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Queer Disruption in the Rural South: Institutionality and the Viability of Queer Composition

I MAKE MY LIVING WITH WORDS, MY OWN AND OTHERS'. MOST SIMPLY STATED, MY WORK includes (as a teacher) helping college students to write more effectively, (as a WPA) keeping our composition program afloat, and (as a scholar) writing up the research that I conduct within my classrooms. It's a job description that sounds pretty mundane on first glance. However, when I remind myself that the students who sit in my classrooms were often never supposed to be there, that the academic prose that many think those students should write often contains little meaning for and little reflection of those students, that visions of just what writing programs should be often conflict in violent and impactful ways, and that my own scholarship challenges what often strikes me as a homophobic academic status quo, the job description begins to reflect its more harried reality.

I'm haunted by a question from the 1977 MLA convention, a question since archived in Audre Lorde's anthology of essays and speeches *Sister Outsider*. Back in Chicago, Lorde, describing herself "a Black woman warrior poet doing my work," asked her listeners then (and me now, all these years later) are we doing ours? (41). Am I doing my work? Minimally, are my students leaving my classrooms better writers? Is our composition program up and running with students accruing their general education credits? Moreover, do my classrooms provide a place for marginalized students, who often do not see themselves reflected in academia, to carve out a room of their own in the ivory tower? Do I push for the revision of what is, *still*, a non-prefixed "academic writing" (prose that might more aptly be tagged a white-, male-, heterosexist-, traditionally abled-Standard English) so that students need not abandon, in June Jordan's words, their own "community intelligence"? (59). Am I enacting that vision not only in my own classrooms but also furthering it in our FYC program, on our campus, and in the professional field of composition?

I try. Weak as it is, that's my answer. And, reflecting the see-saw between banality and controversy that my professional life seems daily to ride, one way that I try is through the single-themed composition course, a pedagogy that, perhaps naively, until arriving on my current campus, never struck me as radical.

I hit upon teaching composition courses that focus on single themes (especially the traditional Composition II, academic-arguments-with-research course) when I was still in graduate school. I had one of those teaching epiphanies that come 'round not nearly often enough. I was making copies. As I stood there, scorching my retinas and breaking the backs of the bound periodicals I'd checked out of the graduate library, I listened to two fellow graduate students, draped over chairs in the lounge and haranguing about their students' writing. Pointing to his latest batch of essays, one mocked his students' thesis sentences: "Cloning is like genetics, yet they are also different' or 'No one but God should have the power to clone!'" he hooted, stabbing student essays with an index finger. I didn't so much judge the derision these TAs felt for their students' writing. I mean, we all have bad days. But suddenly it hit me: if I had three weeks to learn the facts about cloning, to become familiar with the literature surrounding the subject, to learn the personalities within the national and international debates, to place the polemic within my own ethics, and to produce an essay delivering some pearl of insight, I'd write a shitty paper, too. And it'd be likely that my next paper on euthanasia or genetically engineered food or some such topic wouldn't be much better.

The question for me, then, became, how can I, through my course design, my writing tasks, my reading assignments, and the like, encourage student writers to write good academic prose, not stereotypical student essays? The answer that emerged was that I should ask my students to mimic as closely as possible the meta-process of writing that I knew most academics to use. It seemed to me that the process of most academics' scholarship included attention to a single, narrowed subject over time; discussion of that subject with colleagues; understanding of the research, both past and current, devoted to that subject; the coming to one's own position within the larger debate; and composition of multiple documents on that same subject, documents that are informed by other knowledgeable colleagues' opinions of one's writing. Single-themed courses, especially when they also employ writing groups, provide one viable means for effecting such immersion into academic writing. Students write more complex, intricate essays and take up more complex, critically informed arguments because they have had the time to do expanded research, to digest what they've read, to place themselves in the discourse, to hear dissensus in the classroom discussion, to be challenged by knowledgeable readers during workshops, and to write both repeated drafts but also numerous essays on the same subject matter.

Moreover, single-themed courses can be aimed at particular students to generate even fuller experiences of FYC classes. Sometimes, it's simply a matter of interest: students from all sorts of different socio-cultural niches might enroll in a composition

course that advertises hip hop culture as its semester theme. Other times, given themed courses can be targeted toward particular campus groups: criminal justice majors might be more interested than the average freshman in taking a composition class that is concentrating on prison reform. Perhaps most powerfully, students who recognize themselves as members of identity-based communities might be particularly drawn to courses that foreground those subject positions. For instance, A. Suresh Canagarajah has noted how his classroom became a "safe house" where his African-American students celebrated their solidarity, particularly through their linguistic choices (174). Harriet Malinowitz has written of how gay and lesbian students in her gay writing courses found their own subject positions and the societal pigeonholing of them as worthy of academic investigation. Offering such courses to students who are traditionally marginalized within academia can work, yes, toward the valuing of diversity on given campuses. However, what's even more salient for us in composition is that such courses can also open up academic writing to students who are often alienated from it and, in so doing, can work to change academic writing itself.

