try to teach readers to become conscious of their mental moves, to see what such moves produce, and to learn to revise or to complicate those moves as they return to them in light of their newly constructed awareness of what those moves did or did not make possible" (447). Salvatori connects this awareness of reading to the work of writing, contending that the

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\* from Iggy Kelly's "Fluidity is Key"

more aware a *reader* becomes of these “mental moves,” the more aware this reader becomes of her moves *as a writer*. In class, we generated a list of things Warner does as a reader of texts in his writing, his mental moves, so to speak. Here is a partial collection of the students’ list:

- qualifies like crazy
- lots of dashes and commas
- uses humor, or sarcasm
- mixes personal private matters with public ones
- uses “I”
- circles back to the same stuff
- quotes all kinds of sources, not just academic ones

This list became the list of moves they were to imitate in their writing for the next essay assignment. I have included below the essay assignment corresponding to this challenge to structure their essays using the “Warner Model.” Essay 3:

Michael Warner tells us that a “statistical norm has no moral value” (70). He spends several pages (53-60) interrogating the use of statistics as a pathway to normalcy and shame. He proposes his own theory about the way sexual statistics work. Re-read these pages in Warner, marking up the places you find most interesting or provocative. Type out all these places on a sheet of paper—places where Warner calls your attention to something specific (maybe something you had never thought of) about statistics. Try to get a list of 8-12 quotes. Print them out. Then maybe eat a sandwich. Then take the sheet with you to a computer and do some research. Start looking up any statistics you can find about sex, gender, or sexual behavior, etc. As you look at the statistics you find, think about how those statistics reflect or seem to be in conversation with Warner. Choose one set of statistics. Provide me with the link to the website where the statistics can be found. Then answer the following: What do the statistics want you to believe? How can you tell? What kind of language is used to talk about the statistics? How do you put these statistics into conversation with Warner? (In other words, use the quotes from in Warner and close read the quotes *and* the statistics in your paper.) Finally, has Warner changed the ways you imagine what statistics do, or what they are?

I want to turn now to a piece of writing that came out of this essay assignment using the “Warner Model” and using some of Warner’s moves. The day students turned in these papers, I asked them to answer three questions, and to write their answer on the back of their papers. My questions were written using language from our discussion, language the students themselves

had generated to describe the structure of Warner's writing. My questions were the following: 1) *At what point did you begin "arbitrarily, but not"?* 2) *What do you loop back to and change (or revise) each time you looped back?* 3) *At what point did you end arbitrarily, but not?* One of my students, Jessica Poli, whose paper I have excerpted below and whose permission I have to share both her name and work, gave the following answers: 1) Began with being a virgin. 2) Looped back again and again to statistics. 3) Ended with not buying sunscreen. Her answers seem an unlikely trio, a set of disconnected subjects, but it is fascinating to watch Poli enact her version of Warner's structure, making this unlikely trio a structural delight—arbitrary, but not. Below are excerpts from the beginning, middle and end of her essay, "Sex in Numbers":

I've never had sex, and apparently I'm a part of a whopping 20% of girls who haven't before they turned 19. Since we've all mastered at least our high school Integrated Algebra class, we know this means that 80% of girls are sexually active before 19. In Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*, he writes in reference to statistics, "People have come to rely on these numbers in evaluating the validity of their own sex lives" (54). Oh no, it's happening. I'm reevaluating my entire lack of a sexual life. Someone get me a big slice of hunky boy love because I can't go on, I NEED SEX NOW! This thinking is part of a theory Warner invites us to explore with him—that statistics are often mistaken for standards, and that we wrongly use these statistics to form judgments on our own behaviors.

The National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families is an organization whose goal is to educate others about their code of sexual ethics based on the Bible. They are against premarital sex, pornography, gay marriage, and unmarried couples cohabitating. Even without knowing the organization's purpose or values, however, you could probably get the gist of their attitude just by reading the set of statistics they put together for their website, [www.nationalcoalition.org](http://www.nationalcoalition.org). Here are some of the examples of statistics they offer, all of which support a part of their values they try to place in their message. "Married people are healthier than other adults." So, get hitched as soon as possible or you might catch a cold—an interesting spin on encouraging people to get married. "For every ten men in church, five are struggling with pornography." I now have this very unfortunate mental image of five men sitting in church pews with *Playboy* tucked inside their Bibles . . . *struggling*. Because pornography is obviously some deathly affliction that we have to ward off. "Cohabitating couples have twice the break up rate of married couples." Why buy the cow when the milk is free? The statistic clearly shows that the Coalition is against cohabitating couples. "Up to 20% of couples now report that they have sex no more than ten

times a year, qualifying them for what experts call a ‘sexless marriage.’” Who are these experts, and what exactly is their expertise? Do they sit in an armchair with a pen and paper in a married couple’s bedroom, waiting anxiously to see if they have sex? This statistic shows that the Coalition is actually all for sex—as long as it’s not outside of marriage.

The language used in these statistics feeds into an attitude the Coalition conveys. Men are “struggling” with pornography, as if it’s an addiction they’re sent to rehab to beat. Speaking of addictions, another statistic claims, “One out of every six women grapples with addiction to pornography.” The word “grapple” is used the same way “struggle” was, to make it seem as if watching pornography is something that must be overcome. I’m also curious as to what they would say an addiction was—do these addicted men and women watch porn once a day, twice a day, three times a day? How much does it interfere with their lives? Do they forget to feed their children because they’re so busy watching *Naughty Nurses VII*? Pornography is often treated as if it were an unhealthy habit that needs to be stopped. In the case of the Coalition, they treat it this way because they believe it violates their morals. I’ve seen a couple naughty nurses videos, and I don’t think I’m going to Hell, but the Coalition might have a different opinion.

Poli’s essay continues and closes with the following:

What the Coalition is doing with their statistics is very interesting when thinking about Warner’s position. They are using statistics to back up their morals, to raise awareness of their message. The statistic itself, however, does no work in creating or supporting morals—it is only a measurement of what *some* people *say* they do. Warner is a pretty clever guy. To me, “Statistics” was a boring high school math class, statistics were fun facts that I could sometimes use in a speech to prove a point. But if I listen to Warner, I’m now skeptical, not necessarily of statistics themselves, but of how people use them, why they’re using them, and what they’re trying to make me think by using them. The idea of blindly following statistical standards as a way of attaining normalcy is new to me. When I’ve looked at statistics in the past, I must admit I’ve done a fair bit of comparison between the numbers and myself, and questioned, to some extent, how normal I was based on those numbers. I’m not so sure I’ll do that again. Is every statistic just a pathway to the golden gates of Normalville, where houses line the streets in identical rows, all the grass is half an inch high and the sun shines all day? I think so, and I am definitely not rushing off to buy any sunscreen.

What I find interesting about Poli’s paper is the compelling voice and surprising movements Warner’s “structure” seemed to allow or encourage in her writing. She experiments with humor and sarcasm, mixes the personal and the public, deploys a narrative “I,” and uses dashes, circling back. In contrast, I have described her prior papers (one of which appears in

chapter three) as stiffer, more “structured” even, more contained. Working in a new structure, a new set of possibilities with a new name, Poli is able to disrupt some of her normative conceptions of essays, to write not inside a container, but *beside* a non-normative model that queer theory brings into view.

*Revision is not easy—revision of the self, revision of writing. When I reread the stories of my past through the eyes of my sixteen-year-old self writing in a notebook, working through the revision of the self in writing. I was the tourist in a gendered village. I left these notebooks out around the house for anyone to see. If one of my parents or siblings ever read a single word, they never said so.*

After reading many of the students’ papers that attempted to “follow” the “Warner Model,” I began to think differently myself about structures, recalling something Judith Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*: norms themselves don’t do violence. In fact, she says, we need norms to live and live well. But what we *do* with norms—how we form and enforce their power—is the important question. Jessica Poli’s essay calls this question to my attention when she writes about the problematic use of statistics and their troubling relationship to normativity. She writes that it’s not the statistics themselves, but *how people use them, why they’re using them, and what they’re trying to make me think by using them*. Likewise, I wonder if the funnel method, or the five-paragraph essay, as norms themselves, are not responsible for the possible reductions that seem connected to their containment. Perhaps it is my own thinking about these structures—how I imagine what they are doing and why, or how I enforce their authority as a teacher that’s causing the forms to *appear* to fail, or to seem like formal failures.

*In any one body, there are two types of muscle: voluntary skeletal muscles and involuntary smooth muscles. In this sense, only some movement is about choice.*

After all, as a writing teacher, I am responsible for teaching my students about structure, about the shapes essays can take. And perhaps one of the things writing in queer theory offers to student writers and to writing teachers, is the opportunity to imagine, describe, and invent alternative structures—ones that encourage and evoke (for me and for my students) movement rather than containment, ones that value shapes that are not necessarily linear, ones that are messier perhaps, ones that are “arbitrary, but not.” Structure is not, as it turns out, the enemy, but what I do with structure as a teacher of writing is what matters. How might we rethink or revolutionize structure? How might we build new systems of organization guided by queerer, more fluid and flexible principles. Karen Kopelson asserts: “A queer [. . .] pedagogy often strives to confuse, as it strives to push thought beyond circumscribed divisions—strives to push thought beyond what can be thought” (20). In my class, what we called the “Warner Model” temporarily caused confusion and then “[pushed] our thoughts beyond what could be thought” by opening up the possibility of new structures for thinking and writing. Writing like a queer means to think of structure as thin, wet, queer ice, temporary and unstable—it means, as Jessica Poli writes, to begin with virginity, to loop around to statistics over and over, and to end by not buying the sunscreen.

Confusion and disorientation are not strangers to some compositionists, as I have discussed in earlier chapters. I want to highlight here how confusion is already a part of our thinking about teaching writing and how queer theory and queer methodologies might offer a particular kind of confusion—one that can be embodied and practiced by students and teachers alike. For example, James Slevin reminds us in *Introducing English*:

Allowing ourselves as teachers to become confused in the face of students’ questions and needs is perhaps the best thing we can do to become their teachers. Embracing this kind of disorientation seemed then, and still seems today, at the

heart of composition's work, especially as it makes possible the critical examination of any disciplines intellectual "canon of methods." (32)

Slevin takes his term "canon of methods" from Robert Scholes's *The Rise and Fall of English*, and in some ways my project here is to push on the boundaries of the "canon of methods" used to teach, describe, and evaluate writing. And while Slevin refers to the "canon of methods" teachers of writing have used in composition, I think this critical examination applies to any teacher's individual "canon of methods" as well. For me, the class in which these discussions and writing assignments occurred was an attempt at experimenting with and reinventing "the canon of methods" I had used as a teacher. Both my students and I needed to examine and reconsider our "canon of methods," even as their canon and mine might, at times, be of different sorts.