Such a conviction led me, while still a graduate student, to propose, develop, publicize, and teach "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer Identities and Rhetorics," the University of Illinois' first-ever GLBTQ writing course. The class was housed, as all composition classes were, in Illinois' Rhetoric program, but it was also co-sponsored by Illinois' Women's Studies and Unit One programs.¹ Therefore, while it was largely, though not only, self-identified GLBTQ student writers who registered for this course, these students represented many different facets of the university. Junior and senior Women's Studies students, for instance, sat beside Unit One freshmen who sat beside traditional college freshmen who were simply completing their FYC requirement who sat beside students who had dual-enrolled in the class (completing extra readings and more complex assignments, thus receiving upper-division English credit). All of these students, though, showed impassioned engagement with the course's subject matter, with me as their queer teacher, and with one another (engagement that was all the more satisfying considering that many of these students *were* simply fulfilling a general education writing requirement, the very site where motivating students is often challenging).

Students' commitment to the course, though, wasn't always expressed politely, in part because the course opposed not just heteronormativity but *homonormativity* as well. Owing to my own allegiance to queer theory and my insistence on queering the classroom,

1. Unit One is a University of Illinois program designed to achieve a small college atmosphere in a huge institution by offering students the opportunity to reside and take courses in the same building. The program is aimed at college freshmen and sophomores.

this composition course inspired not a seamless utopia for GLBTQ students but a contested space. I designed the class activities, the readings, and the writing tasks around the notion of queering identity. Thus, my students and I traced the distinct *differences* expressed by GLBTQ writers and thinkers, and the course's structure invited student-led discussion of and writing on these differences. Students' participation subsequently reflected just as much divergence

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as the course readings (a stark contrast to the uniform debates on "gay and lesbian topics" in so many composition classes²). This environment allowed GLBTQ students to transfigure their writing, to form academic voices that mimed neither heterosexual objectivity nor stereotypical GLBTQ

positions. In so doing, in the model of, say, Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*, academic writing itself was altered in our class as single essays saw students' "personal experiences" sit beside cultural analyses, which bookended literature reviews, which backed up against campus anecdotes, all equally essential and valid in making students' academic arguments.

Unwittingly, on a day-to-day basis, as I traipse from classroom to classroom, my most immediate concerns regarding composition probably center more on my latest batch of essays or my students' grades than on meta-criticism of academic culture—I likely log more worry-time focusing on Jose's five-page, single-paragraph essay or on Tynisha's fear of first person than I do on overthrowing hegemonic textbooks or religious allegiance to the Toulmin model. However, my students' reactions to that GLBTQ writing course suggest my priorities may be out of whack as perhaps what was ultimately the most important result of that class was not just the nods toward the reconfiguration of what's allowable in students' academic prose but the transformation of academia itself for marginalized students. At semester's end, we all receive the occasional notes and e-mails from students who've enjoyed our classes, but at this course's completion, I received more such notes—tucked into my department mail box, slid under my office door, stapled to a final essay—than I had ever before. Many of these students spoke of the stark contrast in which our GLBTQ writing course stood in comparison to the rest of their educations. One student summed up many peers' feelings when he wrote,

2. For a fuller discussion of the problems inherent in "gay and lesbian marriage" and "gays in the military" types of debates, particularly as they emanate from the use of composition textbooks and readers, see my essay "'Gay Topics,' GLBTQ Students, and the Queering of Composition," forthcoming in Jonathan Alexander and Michelle Gibson's *Queer Compositions*. See also Sarah Sloan's "Invisible Diversity: Gay and Lesbian Students Writing Our Way into the Academy" for a discussion of the precarious position of GLBTQ students in classrooms that discuss these so-called gay topics without first establishing a safe space for GLBTQ students.

"I found a voice, not just in class, but a voice that finally connects with academia on some level that I have never been able to achieve. . . . The feeling of finally being able to identify with academic literature that has been engaging and provocative has provided a source of relief from the grind of consistently feeling disconnected from . . . a so-called 'general education'" (Tony³).

My allegiance lies with these GLBTQ students. I share their anger at the homophobia I see daily on college campuses. Moreover, I project my younger self onto my GLBTQ students and want to reach out to them, to offer a hand up to them, a hand I wish had been extended to my 18-year-old self. For that matter, I make my academic living off these students. While I believe that GLBTQ-themed writing courses targeted toward GLBTQ students can offer important alternative and liberatory spaces for these students, my publication, promotion, and tenure trace back to these folks. I have, then, all kinds of conflating investments in offering single-themed FYC courses to GLBTQ student populations.