Certainly imitation is part of a long tradition of methods used by writers and writing teachers. But, I think it is worth considering, who and what are students imitating and why? Confusion and disorientation as concepts are not the property of queer theory or queer pedagogies. Slevin is not a queer theorist. But Kopelson's notion of confusion is informed primarily by queer theory, offering us a lens through which to radicalize confusion, to face its danger, its risk, and its undeniable connection to embodied writers and lived experience. I taught this particular class in the spirit of disorientation; I write here, in these chapters, in that same spirit. I agree wholeheartedly, but queerly, with Slevin, that I need to "become confused" in order to be a good teacher. In the same way, I am asking students to "become confused" to be better writers.

*The primary function of muscles in a body is to cause motion or produce force. To do the work of contracting and expanding, muscles need oxygen and energy, provided from the body's blood. Some muscle fibers are relentlessly diligent and will allow a body to work for a long time, repeatedly stretching and pulling, stretching and pulling. This intense motion calls for a constant*

*supply of blood. Muscle fibers that need a rich supply of blood and can work intensely without rest are red muscle fibers.*

### III. NAMING THE PARTS

It is always fascinating to me how much intellectual and creative energy can be generated by giving something a new name. I spend a great deal of time in class asking my students to invent more names for what a writer might do in an essay. Queer theorist and performance artist Kate Bornstein writes in *Hello, Cruel World*, “I have this idea that every time we discover that the names we’re being called are somehow keeping us less than free, we need to come up with new names for ourselves, and that the names we give ourselves must no longer reflect a fear of being labeled outsiders, must no longer bind us to a system that would rather see us dead” (36-7). For queer subjectivity, new names are a matter of survival. When I first began teaching composition courses just over ten years ago, I was (and it seemed at times my students were as well) frustrated with the language already in place to talk about writing and to talk about being in the world. And while, in terms of writing, the name “thesis statement” is not inherently problematic, I think that this particular naming has come to limit rather than expand our ideas about what essays might *do*. And so, in the spirit of “queering the brew,” as Harriet Malinowitz put it in her book *Textual Orientations*, I ask students to invent new names, new kinds of structures, new ways of calling into being what their essays, and the essays they read, can *do*. As a class we continue to practice naming together, inventing a common language among us—something we have done more accidentally and implicitly before, but something that became more purposeful and explicit in this particular class discussion. I began by handing out to students the following

excerpts—two taken from the final paragraphs of student essays written for Essay 1, and one paragraph Bornstein uses to conclude a chapter. Part of my classroom practice is to blur the boundaries between the student writers and the published writers offered as readings, and this was my goal in constructing this handout. James E. Seitz puts it this way in *Motives for Metaphor*:

But if student writing is to be read *as* writing, with the same concerns that animate the reading of those texts on course syllabi, then teachers of English will have to be willing to mix their metaphors. That is to say, they will have to be willing to merge student texts with the official material of their courses, so that the disjunctive discourses of student writers and experienced writers can be investigated together, often in the same class meeting and with the same set of terms. (202)

The handout I constructed appeared as follows:

#### The Movement of Concluding: Three Excerpts

If I could go back and have a conversation with little Kelsey, while she was waiting to be rescued by the boys [while playing imaginary Star Wars games], I would give her a couple of pointers on growing up a woman. I would tell her to get up, walk out of the tree house, and go play with her friends. [...] I would understand little Kelsey's reasoning behind allowing herself to be a victim. I would see what influences have brought her to sitting in that house playing the helpless princess. And finally, I would tell her that she should do what she wants. If she would like to be Luke Skywalker, she should go be Luke Skywalker and if she wanted to be Princess Leia waiting to be rescued, then she should be Princess Leia. But I would be sure to ask her one thing: who were those boys to tell her who she could or could not be? She could be Princess Leia, a woman, and still fight the bad guys. No one ever said a Princess couldn't rescue herself.

—Kelsey Fagan “My Journey to Womanhood”

This idea that I am searching for truth, which is ultimately what I believe Bornstein is searching for as well, is never-ending. If I were to think against what I am generally trapped to think, then my truth would indeed be beyond my gender, my skin, or my sexual relations. How would I describe something that is intangible and quite frankly non-existent to our language? After all, our language limits us as well. The basis of gender is even imprinted in how we speak. In search for truth, I am pushing through all the lies that I have been amid. If I drop every lie that I have ever lived, what is left in my hand? That to me is what I fear: the bare-nakedness of what I am made of. I fear this because for once, I would be

seeing the truth. If I imagine that truth, I would be an alien—something so queer from our view point of truth that it would be frightening.

—Johnnie Hart “My Queerish Truth”

Our culture is obsessed with desire: it drives our economy. We come right out and say we’re going to stimulate desire for goods and services, and so we’re bombarded daily with ads and commercial announcements geared to make us desire things. No wonder the emphasis on desire spills over into the rest of our lives. No wonder I get panicked reactions from audiences when I suggest we eliminate gender as a system; gender defines our desire, and we don’t know what to do if we don’t have desire. Perhaps the more importance a culture places on desire, the more conflated become the concepts of sex and gender.

—Kate Bornstein *Gender Outlaw*

I brought in these three sets of concluding paragraphs with the idea that we might name the moves we saw, describe them rhetorically, aesthetically, even grammatically in order to open up some new possibilities for how we can think about ending an essay or coming to conclusions. I chose these excerpts based on their different moves, and not necessarily because I thought any particular one was a model for concluding. I there are an infinite number of models to choose from, and that we could put together a new model if we wanted. But I wanted us to practice, explicitly, the naming of writerly moves. We started with the first example. Students read the entire sheet silently to themselves, and then I asked Kelsey to read her paragraph out loud to the class. When she was done, I asked students to reread the first sentence. *What is Kelsey doing in that first sentence?* Shannon says, “she’s talking to herself as a kid.” And she’s right, though she’s not quite getting at the kind of answer I imagined. I try again. *Yeah, she is. What would you call that?* Iggy raises his hands and says in a questioning tone, “a hypothetical? Something, like, she can’t actually do.” I nod my head in agreement, yet still feel confused about how to bring them to new language, so I just keep pushing. *What would you call doing that?* I ask. I ignore Johnnie’s hand, only because of his gift with metaphor, and how deeply I have relied on him for this kind of invention in the past. I repeat the question: *What would you call doing that?* There

are a few silent moments, and finally Kyle raises his hand and says, “I’d call it setting up a conditional, you know like an if/then kinda thing, like in logic proofs.”

*The human ear is responsible for detecting sound, for listening. It is also responsible for balance, for the ability to maintain position.*

I’m excited by Kyle’s answer. Even though the language he is using is familiar, he’s using it outside of its usual context, and so its relation to writing is not taken for granted. I am not, at this point in the conversation, quite sure what kind of relation it is, which usually means we’re onto something. I paraphrase him on the board writing: *setting up logic proofs—if/then*. I move us on to the following sentence. I read it aloud. *What’s she doing now?* I ask. Someone says, “she’s repeating the ‘then’ part of the proof, like the ‘if’ is still there but she’s going on with the ‘thens.’” We describe what they start calling “extending the second part of the conditional,” a phrase which also made its way to the board. We talk about how this might be rhetorically powerful. Students notice the repetition of “I would.” We focus on its music, on what the repetition did to our reading. And while I do not believe in the separation of form and content, I was excited by the possibilities of what was happening, how we had moved away (in some sense) from what the writing *said* and were moving toward what the writing *did*. Students noticed Kelsey’s re-introduction of the “if” part of the proof when she talks about Luke Skywalker, but how she moves not to what she would tell her younger self, but what she would *ask*. We talked about how that might be a “variation” or a branching away from the pattern. *I like it though*, Danielle says, *I like how it repeats but then veers away from the pattern slightly. You almost don’t notice.*

*It's funny. All you have to do is say something nobody understands and they'll do practically anything you want them to.\**

We spent a few class meetings looking at these paragraphs and naming their moves. Students noticed the different ways Johnnie Hart was using the “logical proof.” Some of the most interesting moves students noticed in Johnnie’s paragraph were “showing his underwear” (which was the name Iggy gave to the idea of admitting one’s fears or shortcomings, what I might call self-implication) and “the hard bold truth” (which was the name Danielle gave to Johnnie’s short bold claims in the center of his paragraph). We began to talk about how they might imitate some of these moves, how they might use these new names as strategies for writing conclusions. Then, the conversation turned to Bornstein’s piece. The students saw some of the same moves from both Kelsey and Johnnie’s essays, noting the repetition of “no wonder” and noticing Bornstein’s use of two “hard bold truths” in the first sentence. Toward the end of the discussion, I asked students to note some moves Bornstein makes that they do not see in the other paragraphs. Marie says, “The ‘we’ thing. Johnnie and Kelsey don’t use ‘we,’ but Bornstein does.” Shannon interrupts, *Can you do that? Speak for everyone like that?* I’m intrigued by this discussion, and ask, “Can you? What would you call that?” Kyle says, warmly and laughing a bit, *Well, I mean, I guess you can ‘cause there it is.* The students all laugh. Jennifer, who rarely speaks up in class, says, sarcastically, *I’d call it “gathering the followers.”* I write this one on the board. I prompt her again. “Great name,” I say, “what do you mean by that?” Jennifer sits up, *I mean, some readers, just if you say “we” immediately believe they think what you think. It’s tricky,* she says, smirking a bit. We spent some time talking this through, this language of coercive inclusion and its possible effects.

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\* from J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, as spoken by Holden Caulfield.

Finally, I ask if there are any other moves in Bornstein worth noting. Johnnie says, *She goes soft at the end.* The class bursts out laughing, of course, with all of Bornstein's discussion of sex, gender roles, and her own sex-change surgery. I'm laughing too, but try to bring us back to discussion. *Yeah, hilarious Johnnie, but let's attend to the writing part. Because you are serious, right?* Johnnie replies, *Yeah, I am serious. The "perhaps," it's super gentle, like maybe or possibly.* Danielle chimes in: *It might seem like you shouldn't do that either, like end on saying "maybe." Shouldn't you end with something a bit stronger?* I push, "Why? Strong how?" Danielle replies. *It's like the "hard bold truths" feel more like facts. In high school, my one English teacher said to state everything like it's a fact. It's more believable.* I feel self-conscious. I try hard not to make certain kinds of high school English lessons seem irrelevant or wrong. I do understand the contexts and value systems informing such lessons. *Let's look back at Bornstein for a second,* I say. *Why might she have "gone soft"?* A few small giggles from the back. *It's tough stuff,* Kyle says, *you can't just "hard bold truth" it the whole time. People will just drop the book and call you a freak.*

*When a man says I, he means one or the other. The I he means is present when he says I. And when he says You or It, the I of one or the other basic word is also present. Being and saying I are the same. Saying I and saying one of the two basic words are the same. Whoever speaks one of the basic words enters into the word and stands in it.\**

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\* from Martin Buber's *I and Thou*

#### IV. GRAMMAR IS QUEER

I'd like to say the "grammar lesson" I am about to describe was planned, but it wasn't. In fact, on this particular day, we were supposed to discuss a particular section of Michael Warner, but something else happened instead. As the students arrive at the start of class, Marie raises her hand and says, *Stacey, you know that queer theorist we read sentences by on the board?* I smile, "which one?" Marie looks down at her notebook. *Butler*, she says, *Judith Butler*. I nod my head. *Well*, Marie says sort of smiling, *she won an award for being, like, a really bad writer. I saw it on the internet. There's a prize for it and everything. And I just thought it was funny that we were looking at sentences by a person who won a bad writing award.* The class giggles. I am laughing too. I know about Butler's sentence from "Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time," a sentence that garnered the honor of the worst and most incomprehensible sentence of that particular year. But what do I do here? I'm caught. I'm out of the closet. I am showing them sentences written by people who have been said to be decidedly incomprehensible writers, impossible to read.

While I acknowledge the density of Butler's prose, I value a writer trying to say something that feels impossible to say. I value even a writer trying to find out what they are saying while they are saying it. In my teaching, I have noticed students make many grammatical "mistakes" or write jumbled and incomprehensible sentences primarily when they are trying to say something they've never said before, something they've never thought before. I decide, without preparation, to continue with this dialogue. *The bad writing award was for a particular sentence*, I say. *Whose got internet access? Let's find it.* Sure enough, a student is able to call up the sentence on her cell phone. She reads it aloud, and I transcribe it to the board:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

I suspect, as I see the terms appear on the board, that this could be a tremendous pedagogical failure. Can I even really define all the words in this passage? Do I have the knowledge to explain something tangible about Althusser's role in this quote? Do I know what Butler is even talking about here? Can I, as someone who is in some sense a "professional reader," even read this sentence? We're all staring at it. Some students have given up and seem to be waiting for me. Others, I can see, are reading the passage again and again. I feel proud that they're doing that, but I am deeply fearful they are about to be let down. "What's Althusserian theory?" Johnnie asks. "It's probably made up," Kyle says, laughing a bit. My laugh turns to a nervous laugh. I am filled with the kind of self-doubt that puts the whole exploration in question. How can this sentence, this "bad writing award sentence," teach them something about writing?

*I got to play Hansel in the school production of Hansel and Gretel. I had practiced being shoved into the oven. I had watched my brothers intently, practicing my protective boyish faces. And I was a good Hansel. And I felt at home in Hansel's clothing. I felt, at last, like someone's brother. And when the play is over, the audience claps and cheers, my family in the third row—my brothers punching one another and laughing, my mother looking down. But the rest of the room is in love with us. They love the play. They love Hansel. And I am soaking up my boyhood, until Mrs. Toriani says into the microphone. "These children are wonderful little actors, so wonderful that Hansel was played by Stacey Waite, quite a talented little girl." There's a pause. There's the sense of surprise. I'm mortified. I am, in the end, no Hansel.*

I decide it's a mistake to worry about what the passage means. *It's a grammar lesson*, I tell myself, but don't say to them. *I'm a poet*, I tell myself, *I can do this*. I take one of those big

breaths. *Let's take it in parts*, I say, *grammatical parts*. *Let's start with the moves*. I add some slashes to the sentences, like I would in poetry:

The move from a structuralist account/ in which capital is understood to structure social relations/ in relatively homologous ways/ to a view of hegemony/ in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation/ brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure,/ and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory/ that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects/ to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure/ inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony/ as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

“What kind of sentence is this?” I ask. There’s complete silence. I wait. I wait, as I have been taught by many teaching mentors to wait. Nothing happens. No jokes, no tries. Nothing. I try a different question. “What makes this sentence so hard to read?” I ask. Tearsa says, “you think it’s hard to read too, right?” I nod. “Yes, very hard,” I say. I wait again. Danielle speaks up finally, *it's like it has parentheses missing*. I ask Danielle to put them in and she does.

The move from a structuralist account (in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways) to a view of hegemony (in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation) brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory (that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects) to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony (as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power).

The parentheses appear in some of the same places as my slashes, but they seem to work better, to trigger some discussion. “Whoa,” Johnnie says, “that is better actually. I mean, I still don’t quite get it, but I feel like I can read it somewhat.” I ask Johnnie, “Start with the first two lines. What does Danielle’s punctuation do to help?” He sits a moment. He turns to the rest of the class. “I don’t know, it’s better, isn’t it?” he asks them. “It is,” Danielle says, “like with my parenthesis, I at least know that what’s inside the parenthesis in the first two lines is a definition of ‘structuralist account’ even though I don’t know what the definition means or anything.” Kelsey adds, “it means that money controls everything in the same way, I think. Capital is

money, right?” They are sorting it through some, and I am just watching. I am doing nothing, mostly because I am still not quite sure what we are doing, or if it will be worth anything in the end. The students talk a few more moments about meaning.

*It's not something we talk about. But teachers feel a bodily vulnerability when they turn their backs to write on the chalkboard, their backs exposed, the movements of their hands watched, the curve of their words appearing against their bodies.*

I ask, “Danielle, how’d you know where to put the parenthesis?” She walks to the board to show me. “It’s just where the pauses are, where she is qualifying stuff. It’s like a more convoluted version of Warner,” she says. They all laugh. She’s right, in a way. It really is. Queer theorists write like this often. “Is it ‘cause what she’s saying is way complicated?” Kyle asks. “Seems like it,” Johnnie says, “I mean, if you could say it an easier way, why wouldn’t you?” What gets sparked is an interesting discussion of difficulty, of the ways it might be necessary, of the ways in obscures *and* illuminates meaning at once. I try something toward the end of class, after we’ve struggled with this grammar and meaning for over an hour. “You try,” I say to them, “you try a sentence that is grammatically identical to this bad one. Try one and turn it in to me on your way out.” Here are two examples of the sentences I received from students at the end of class that day:

The move from Australia (in which news is understood to be a way of finding out what funny or strange things happened) to the US (in which news is a way of scaring everyone about tornados, murders and school shootings) brought the question of purpose into our thinking about media, and marked a shift from a form of entertainment and information (that takes important events that encourage a society as the most important subject) to one in which the well-known and accepted human fears are preyed upon as a means of control (as it is bound up in news sources and different cultures).

Coming from my parents’ house (in which a late night out is 11 PM) to college (in which a late night out is morning) brought the question of my decision-making to

light, and signaled a change from my being motivated by immediate satisfaction (that tells me to do whatever I want) to my being more even-headed (as even-headed-ness was previously bound up with my parents lameness).

Almost every student used parentheses to break up their sentences. And, every single one imitated not only Butler's grammar, but also some of her content—everyone had, for example, understood that the sentence was about a shift in understanding, that the sentence was about movement between a *before* and *after*. Perhaps a queer grammar is always a kind of movement, composing sentences that understand themselves as movement. Perhaps the presence or lack of parentheses has something to do with the ways grammar regulates. It is, after all, a regulatory practice. And it is something queer indeed to *play* with grammar—to put up and take away its markers, to imitate a style that obscures meaning or reflects a meaning already and always obscured. Perhaps in the same we might teach ourselves to look at identity differently, to look at structuring an essay differently. We might also look at sentences differently—as having more possibilities that we initially imagined. I can't help but think (while I acknowledge the denseness and difficulty of Butler's prose) that her queerness, and her concern with queer understandings of culture, sometimes signal her prose as impossible, incomprehensible, unrecognizable.

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)\**

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\* from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

## V. COMPOSITION IN DRAG

While I appreciate your wanting to get your students involved in their readings, I worry about how much these students talk about themselves in their writings. Have you begun to address why they might not want to use “I” in an essay about *Moby Dick*? I know your teaching style is performative and conversational, but I also think you would be doing your students a disservice to suggest to them that their college instructors are going to want them to abandon formal, long standing conventions of language arts.

Mifflinburg Area High School Supervisor  
From an Evaluation of My Teaching, 1999

In order to actualize and explore the radical pedagogical possibilities of queer pedagogies, I also want consider the ways that gender performance and theories of drag performance help us not only to identify the relationship between drag and composition but also help us to develop drag and performance infused teaching practices—perhaps as a component or particular tributary of theorized practices of queer pedagogy. It seems useful first to answer the question: why drag? What is so useful about the concept of drag and gender performance in thinking about composition? Why would drag even be a productive or logical place to begin thinking about composition at all? We can start to answer these questions by first examining some of the various ways that composition and rhetoric find themselves located in positions and characterizations that are also inhabited by (or at least perceived to be inhabited by) drag. We can begin with the colloquial phrase: “That’s all just rhetoric”—something we say when we mean that what is being said/written/communicated is a performance, is decorative deceit that conceals and masks real, stable truths, or that what is being said means nothing, that the performance of the words is hollow. “To many people, the term *rhetoric* means speech or writing that is highly ornamental or deceptive or manipulative. You might hear someone say,

‘That politician is just using a bunch of rhetoric’ or ‘the rhetoric of that advertisement is very deceptive’” (Faigley and Selzer 61). It is useful here to make this connection explicit: One of the reasons drag shows and gender bending performances can be so threatening (and titillating) is that the performances are seen as trickery, as concealment of a stable bodily truth that while it may not be known is there waiting to be uncovered—meaning found as opposed to meaning made. The genitals are there under the clothes; these genitals are truth; these genitals are under the composition, under the rhetoric (the “dress of thought”, the suit and tie, the jeans). And of course, it is far more complicated than this to understand both drag and rhetorical performance as neither is merely a putting on.

*I still cannot help but think to myself that Kate Bornstein is still Al Herman deep down inside. Despite all of the open-minded discussion class, I don't know how I feel about a male to female transgender “joining” the women. I hate saying it because it sounds close-minded and selfish, but because they were originally men, I just feel wary about it.\**

In addition, like composition and rhetoric, queer theory (the field under which drag is most often studied) has no real disciplinary home. As Judith Halberstam asserts:

The liability of not having an institutional home, of course, is that the study of sexuality is central to no single discipline or program and in fact may be taught everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. However, the advantage of the stealth approach to the study of sexuality is that it remains multidisciplinary, a promiscuous rogue in a field of focused monogamists. (362)

We can hear some of the same anxieties about composition and rhetoric—that it “is central to no single discipline or program and in fact may be taught everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.”

For example, in “A New Canon for a New Rhetoric Education,” Zapico and Cos suggest: “At present rhetoric appears to be more of an interdisciplinary area of study than a specific academic

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\* from Jennifer Bracken’s “Outlawing Outlaws”

discipline” (62). I am struck time and time again by both queer theory and composition's "position" in the academy and how many theorists and scholars are worrying over this issue.

*I'm not sure if I was rejecting my gender so much as expressing my love for the mask-wearing superhero, but it sure got some people ruffled. Adults were telling me I was a girl, even though I dressed up as Batman on purpose, as though they were afraid I was confused. I knew I was a girl at the time.\**

Cicero's notion that "language is the dress of thought" might be an interesting place to think through questions about thought itself as the "thing" being dressed up and about what it means to "dress up." If we queer, or twist Cicero's notion, we might say then that language is thought in drag. If, in the metaphor, thought is the body that gets "dressed" up, we then have to contend with the instability and fractured nature of the body and its meaning. Of course, Cicero is not a likely source, in many ways, for queer notions of rhetoric, as remarks that "The universal rule, in oratory, as in life, is to consider propriety" (Benson and Prosser 233). And anyone who has ever been to a drag show, even the most upscale burlesque of them all, would not say that propriety and decorum is part of the creative expression *or* the rhetorical space. But perhaps to queer Cicero's notion of "the dress" is a way of bending traditional understandings of what it means to convince through subversion rather than through persuasion *per se*.

*Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes, never unfold too much, or tell the whole story.\**

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\* from Chloe Bolon's "How I Came to Be Myself"

\* from Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

Drag allows us to think through not only the unstable and fluid aspects of performance, but to also think through the idea of the body and of identity (which that unstable performance can also destabilize). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself. (21)

As alluded to in the introduction to this piece, drag is often seen as a fake or deceitful (even if playfully deceitful) imitation of something real. If I dress up as a man, I am imitating this “real thing” called a “man” and/or I am dressing up as this “real thing” called a “man” even though the “real thing” I am is called a “woman.” Drag, cross-dressing, gender bending are, of course, often seen as forms of imitation, copies of something real. And let us not forget how important imitation is to all of the ancient rhetoricians. Cicero tells us, after all: “Next let practice be added [to imitation], whereby in copying he may reproduce the pattern of his choice and not portray him as time and again I have known many copyists to do, who in copying hunt after such characteristics as are easily copied or even abnormal and possibly faulty. For nothing is easier than to imitate a man’s style of dress . . .” (320). I am interested in Cicero’s concern that the copying could be “abnormal” or “faulty,” that copying has no value—that is, unless the copier can make “choices” and adopt the “style” as, in some way, his own authentic style.

*My first grade teacher was Mrs. Killian. She lets me take home the class gerbil on weekends. I do not like the gerbil, but I understand the gesture. She’s old and fragile and thinks of me as the care-taking kind—responsible and sound in judgment. She catches me and Jillian Becker trading kisses in the jacket room. She tells my mother I am “confused about my role—perhaps it’s the four older brothers,” she says. And she’s kind and gentle enough for my mother not to be threatened or alarmed. But my mother does begin to dress me more gender appropriately, crying one morning when I refuse the dress and barrettes. Second grade, Mrs. Walsh. I remember her very little. She did not like my handwriting and was my first “B” grade—*

*penmanship. I spent second grade failing at the alphabet sheets, not touching my capitals to the top line, missing the cursive “z” over and over. I cry at the bus stop. My mother says, “no one’s perfect” and signs the report card without hesitation. My father leaves my mother for his nurse. He leaves a note on her pillow that says he “went with plan B.”*

Aristotle says, “We become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave actions.” Following this logic, we become “men” by performing “man acts.” We become “women” by performing “woman acts.” Anyone who has ever been to a good drag show would tell us how “convincing” the performers are, how like “real girls” or “real boys” the performers can seem. And could it not also be that we learn about gender, about its construction, through performances (through doing the performances, becoming the performances or even witnessing, watching, or listening to the performances)? My point here is to engage Butler’s argument in the pedagogical sense—meaning that not only can gender be seen as constructed performance exposed by drag but also that we *learn about* the constructedness of gender through performance itself. And that like the ways we learn of the constructedness of gender, we learn about language and about its rhetorical construction through performance of this kind.

Butler calls attention to ways in which drag exposes the constructedness of gender so that there can be no original to copy or imitate, no stable truth to mimic or mis-represent. But what good does it do us to be able to see the constructedness of gender (or, of language for that matter)? How does this change or refigure the way we might think about rhetoric or rhetorical education? Let us begin by “dressing up” Butler’s passage in rhetoric’s clothing. What would it mean for Butler (or for me via Butler) to situate rhetoric in the place of drag in order to say:

**Rhetoric** constitutes the mundane way in which **language** is appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all **language** is a kind of **impersonation** and approximation. If this is true, it seems there is no original or primary **truth** that **rhetoric** imitates [or represents], but *rhetoric* [as it is studied

in the pedagogy I want to argue for] *is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself.

What I want to address in this reformulation of Butler's passage are the ways in which drag and rhetoric have parallel, powerful radical potentials. If we think of rhetoric as the kind of imitation that Butler attributes to drag, we can also think through the pedagogical possibilities of teaching as though rhetoric is a kind of performative and imitative act. It seems important to mention here the various ways that Butler defines and redefines performance and performativity in order to highlight the specific kinds of performances that can lead to not only the constructedness of what is being performed but also to the subversion of what has constructed what is being performed. Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, extends out Derrida's notion of citation in order to redefine some of the complexities of performance and its subversive potential. She explains the ways in which the queer can "take up" or "cite" the very terms that shape homophobic discourse. She writes, "This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*" (232). I cannot help, of course, but hear the echo of the epigraph to this piece in which my own teaching performativity is "cited" as a problem for "discursive convention"—to which, of course, I say, *I certainly hope so*.

*All the children are laughing. The two first graders: Lucy Cavarero and Craig Larson. They each have rocks. Lucy is taunting, "Are you a boy or a girl? Boy or girl?" I don't say anything. I keep doing what I do whenever I feel cornered like this. I look off through the green fence and picture myself as capable of movement. I picture myself faster than I am, as fast as a boy, I suppose. I see myself leap the tire swing and head for home. But Lucy won't quit. She hurls one of her rocks at my feet. "Can't you even talk?" she wants to know. I can't rid myself of the fire rising in my small round belly. There's a pasty coating on my tongue and the lump in my throat is growing, expanding like a party balloon. I can't breathe. When Miss Sherri finds us, she's angry. When I tell her Lucy does this to me, she wants to know why I don't answer. "Tell her you're a girl," she says. But I can't think of what to tell—the way I can't think of any sins to tell the priest at confession I saw a face of contradiction, I was frozen, unnamed on a playground.*

Butler reminds us that performativity is always imitation but never the same in its repetitions. And it is in precisely this way that citation—what is said and who says it under what circumstances—alters, revises, or re-inscribes any given ideology. Language performances, in the same sense, expose the constructedness of language; however, once the constructedness is exposed, then what? Or, so what? What can become of the exposing of the constructedness of categories or structures? What can we, or our students, do with this? How might it help us to imagine other possibilities?

*One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer.\**

Drag is often criticized, for example, as being mere imitative fantasy. But this fantasy becomes precisely the point. Drag enables fantasy, ignites the imagination (whether in failure, parody, imitation, or even exaggeration of stereotype). Judith Butler, in *Undoing Gender*, writes: “fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable” (28). When Butler values fantasy as the “articulation of the possible,” I also value rhetorical pedagogy as such—as teaching students to extend out what they think is possible (for writing, for learning, for listening, for being). How can we teach our students first to recognize what is possible, then to articulate what is possible in order to write, to speak, to be an agent of social change (no matter how small that change may be)? I argue that a performance and drag infused pedagogy can begin to answer these questions. We can begin with a more specific radical potential of drag

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\* from J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, said by Holden Caulfield

itself: drag has, as Butler and others have argued, subversive potentials in that the audience or performer has the opportunity to see that gender is not naturalized or essential but rather it is fluid and constructed. Seeing this is not enough. The next step is to ask: what can this way of knowing gender *do*? It is my argument that it can open up the opportunity for both recognition (reading/listening) of and “articulation (writing/speaking) of the possible,” to return again to Butler. Once we can understand gender’s constructedness, we can imagine other ways of performing gender (for ourselves or for others). And once we can imagine rhetoric’s constructedness, we can imagine other ways of reading and writing.

## **VI. THE AVAILABLE MEANS OF PERSUASION**

We can further explore Butler’s notion of fantasy and the “articulation of the possible” through Aristotle’s often revisited claim that rhetoric is the “faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion” (116). Butler values “the articulation of the possible” (saying it, naming it) in perhaps a similar sense as Aristotle’s “observing the available means”; however, for Butler, the “available means” must answer to fantasy’s demand that we also “observe the means” that *seem* unavailable, unimaginable. Drag is particularly useful in thinking about pedagogies that value articulating the possible whereby the imagination can extend and stretch “the available means” by exposing the constructedness (of language, of gender) and opening up the imagination to possibility. But before we (and our students) learn to “articulate the possible,” we must first be able to recognize those possibilities that seem impossible. In order for anyone to observe the available means that seem unavailable (like

gender bending for example), one must learn to hear the means that are barely audible—this hearing may come in any form of critical looking—reading, viewing, touching, and listening.

*I fear what people would make of me, and in doing so I created a product that was satisfying to the “audience.” It was not worth the ridicules, the loneliness or the looks to just not be a man.\**

What I am characterizing as a Butlerian notion of the “available means of persuasion,” or put more aptly, the *unavailable* means, is perhaps closely connected to Heidegger’s translation and reading of Aristotle. In *Basic concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* (2009), translated by Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer, Heidegger translates and interprets Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “the possibility of seeing what is given at the moment, what speaks for the matter that is the topic of discourse, the possibility of seeing at each moment what can speak for the matter [ . . . ] it sets forth a ‘possibility’ and cultivates a possibility, a possibility that cultivates in itself the ability-to-see that which speaks for the matter” (78-79). I am struck by Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle as being connected to “possibility” rather than “availability.” This difference seems deeply connected to my project here. And Butler’s way (the way conveyed in her “worst sentence” from chapter four), for example, is certainly connected to possibility. What’s available is not what is possible? What’s available might be finite, might be regulated or hidden. What is possible is endless. Possibilities for gender are endless, possibilities for argument, for writing, also endless.

In the spirit of the study of gender performance and drag, it seems that reading and writing themselves contend with the problem of constraint. Drag, too, depends on constraints:

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\* from Johnnie Hart’s “My Queerish Truth”

understanding the subversive potential of drag depends on understanding the constraints under which gender operates. Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us that: “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture” (38). Culture forms the belief that there are two and only two genders and that they are not mutable, interchangeable, fluid or contradictory.

*“She’s talking like her brothers on purpose,” my father says when he is trying to convince my mother that the depth of my voice is not inherent in my voice itself. “There’s too many men around,” he says. And this is without knowing about the hockey boys, the hockey coach, the weekend trips to the batting range, the neighbor boy’s barn where I had jumped time and time again from the hayloft door. They “sit me down,” as parents call it. My mother teaches me to lift my voice, to let more air into the words. She doesn’t like doing it but does. I try not to answer the phone, to get mistaken for one of my brothers, or worse my father, would only call further attention to the problem. At night I have dreams that my voice box is made of ink, that when it runs out, I won’t be able to say another word.*

I am not at proposing drag as a pedagogical hero; in fact, the limitations of drag and the complicated nature of its capacity for subversion helps us to unfold even more about how and when teaching and learning is subversive. Drag relies on the constraints of male and female. Is it enough just to dress up in drag in order to interrogate those constraints? Certainly not. Butler writes, in *Bodies That Matter*, a kind of revision to some of her earlier work on drag: “Drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure” (230). She goes on to explain, “But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion” (231). It does not then go without saying that drag is subversive or that it can lead to any kind of social transformation. However, we recognize, along with Butler, the great potential

for this subversion in the same way we recognize the potential for subversion in our classrooms and in our pedagogies. Butler writes:

The critical potential of “drag” centrally concerns a critique of a prevailing truth-regime of “sex,” one that I take to be pervasively heterosexist: the distinction between the “inside” truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the “outside” truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed “truth” can be established. (*Bodies* 234)

This distinction between “inside” (disposition) and “outside” (presentation) truth-regimes, according to Butler, contradicts the very truth-regimes it seeks to solidify and guarantee—the distinction produces “a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed ‘truth’ can be established.” And at the outset of this piece, I had proposed a set of teaching values—disruption being one of the cores of the teaching practices I want to argue for. Therefore, I want to likewise argue that the critical potential of rhetoric and composition is to create classrooms, reading and writing practices, and ways of being and knowing in which “no fixed ‘truth’ can be established.” I want to be clear here that I am not arguing that because no one truth can be established, then all versions of truths are equal or even entirely relative. I am arguing that what we must know first is this: fixed truths and fixed ideologies are as dangerous and paralyzing as fixed identities. We must (as readers, writers, even citizens) be able to move. There are great consequences to ourselves and others if we cannot move from where we are, if we cannot access or articulate (im)possibilities of knowing and being. We do not need to look far to see what those consequences are. I need only look in the mirror to see the reflection of my own will to survive, one I cannot shed when I am becoming also my students’ teacher.

Butler writes, “Recognition is, however, also the name given to the process that constantly risks destruction and which, I would submit, could not be recognition without a defining or constitutive risk of destruction” (*Undoing* 133). While Butler’s statement is, of

course, a response to philosophical and psychological notions of recognition, I would argue that this concept of recognition is one relevant to the task of listening. When we open ourselves to hear an argument, to listen to what it asks of us, we do risk, as the student above articulates, a certain “destruction”—the destruction of the ways we imagine ourselves. I often ask my students, therefore, to imagine what texts are asking of them. I make assignments that assume that the texts they read are texts that are asking them to re-imagine what it means to read, to hear themselves talking, assignments that make attempts to expose the self’s own constructedness.

## VII. EPISTEMOLOGIES IN DRAG

In *Gender Outlaw*, Kate Bornstein writes, “In the ‘80s, there were a lot of theories about addiction and codependence. Most of these agreed on the point that we get addicted to something in order to avoid or deny some other thing . . . I look at gender in the same light: it’s something we do to avoid or deny our full self-expression” (45). In response to this passage from Bornstein, I asked students the following question for a short writing assignment: *Re-read Bornstein’s claims about the connections between gender and addiction. What happens to you as you are reading this passage? I am not concerned about whether you agree or disagree with Bornstein at this point, but more about your awareness of what is happening to you as a reader that might lead to your agreement or disagreement.*

This assignment asks students to read self-consciously. And it would be useful, I think, to look at several student responses in order to illustrate some of the differences I have been trying to describe—namely, the difference between exposure and subversion (even though, of

course, exposure is a step on the way to subversion), one student writes, in response to this assignment:

At first I was confused about Bornstein's connecting gender to some kind of twisted addiction. So I guess the first thing that happened to me reading this was feeling accused of having an addiction or of being in denial. So I got kind of defensive. Then I remembered what people do when you tell them they are drug addicted. They get defensive.

I want to note especially here the kind of reading this student is, in his first pass, trying to do in both reading Bornstein and himself. This student is able to describe his own first instinct: denial and defensiveness. Once he has named these as his first obstacles at hearing, he is able to connect his inability to read with the very denial and defensiveness that causes it. And he is also able to rename what he first calls "confusion" as a kind of resistance ("denial") to what he is hearing. The text accuses us all of being gender addicts. And he is hesitant, as we all might be, to being named an addict. I asked him, in the margins, if he might think through why being an addict of some kind is so hard for him, or others to hear. The following week, he writes, "Addicts can't make good decisions and are controlled by what they are addicted to. So I guess gender would fit." I guess gender *would* fit, however uncomfortably. This student is able to articulate some of the first pieces of his own consciousness. The student seems to understand and identify what is at risk not so much in exposing gender as constructed but more in what it means for him, for all of us, if this is true. If we are "controlled by" what we are addicted to, how can we escape addiction? Another student might be able to help us to answer this question in her own reading of that same Bornstein passage. She writes:

I like how Bornstein says addiction is something we do because it's usually talked about as something we have, right? Like "he has an addiction to drugs". It seems more hopeful like if addiction is something we do, we can just not do it. And if that's true about gender too, well then people could just stop doing that too. Not that they would. I mean, I would, but only if everyone else did (lol). But it does

make you think about the people like Kate Bornstein who have broken their addictions. In a way, they just don't seem better off.

This student notices the language of “having” versus the language of “doing” an addiction, or a gender. She sees the doing as having a subversive potential, as “hopeful”—so that maybe the previous student’s naming addiction as something we have and are “controlled by” can be revised by this student’s sense that addiction is something we “do” or even perform in some sense. However, she then goes on to articulate the limits of gender’s exposure as addiction discussing her sense that knowing that gender is an addiction would not get people, even her, to “stop doing that too.” She jokes, saying, “I mean, I would [stop doing gender], but only if everyone else did.” This student is noticing the problem of the collective, the powerful force of cultural norms and the loneliness of subversion. This small excerpt gestures toward a kind of empathy in which the student writer imagines the possibilities of not doing gender and what the consequences of not doing it might mean or whether it is “worth it.”

*When my parents move, after I have grown and moved out. They tell me to come to collect a few boxes of things that belong to me. I drag the boxes of yearbooks, old trophies and school work to my small apartment in Lewisburg. One night I discover I have written “DYKE” over Emily Mott’s face in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade yearbook. I hadn’t remembered doing so, though the handwriting is recognizable. I do cry some. “How could I have done that?” I say to my college girlfriend whose shirt is wet with sink water from leaning into the dishes. And it’s impossible to know now why, but the ink is dark blue; the lines of the letters have been repeatedly traced over. I don’t even remember her, Emily Mott. Now, though, I will remember. I cannot forget her blue lined face, the violence of the pen having revisited the word so many times. “You couldn’t have known,” my girlfriend says. And I start to feel angry. “Yes, I could have.”*

In Lorraine Code’s book, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations*, she argues for the place of empathy in rhetorical spaces, particularly with regard to the ways empathy has been “feminized” (much like listening, in fact) and therefore dismissed as an essential component of progressive political progress. She argues that the “denigration of empathy”

creates a “privileging of a spectator” and creates the idea that “knowledge is neutrally given, found, not made” (Code 122). Certainly I spend many hours trying to find ways to expose the constructedness of knowledge and the failure of the “spectator” in my own classes each semester. We cannot avoid being spectators, but we can transform the kinds of spectators we are; and sometimes that transformation can lead us to become something other than spectator, a participant (however self-implicating our participation might make us). It is my argument that drag can offer, via its subversive potential after exposing the constructedness of meaning, an “articulation of possibilities”; and that once these possibilities are made visible, a student can then begin to imagine worlds outside her own, can begin to understand those worlds as integral to *and* challenging to her own. This move of the imagination, then, can lead to the kind of complicated empathy Code describes.

Maxine Greene discusses the ways in which imagination sparks potential for empathy and social transformation. She writes:

I begin to seek out ways in which the arts, in particular, can release imagination to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives. The vistas that might open, the connections that might be made, are experiential phenomena; our encounters with the world become newly informed. When they do, they offer new lenses through which to look and interpret. (18)

Drag offers these new lenses through which to look. It seems to me that one of the problems with curriculums that are designed for teaching empathy (as many multicultural curricula are) is that they reduce empathy to a kind of identification that students end up trying to comply with. Compliance does not make empathy, nor does it open opportunities for resistance. Compliance is another version of the “available means.” And what has been the available means through which students have been asked to learn empathy?—something that masks as empathy, something not historically or politically situated, something that cannot lead to subversion,

something that mirrors what can happen when drag fails to expose and subvert and only reinforces the constraints it wants to challenge.

About a year ago, I was visiting a cousin in Akron, Ohio. Her daughter is a white twelve year-old in the Akron Public Schools in which they designed an “empathy and tolerance” program in order to “celebrate and honor diversity” in their schools. I saw, there on the refrigerator, an assignment that I was told was part of this program, an assignment in which this twelve year-old was asked to write a poem in the voice of a slave after they had learned about slavery during Black History Month. My cousin was proud of her daughter—the direct rhymes, the compassion with which she took on the assignment. And while I don’t have the poem to quote here, I think the limits of this assignment and its potential to feign empathy is somewhat clear. What I am interested in are the ways in which assignments like these reduce empathy to a mere “dressing up” in a voice. Without a sense of context, without a sense of self-implication, without some understanding of “whiteness,” how can this young student, or any student, understand the complexities of empathy or of their implicated position in writing about the “other” or as the “other”? The students become, often without their knowledge, the very spectators Code cites as a blockage. As Butler qualifies in her later work: “I never did think that gender was like clothes” (*Bodies* 231). Nor is empathy “like clothes.” Nor is rhetoric, or language, or pedagogy. Anything “put on” without consciousness, or self-implication cannot create disruption in ways of knowing or subversion of those ways of knowing. The “putting on” without consciousness is the kind of drag in which the drag performance only encourages or reifies stereotypes of gender. And as we can tell from the very complicated arguments about drag itself, it is not always a simple task to tell the difference.

In *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “The act of composition, whether you are composing a work of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense” (238). But what are the “available means” through which we make that “sense”? Who tells us what “senses” can be made?

After all, as Kopelson reminds us, “*Queer* is a term that offers to us and our students an epistemological position—a way of knowing rather than something to be known” (25). This way of knowing expands out the limits of what “senses” can be made. This way of knowing is not, as drag suggests, inherently subversive but contains endless possibilities for subversion if we can inhabit this way of knowing with awareness. I am remind of a student, Michelle, Doyle, who wrote in response to reading Susan Griffin’s *Chorus of Stones*, a text that moves, in some ways, as my text moves:

It’s like I can see myself reading. I can see myself trying to make meaning from the bunch of strands Griffin writes. When we talk about the essay in class and I see how everyone has read the symbols she uses, I try to imagine what has made each of us say what we say about what it means. It’s like reading is more about who you are than what you are reading.

This student articulates some of the primary goals of the pedagogies I explore. When students can see themselves, they can also listen to themselves reading and responding. I have had many students in my office who don’t exactly recognize their papers when I read them aloud during a meeting. This is because they have not heard themselves say it the first time. They have only said it. They haven’t yet *made* a reading or a piece of writing. When students read, the reading may be, as Doyle suggests, “more about who [they] are than what [they] are reading.” Something is at stake in reading the texts they read and in listening to the possibilities they may not be used to listening to. And haven’t we all claimed, time and time again, how students need

to “be invested in their own work”? What better way to ensure investment than to put something of value at risk? The very sureness of the self and self’s position can be destabilized if students develop rhetorical practices that have self-consciousness and contextualized agency.

To answer the critique that begins this meditation: am I, too, worried about how much my students write about themselves in their writing? As the drag infused pedagogy I argue for suggests, students can only begin to respond to the texts/bodies/language they hear through the vehicle of their own positions; it is our obligation to help students expose, interrogate and articulate those positions so that they may write/read/live with responsible and complicated empathy, so that they can envision other lives for themselves and for others, so that they can make available what seems unavailable—so that we can all come to terms with the constructed, authentic *and* suspect “dressing up” that we do (rhetorically, politically, socially, personally). It is through this self in drag that we understand what’s been made of us, and what we might now make of ourselves.

## CODA: GESTURING TOWARD A QUEER FUTURE

The phrase, “body of knowledge” is most familiar to us as institutional, a set of sanctioned practices—this body of knowledge is understood to be located outside the self. It something we can grasp towards, something we can know, something we can teach, but it is not, however, something that we are. In this model, I have the body of knowledge; my students do not. However, even as I have this body, this does not mean I am this body or can ever be it. Our bodies are forbidden to be this body of knowledge, our bodies are meant to be outside, separate from this body. What we know, then, is not supposed to be at all about embodiment. The body of knowledge replaces the body, substitutes institutional sanctions in its place, intending to forever codify and compartmentalize what we know from what we do, from what we are, from the lived experience of our bodies. The political stakes of this “body of knowledge” are then quite high. It evens paves the way for us to dismiss or disregard what the body knows in favor of what the institution knows.

So then it is no accident that the idiom, *body of knowledge*, takes the metaphor of body—steals it from the body in order to disembody education. But in the echoes of the idiom’s erasure of the body, we can still hear that somehow what we know, or what we come to know is part of bodily expression and bodily composition. What happens when we ourselves become bodies of knowledge? Most of us don’t want to talk about our bodies, at least not here in the brainy mind space of academic discourse, and especially when it comes to teaching and students. Part shame,

part fear, part binary of body and mind, this hesitance can be particularly amplified for queer bodies, or bodies like mine. The queer body always calls attention to what the body knows. And of course, the institutions must put these kids with nice straight folks who won't have sex with them, nice straight folks who will erase themselves as bodies, or who have the luxury of seeming to do so. At sixteen, when my close friend says to me: *if you want to be a teacher you better take off those freedom rings and stay in the closet. You can't be queer around kids; people don't like that.* And later in college, the education professor who supervised my high school teaching certificate saying: *especially for you, Stacey, it's important you keep your classroom and office door open and do not touch your students for any reason.*

Two days a week, I teach Tai Chi to elderly women from a church in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. I have been teaching them for three years. Some of them refer to me as “he,” some as “she.” They don't seem to notice the disparity between their pronouns. And just last week, I was showing Evelyn, a 76 year old two-time cancer survivor, how to stand. I pressed my hands gentle atop her shoulders and pressed down. Her back and shoulders relax. I place my hand at the small of her back and push softly forward. Her knees bend as she falls into a stance known as “wu ji,” the most balanced and relaxed a person can be. Perhaps another way to think about a body of knowledge.

In teaching Tai Chi, the physical relation is obvious, necessary. Even when I am not touching my students, they watch my physical movements intently, looking for when to step, when to circle their hands, how to use their waists to lead the rest of their bodies. In the college classroom, the body's force is less obvious, or perhaps less admitted. In his essay from the anthology *The Teacher's Body*, Jonathan Alexander writes about the ways his particular “embodied queerness had intense effects on his teaching and relationship with his students”

(163). My body first, for most students and most people, watched for clues for what might be underneath my clothes, what body of knowledge my body conveys. And if what my body conveys is no knowledge at all, no way of knowing for sure, then what kind of subconscious erotic interaction can take place? What does it mean for my uncertain body to teach my students? What does it mean for my queer ambiguous hand to write words about my students' work? And do I also, in writing about their work, write about their bodies?

Bodies do matter. A body of knowledge has everything to do with bodies. And as a person whose scholarship draws most often on students and student writing, I have to contend with their bodies. I have to raise questions over and over again about how, if, and when to represent their bodies as part of their writing or their classroom presence. I have to make decisions about what representations are ethical or necessary. I have to consider my own fears about being a queer scholar who pays attention to bodies. I am supposed to be one of those good queers, if I am to be a teacher, one who says appropriate things, unerotic, eunuch. I am supposed to desexualize and ignore my students' bodies. Of course, the question arises. Can I really do this when so many of my courses ask students to think about gender, sexuality, and embodiment, when I ask my students at times to write about themselves, their bodily experiences? Take, for example, the following passage, written by Kelsey Fagan in one of my first year writing classes. I had asked students to spend the five days between two class meetings keeping a gender journal, one in which they were to take notice of anything they saw that they thought might be connected to gendered bodily expression. Fagan writes:

When I am walking down the street alone, I rarely make eye contact with other people who are passing me. I never thought of this attribute as a female one. But I think maybe it might be. When I walked down the street, I tried to make eye contact with people I passed. I noticed it was much harder to make eye contact with other women than it was for me to make eye contact with men. I wonder if

it's because women evaluate each other in secret. Like we look at each other's clothes and stomachs and stuff to see how we compare. With guys, who cares.

Does it help in trying to read her writing to know Kelsey Fagan is a white body, an attractive traditionally gendered young woman, that she looks me in the eyes all the time, Do I say I am uncomfortable saying that? Do I say she wears rings on every finger, that she closes her eyes when something is hard to think about in class, that she rolls her eyes whenever a particular classmate speaks, that she crosses her legs always when she sits and has a habit of biting her nails. I learn, in Kelsey's passage, that I am easier for her to look at, that our bodies are not in competition, that Kelsey and I are not women to each other. This is Kelsey's body of knowledge as I read it, as I am not supposed to be reading it. We know our students' bodies; we sometimes know the emotional terrain that is expressed through them. We are, by the very notion of an institutional "body of knowledge," encouraged to erase this embodied knowledge, to find it irrelevant to our classroom practices. To acknowledge Kelsey's body would be, in part, to explode the myth of my own objectivity as her teacher, to admit there is more to my comments, more to my scholarship that cites Kelsey, more to the grades I give Kelsey inside the institution, the grades that mark her position with respect to writing's ambiguous, shifting body of knowledge.

The truth is: this is what I am reading when I read Kelsey's papers, when she raises her hand to speak in class—her body always part of my interpretation of her words. I can hear Kelsey's voice in her response because I know the sound, because I recognize the sound, because I have watched and listened to the sound of her voice rising in her mouth, because I even know the sound she makes the instant before she speaks—the quick taking of breath, the tight shift of the eyebrows. Reading student writing in a traditional non-digital classroom means always to read a body alongside or behind a text. Reading student papers is quite distinct from reading a

novel, from reading a book of scholarship by someone whose body you have never seen, whose body you do not know. Reading student writing and representing that writing in our scholarship is always a representation of a body.

Here is an excerpt from Fagan's essay "A Journey to Womanhood." The first passage is from the beginning, and the second from the closing to her essay. She writes:

I was six or seven, and I was playing in the yard with all of my neighbors, all of whom happened to be boys. We were playing Star Wars and since I was the only girl I of course was Princess Leia. We set up the rules for the game and started to play. Only I wasn't running around with light sabers saving the galaxy. I was sitting in the tree house waiting to be rescued. Since I was the princess, I needed to be rescued.

And then later in the essay:

If I could go back and have a conversation with little Kelsey, while she was waiting to be rescued by the boys, I would give her a few pointers. I would tell her that she should do what she wants. If she wanted to be Luke Skywalker, she should go be Luke Skywalker and if she wanted to be Princess Leia waiting for the boys to come rescue her then she should be Princess Leia. Either way, she rescues herself in the end by making a conscious choice.

Composition, of course, as a field, has known for a long time that the idea of some official "body of knowledge" in our discipline is contradictory, even impossible. Consider how much time we spend reaching into other disciplines, blurring and contesting the boundaries of what counts as composition. Consider the ways we tell and re-tell histories of composition, knowing all along that the "body of knowledge" that counts as Composition is not a stable pre-determined body. Consider the work compositionists do in thinking about identity, knowing that this body of knowledge is connected to rather than outside of some notion of self. But what some recent turns in queer theory can tell us is that the idea of a "body of knowledge" is not only linked to identity as a concept, but also linked to actual bodies; that, in fact, identity is inextricably linked to actual material bodies. This is the pressure transgender theorists are putting on queer theory—

a pressure I want to put on our practices of pedagogy, and our writing about our students and their work. I want to bring the body back to knowledge, to acknowledge all the material realities of our classrooms—the student who shakes my hand firmly and introduces himself on the first day of class, the student whose hung over and vodka-seeping body slumps in the back row, me (their teacher) whose voice rings of her father’s voice, whose broad shoulders curb her fears of no authority. There is no bodiless pedagogy, no disembodied scholarship to represent disembodied students and teaching. And I wonder, at times, what would happen if we stopped pretending there were, if we consider the meaning our bodies make, if we showed up (mortal, subjective, messy, and vulnerable as bodies are) to, as Kelsey Fagan says, “rescue ourselves in the end by making a conscious choice.”

Recent turns in queer theory itself have turned many theorists attention to questions of time and space. In 2004, Lee Edelman makes what some found to be a startling set of declarations in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In a discussion about how queer relations are characterized by lawmakers, the Pope, and others, Edelman writes:

Queers must respond to the violent force of such constant provocations not only by insisting on our equal rights to the social order, not only by avowing our capacity to promote that order’s coherence and integrity, but also by saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fucks Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop. (29)

Influenced by the work of Leo Bersani, Edelman asks queers to fuck the future, to imagine investments that might have little or nothing to do with the *future* of our lives, the future of our world. Through the figure of the Child, Edelman astutely outlines the ways children and reproductive futurism position notions of queerness as the enemy, as the antithesis of the future, as those dangerous bodies of knowledge I describe in the previous section. Edelman invites us to

embrace ourselves as this antithesis, as opposition, as antithetical to the future itself. And I must admit, for a teacher (even one working primarily with college students), this is a difficult moment. Can we teach without the future, without a notion of development where a self is the process of becoming and that becoming points to a future, a future self and a future world? Education rests on the notion of future, at least the ways it's imagined in our current social consciousness. Our president says we will "win the future." We are told our future depends upon education. And Edelman himself is a university professor, so he doesn't particularly discuss in his book. What would it be like to be a teacher who, instead of "winning" the future, fucks the future? Is this a viable way to teach?

Judith Halberstam, in a book entitled *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, creates some interesting layering around Edelman's futuristic resistance. Halberstam calls for a "queer adjustment" in how we conceive of time and space. "Queer time," she writes, "is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). Halberstam considers what the transgender turn in queer theory has known all along, that "the transgender body has emerged as futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of postmodern promises of gender flexibility" (18). Queer theorists have been wrestling with these questions: what is *queer* time, and what is its relation to a future? In her investigation of the idea of the queer child, Kathryn Stockton also considers this question of queer time, suggesting that a queer understanding of time might "call us into notions of the horizontal—what spreads sideways—or sideways and backwards—more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time" (4). I have imagined this project, all along, as happening in and being recollected through queer time, through a classroom and a representation of that classroom

that moves “sideways and backwards.” It is in this notion of queer time and regarding the prospect of a future where I believe queer pedagogies can offer a complex, dialectical intervention about revision (presumably an act invested in a future), about sequence, and about educational notions of “improvement.”

We might think of improvement as a kind of move towards utopia, a gradual progression toward something better. In his recent book, José Esteban Muñoz asks us to reconsider the future again, and makes the argument that for many queers, and especially for queers of color, the future (and the hope out on the horizon of that future) is a matter of survival. Muñoz writes at the start of his book:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. (1)

My teaching tells me something about this “horizon imbued with potentiality.” While I agree with Edelman’s assessment of the cultural problem of futurity as it rests in the hands of procreation, and I agree that queers are often positioned as the enemy to the future, a danger to it, I also think it is the very fact that queerness points toward a future that makes it threatening *to* the future. Queerness uncovers and unleashes possibilities—the potentials for ideas that say: *you can do your life differently* or *you don’t have to live that way*. And I think it’s important to say to students: *you don’t have to think that way* and *there are ways of writing you have yet to imagine for yourself*. If we take Butler’s notion of fantasy seriously as the “articulation of the possible.” The future the always fleeting but potential fantasy of this horizon Muñoz describes. This “educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” is

precisely what queer pedagogies are for. Fucking the future might mean the kind of anti-social jousance that Edelman describes, but it also means a loss of another kind of pleasure—the kind that unfolds out of a doing again, or the possibility of doing again. And while my own Tai Chi practice gently teaches me to remain in the present as I practice movements—white crane flaps its wings, needle at the bottom of the sea—it also offers a gesture toward the future: a lower heart rate, protection, the possibility of being present in the next moment that arrives: the future. The possibility of being present because I have learned how, and this learning cannot be extracted from the future. My body, my teaching, my writing all “imagine a future,” one in which I will be queerer, delightfully more strange to myself.

This project always imagined a future because this course imagined a future. It imagines a future because of my own queer conception of what teaching is for. To think about the question “what is teaching for?” requires such an intense amount of self-reflexivity, it can seem (at least to me) nearly unbearable. I could say that I teach because I believe in reading and writing, and because I want my students to believe in it, too. I don’t mean at all that I want to teach students to “appreciate literature” or to write essays that “count” as academic or scholarly, though this may happen while I am teaching. I mean more that guiding students to becoming more nuanced and complicated readers and writers is to, I believe, help them become better lookers, better sayers. I could say I teach to change the way my students *see*, the way they *look* at what they see. I could say this and it would be true. And I could say that I want to change the way my students see because it will make them better intellectuals, bring them success in their undergraduate or graduate lives, or even make them better citizens in the future—more informed, more critical, and more capable of reading their surroundings. And this is also true.

But I could also say, if I am being honest with myself, that I teach my students to see differently, or I try to, because I want to be safer in this world, because I believe in a future that is safer for me and for my students. And to a degree, I think each of us teaches for, at least partly this reason. My work as a teacher and as a writer focuses on queering, on *queer* pedagogies. So, in many ways, I ask my students to *queer*, to see things more queerly. And of course I have argued that seeing, reading and writing queer is important to any intellectual pursuit because to see this way means not to make binary, one-dimensional interpretations. I have said that to see this way means to make layered, dialectical, even contradictory interpretations. I have even contended that these kinds of interpretations are better, smarter, and more open to possibilities. And they are.

And truly, if I ask myself: what is teaching for? My honest answer is that we teach to make the world more bearable for ourselves, which means, for me, to make the world queerer so that I might live more possibly inside it. This, of course, is only one way of thinking about the question: *what is teaching for?* There are other ways I could think about it, but most of those ways come back to the ways teaching shapes me, the ways my students shape me. What is teaching *for*? Who is teaching for? What is writing for? Doesn't writing always imagine a future, a future reader? What might our teaching become if we owned up, more explicitly and with self-implication, to our investments and fears, if we said with more political, affective, and theoretical honesty why we teach the way we teach, who we imagine we are teaching, who we imagine they might become, and who we imagine ourselves to be in that teaching?

## APPENDIX A

### SYLLABUS

**Seminar in Composition: Gender Studies  
Human Condition: Psyche and Sexuality  
Freshmen Learning Community  
ENGCOMP 0203  
CRN # 19370  
142 Cathedral of Learning  
MWF 11 – 11:50 AM**

**Instructor: Stacey Waite**  
**Office Location: 517K Cathedral of Learning**  
**Office Hours: Tuesdays: 5-6 PM**  
**Or By Appointment**  
**Mailbox Location: 501 CL**  
**Main English Office: 526 CL**  
**Phone: 624- 6619 (office)**  
**735-3699 (home)**  
**E-mail: [staceyawaite@yahoo.com](mailto:staceyawaite@yahoo.com)**

#### **Required Texts:**

*Gender Outlaw* by Kate Bornstein  
*The Trouble with Normal* by Michael Warner  
A Collection of Music to be provided by your Instructor

#### **Course Description:**

This course is perhaps unlike most courses you have taken. It will ask of you a kind of composition that may feel at times uncomfortable, strange or even impossible. The course content is structured around constructs of gender, race, sexuality, the body, writing, class,

politics and art. The assignments in this course will ask you to access parts of your consciousness you may not even know are there. They will require you to think critically about gender and its relationship to various cultural and personal identity categories and constructions. The assignments will also ask you to revise, challenge and expand what you know of as “papers.” As you know, “papers” are assignments given by instructors for students to “complete.” I encourage you to think of the writing in this course as prompting you, daring you, even at times provoking you but never to “complete”—only to compose (like a musician, you might say, or a painter, but not at all like a “student”). If you think you might find it interesting to reconsider all you have learned about writing thus far, all you have learned about bodies, about gender, about sexuality and about the world in which you live, you are sitting in the right course.

### **Instructor's Statement:**

While I feel it is my duty to create a safe and open classroom environment, I do feel compelled to tell you that I also feel that it is my job to make you intellectually uncomfortable; it is your discomfort and unease that will educate you. I am a scholar of “queer pedagogy” and my teaching style and method is greatly informed by this field of interest (which we may discuss at various times this semester). By remaining in this course, you agree to spend this semester considering the idea that that which brings you discomfort, that which you might find unthinkable is that which you most need to read, re-imagine and (un)learn. You also agree to treat every member of this class, including yourself, with respect and kindness. We will discuss many difficult and sensitive subjects this semester, and you must be able to remember that it is one another's writing and ideas that are subject to critique—not one another's character or background. As an instructor, I value difficulty and complexity; I value discussion, community, awareness, creativity, rigor and passion. Consequently, I do not find apathy, disinterest, dismissive-ness or reduction to be of value. This semester, it is my hope that we will learn a great deal from one another and that we will also enjoy one another's input, energy and company. If you feel at all unsure as to whether you will be able to discuss and consider the subject matter of this course in a mature, inquisitive and active way, perhaps this is not the course for you. If you feel up to the challenge and responsibility, then I look forward to the distance we will travel together from now until December.

### **Course Requirements:**

**Participation and Attendance** is required in this class. More than three absences can be grounds for failure. I expect you to be **on time** at the start of class. The success of our course together depends very much on your active participation and contribution to class discussions. Part of your participation grade is also a weekly participation in our online discussion board. Make good use of this tool especially if you know you might tend to be quieter during class discussions. Each of you is expected to post at least 10 questions, comments or responses on the discussion board by December 1<sup>st</sup>. Talking in class is one way to earn a good participation grade, but there are others as well.

**Compositions** are smaller writing prompts (1-2 single-spaced pages, 12 font) in which you are asked to explore some aspect of the course or of the reading. You should consider these informal, which *does not* mean you shouldn't proofread or cite the readings, but it *does* mean you can use these assignments as a way of thinking through your ideas. They will be graded on their close-reading of course texts, their complexity of thought, their attention to the course ideas and discussions, and their writing quality. You will receive a grade from 1-20 on these assignments. Your first writing assignment turned in will be given a 20 followed by a fake grade which indicates the grade you would have gotten had the first assignment not been a free 20.

**A Mid-Term Conference** is required. You need to schedule (during the dates marked on our calendar) one and attend the meeting prepared in order to complete the course and receive a passing grade.

**Essays** will be given a letter grade and should be 5-6 pages (double-spaced, 12 point font) in length. We will talk further about these assignments as the first one approaches. These assignments will be given a letter grade.

**A Final Portfolio** will be turned in at the end of the course. For this portfolio, you will revise, rewrite, and extend two of the writing assignments you composed. You should extend one of your compositions into an essay for the first revision. You should then work on one of your longer essays for the second. In this portfolio, I should find your best writing this semester. The portfolio serves as a reflection of the distance you have traveled in your thinking, reading and writing this semester. In this portfolio, you should also include a one-page single-spaced letter addressed to me in which: you describe your progress in the course, you make suggestions to me about what to look at closely in your portfolio, and you discuss your experiences in this class. Please include all drafts of the two pieces in this portfolio, including the first drafts with my comments on them.

### **Grading Breakdown**

Compositions	20%
Participation & Attendance	20%
Essays	20%
Final Portfolio	40%

### **Academic Integrity and Plagiarism**

As with any course here at the University of Pittsburgh, you are expected to abide by the code for Academic Integrity—as outlined with the University's policy in your student handbook and on our section of courseweb. All work you turn in during this course should be your own work written for this course during this semester. Passing another's work off as your own is grounds for failure in this course and possible expulsion from the University.

## **The Writing Center**

The Writing Center is in room M-2 of Thaw Hall. Thaw is located on O'Hara Street between Engineering Hall and the Space Research Coordination Center (SRCC). It's best to call (412) 624-6556 for an appointment, but you can also drop in during their operating hours. If a consultant is available, you'll be seen right away. Appointments are 25 minutes long, starting on the half-hour. They also have drop-in sites at Hillman Library and in Tower A during Fall and Spring Terms. Call there for times on these. The Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to “correct” your paper for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your papers. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance.

## **Disability**

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 or 412-383-7355 (TTY) as early as possible in the term.

## APPENDIX B

### ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCE

#### *In-Class Writing*

In looking at the various ways in which you and your classmates located and considered the various contexts, definitions and uses of the word “queer,” discuss the following questions: What is the history of the use of the word “queer” in your life? Do you remember first hearing it or specific times you’ve heard it used? Do you use this word? If so, how? What does it have to do with you? Does it have anything to do with you? How might this term be useful to you? How might it challenge you? How does our conversation about this term change or reaffirm your own conception of “queer”? This does not need to be a formal essay of any kind. You should consider this in-class writing assignment to be a directed free write. Be coherent and careful with your writing but don’t worry so much about organization or length. Just keep writing until class is over. This sample of your writing will help me to ensure you have been placed in the proper level of composition at Pitt and will also help to continue our conversations next week.

#### *Composition #1*

Track your responses as you are reading Peggy McIntosh's article on white privilege. How are you responding to the article, and more importantly, why might you be responding the way that you are (here I am looking for something about YOU, not about Peggy McIntosh)? In other words, what about you might be causing you to respond this way? What connections can you make between Peggy McIntosh and Audre Lorde? What do those connections help you to see? How can you take a "queer" position towards these texts, meaning how can you position yourself in relation to them in a way you consider unusual, maybe uncomfortable? What do these texts say about you? Why should you care about these texts at all?

### *Composition #2*

In your syllabus, I make the following claim: “it is your discomfort and unease that will educate you.” As you read the first assignment in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, mark passages where you are having difficulty. Perhaps your difficulty is one of understanding, perhaps one of discomfort, perhaps some other type of difficulty you’d like to address. This assignment asks you to consider your discomfort. What is making you uncomfortable and why? Is it at all connected to what made you uncomfortable about the first two essays we read? I also want to remind you about some of the ways you responded to McIntosh and Lorde. Some of you described your responses as guilty, angry, defensive, enlightened, shameful, etc. How is this reading experience different and why? How do you position yourself in relation to this book? What does the book make of you? Who do you become when you read it? If this book is about gender itself, what (so far) is Bornstein trying to say about gender? How is she saying it or what is her writing style? If what she is saying is true, what does that say about you or your own sense of gender identity? Remember you cannot answer all of these questions. They are here as guiding prompts to help you think through your reading process, the ideas you are coming into contact with and your responses to those ideas. You should quote from Bornstein during your composition and try to engage with the ideas in the text.

### *Composition #3*

Look carefully at your first composition assignment. This assignment asks you to close read your own writing. Pick a passage where you feel you can interrogate or question yourself in some of the ways we were questioning passages today in class. What more did you need to define or say? What could you have said instead? What's more complicated the second time around, looking at it now? You may use my comments in the margins to help you do this, or you may choose to address parts of your writing that I didn't address. It's up to you. This assignment is not "tell Stacey what's wrong with your paper." It is a chance for you to push your own thinking and writing further, for you to try to give your writing the precision and attention it deserves. Ultimately, you need to try to answer the questions: what do I sound like? What kinds of things do I say? Why do I say them? Who do I become when I write one way or another, or when I read one way or another? What advice do I have for myself after these first few weeks of class?

### *Composition #4*

After reading Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," try to write a short one single spaced page essay that imitates hers. Hers is a list of instructions (that seem to be in the voice of a mother or an authority figure) about what it means to be a girl. You can choose any identity category you like. So you could call the piece "Girl" or "Boy" or "Gay Man" or "White Girl" or "Christian Boy" or whatever. Then try to give a list (like Kincaid's) of instructions one might get on how to be this identity. You can get creative and specific with it. Notice the images in Kincaid's piece. Notice the detail. Try to imitate the style and specificity of her short essay. Try to have fun with it.

### *Essay #1*

We have talked extensively thus far about the makings and complexities of identity in terms of race and gender, specifically. We have heard from McIntosh about the category of privilege, from Bornstein about the socially constructed nature of identities. Begin to think about how your race and/or gender identity has been made, constructed—by yourself and others. This assignment asks you to tell the story of your own making: for example, how you became a “man,” or how you became a “woman” or “neither” or “white” or . . . the list could, of course, go on and on. You should seek out the origins, instructions, influences, decisions, forces, and complexities of the makings of whatever identity you choose to write about. You should quote from at least one of the relevant texts from class at various moments in your paper in order to try to put the story of your gender-making, for example, in conversation with Bornstein’s. This assignment, please understand, is not: how did you become the great woman you are today? This is not a success story, or a tragedy, or a tear-jerker film about your destiny; this paper is a careful analysis, study and reflection on the way you have come to know about some aspect your identity—the epistemology (remember this word?) of your identity. The titles might be something like “The History of my Woman-ness” or “A Long White Journey,” etc. etc. Your writing should illustrate: your understanding of the texts from the course you are working with, your ability to quote from and close-read passages from at least one of the texts we are working with, your willingness to ask critical questions of yourself, your level of consciousness while you write, your ability to write in a “voice” that is NOT generic or spoken by the infamous “Paper God,” and your composition of creative and complicated prose. Good luck. And try, as much as you can, to get something out of this process. As Amanda reminded us in class, writing may be able to lead somewhere else, somewhere we might not have thought it could lead. Remember what Annie Dillard said, it’s “a surgeon’s probe” not a scalpel.

### *Composition #5*

The following quote is from the “TeachWithMovies.com” website, which is geared towards teaching students probably a little bit younger than you. The website says:

*Tootsie* is about a man becoming a better man by experiencing what it's like to be a woman. The film explores the different ways in which people conduct themselves and perceive life, based on their gender. It also leads viewers to think about some of the differences and similarities between men and women.

The TeachWithMovies.com Learning Guide will show teachers and parents how to use this hilarious film to teach boys not to mistreat girls and to teach girls to be less tolerant of male misbehavior.

Write a response to this website in which you tell the authors of the above passage why the film is more complicated than the portrait they have painted above. You might do this by have an argument with the quote (both what it says and how it is written), by pointing out other things (having to do with gender and sexuality) in the film that the un-critical eye might not see, or by close-reading the above quote to provide an interpretation of what it would mean for girls and boys to use the film as “instructions.” You might think back to your own work with instructions (in your longer essay or in your shorter imitation of Jamaica Kincaid). What is contradictory,

complex or even dangerous about the film’s “instructions” about how to be a “man” or a “woman”?

### *Midterm Evaluation Assignment*

What have you learned so far? What are you still learning? How are you engaging with the materials? Describe your writing. You may even want to quote from one or more of your essays to provide examples for what you mean. What more can I do to help you in the course?

### *Essay #2*

Choose a complicated or particularly rich and interesting passage from Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal*. Once you have chosen a passage, your assignment is to perform a close reading of the passage. What does he mean? (You may need to turn to somewhere else in the text to explain this). What is most important for your readers to notice about this quote? Why is it of interest to you? What you do with your quote is up to you. You may want to complicate or put pressure on something Warner says (this is not the same as “disagreeing with him”). You may want to put the quote you choose from Warner in conversation with something you’ve observed or experienced by revealing how the quote could help to examine or understanding this observation or experience. You might also try to put this quote from Michael Warner in conversation with a passage from Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw* to discuss the ways in which the two might challenge, complicate or enrich each other. If you choose this option, you will also need to perform a close reading of the passage from Bornstein. You’ll need to think about the kinds of quotes that seem to warrant 5 pages of discussion and inquiry.

### *Essay #3*

Michael Warner tells us that “statistical norm has no moral value” (70). He spends several pages (53-60) interrogating the use of statistics as a pathway to normalcy and shame. He proposes his own theory about the way sexual statistics work. Re-read these pages in Warner, marking up the places you find most interesting or provocative. Type out all these places on a sheet of paper—places where Michael Warner calls your attention to something specific (maybe something you had never thought of) about statistics. Try to get a list of 8-12 quotes. Print them out. Then maybe eat a sandwich. Then take the sheet with you to a computer and do some research. Start looking up any statistics you can find about sex, gender, or sexual behavior, etc. As you look at the statistics you find, think about how those statistics reflect or seem to be in conversation with Warner. Choose one set of statistics. Provide me with the link to the website where the statistics can be found. Then answer the following: What do the statistics want you to believe? How can you tell? What kind of language is used to talk about the statistics? How do you put these statistics into conversation with Warner (in other words, use the some of the quotes you found in Warner in your paper, close read the quotes *and* the statistics)? Finally, has Warner changed the ways you imagine what statistics do, or what they are? Why or why not?

#### *Essay #4*

Your assignment for essay number four is to write an essay in which you explore a concept that you have gathered and studied from this course and try to put that concept into conversation with what might be considered “outside” of the study of sexuality and gender. Think about how your writing, both its form and content, can reveal how this new or interesting idea can shape other ideas and your writing. You brought up several examples of these kinds of concepts in class: the use of the term “natural,” the various expressions of binaries, the idea that the personal is never merely personal. There is certainly more than these ideas to think about but those are a few we discussed in class. What you want your essay to illustrate, explore and question is how some idea or concept from this course might be useful or productive for other kinds of thinking and writing. So, for example, if our course has partly been about the ways that Bornstein and Warner think binaries are reductions, are false constructions, what can be done with that idea? How might this idea be useful to you in thinking about other things, not just gender or sexuality? Or how might your exploration of binaries make you a better thinker or writer? What does this concept enable or prevent you from seeing? In a sense, you want to try to write an essay in which you try to understand how Warner, or Bornstein, or Kincaid, or McIntosh, or Lorde, or me, or your classmates have enabled you to see something differently, to take a different view of not only gender and sexuality, but something else. You might even consider the rhetorical and writerly moves a writer makes as a reflection of their ideas, as we discussed in class. In a way, this paper is a more careful way of doing the work some of you begin to do in the “Making Connections” section of the discussion board.

#### *Essay #5*

Over break, you should remember to listen to the assigned CD. Be sure to take notes on anything that strikes you as noteworthy. Remember the kind of close reading we have done with other texts. Consider these songs a text you are to study, texts that also make arguments or have implications about/for gender and sexuality, about what it means to be man or a woman, about how we might think about our bodies and sex, etc. Your final essay, Essay # 5, asks you to choose one or several songs to write about. Think critically about the songs and offer an interpretation of what some of the lyrics mean. What do they say about gender, sex, bodies, etc.? How can you put the lyrics in conversation with this course or with the writers you read? What, after having taken a course in gender studies, can you notice about the music? Why is it worth noticing to begin with? You might even think about how you might want to guide someone else through listening to these lyrics? When would you intervene to explain something? What would you explain and why? What would you point out? I do not mean this essay to be talking about whether or not pop music is bad for girls, etc. I want you to think about the music. What does it want? Why does it want that? Who does it want it from? Think of the music as objects of study. What might the average listener in his car not see? How and why would you want to see beyond what you might see just jamming in your car?

## APPENDIX C

### STUDENT PERMISSION FORM

Instructor: Stacey Waite

Date:

Course:

The following is a request for your permission to use or quote from your Reading Response Journals, Essays, E-mails or Presentations as part of the scholarly work I write about teaching writing and theories of teaching. You should know that my work is written with public intention and that should you choose to be identified, your name could enter the public in print. Your writing is, of course, integral to the study of teaching writing and to my own scholarly pursuits in pedagogy. However, it has no effect on your grade in this course or on your relationship with me whether or not you choose to make your writing available to me in this way. Thank you for taking the time to read this. If you do not want your work used or quoted from, there is nothing more for you to do. If you agree to have your work used or quoted from, fill out this form and return it to me before the end of semester. If you have questions, let me know.

**Check one:**

\_\_\_\_\_ You may use my writing anonymously, without my name.

\_\_\_\_\_ You may use my writing and my full name.

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Sign and Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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