Student responses, taken with my own experiences of having taught these classes, for some time said to me that not only were these single-themed courses empowering for some students but that the curriculum of single-themed composition courses was, to some extent, transferable. While my pedagogy is ever evolving and the single-themed mechanism is ever being revised, students at various universities (from a large, midwestern flagship institution to a regional southwestern college experiencing exponential growth to a small technological university in the Appalachian foothills), propelled by, for instance, the challenging dissensus they encountered in class, have time and again responded well to these single-themed courses, often improving their writing seemingly unknowingly or even despite themselves. To leave it at that, however, would mean ignoring place and the complications that can come along with it. If my themed courses had been accepted by various institutions scattered across the country and had even been lauded at some, if the courses had been largely appreciated by students and prized by some colleagues, if suddenly these courses did not work at a given institution, I had to ask, why? What blocks transferability where it was not blocked before? More specifically, why is a course of similar design rewarded at one institution but hobbled at another?

These questions began floating about soon after I decided to offer a new version of that GLBTQ writing class. Now at a new university, I'd already taught a few capital punishment-themed Composition II courses with much success (local papers had covered my and my students' trip to North Carolina's Central Prison and its death house). Moreover, as WPA, I'd talked frequently with my new colleagues about single-themed courses, even inviting sev-

3. "Tony" is a pseudonym, as are all the names I use to refer to students.

eral of my students from a prior semester to attend one of our composition faculty meetings so that they could describe their experiences therein, and four different faculty members had since then taught themed-FYC classes (on subjects as various as environmental justice to the Lewis and Clark expedition). So, perhaps due to the encouragement of CCCC's Progressive SIGs and Caucuses Coalition for "writing teachers . . . to take on research, pedagogy, and service projects that promote commitment to peace, justice, and human dignity—even when hazarding the ire of deans, chairs, editors, and hiring and review committees," I wondered what it would be like to offer a GLBTQ composition class on my current campus.

I assumed that there would be some differences.

During my first week here in southeastern North Carolina, still bumping into cardboard boxes and searching for the silverware, a new colleague shared with me the local Chamber of Commerce's (unintentionally ironic) campaign slogan: "100 miles from everywhere." The mountains in one direction, the beach in the other, urban metropolises to the north and to the west, I live in the rural south where church steeples replace skyscrapers and tobacco rows replace sidewalks. When out-of-state friends call me now and I'm not home, they leave messages, teasing, "You must be at Golden Corral," one of only two chain restaurants in our town.

My long-distance friends can tease, but my neighbors struggle. Census figures prove what the eye easily observes of the county that houses our university. A per capita income of just over \$13,000, a poverty rate of over 22% (not surprisingly, higher for children and the elderly), less than 12% of the population with a Bachelor's degree (that's less than *half* of the national average), and over 35% of county residents without a high school diploma (and that's more than *twice* the national average), sometimes it seems as though all that our county is rich in is burned-out buildings, vacant warehouses, and storefront churches (U.S. Census). When the manufacturing base left the southeastern U.S. (there are no Chuck Taylor Converse sneakers made in America anymore—the last U.S. plant that made them sits empty, twenty minutes from my house), what was left behind were women who at fifty years old were waiting tables for the first time in their lives and first generation college freshmen who were trying to pick a major that would allow them to improve the lives of themselves and their families without relocating from the area (a nearly impossible goal). And while our students' racial diversity makes our campus one of the most varied in the nation, one thing most of our students have in common (be they 18-year-old high school grads from the county seat or 48-year-old laid-off machine operators from three counties over) is financial hardship.

Thing is, I understand how my students feel. Myself a first-generation college student, my parents worked twenty-five years in middle Tennessee's garment factories, only to

be left with no pension, no retirement, not even a savings account, when those garment industries set sail for Haiti and China. My folks now work the nightshift at Wal-Mart and tell anyone who'll listen that it's the best job they've ever known.

There are a lot of things that I like about my new home—I like that I can drive down to the Piggly Wiggly and pay all my utility bills in one swoop. I like the fact that the local librarian knows that I'm the one who always orders interlibrary loan books. And I relish knowing that the best food to be had within a fifty-mile radius comes from Miss Callie Mae's, a gas station so far in the middle of nowhere that a regular pretty much has to take you the first time—directions just won't help all that much.

However, while my blue-collar roots and my southern sensibilities are fed by this little hole in the wall, the place has ended up re-lesbianizing me. Yep, I grew up with men with farmers' tans and with women who canned homemade sweet pickles, but I also live with my long-time partner and subscribe to *The Advocate*. The dissonance is, for the most part, something I like. In this place, though, at this institution, the dissonance can be deafening.

Rumblings about my queer self arose on my current campus even before I got here. There were blustery, dire admonitions against my hire delivered to senior administrators. The contract negotiations struck me as suspiciously rigid and cool. A mayday phone call from a future lesbian colleague that reminded me of those old AA commercials ("I'm-Jane-Doe-and-I'm-a-lesbian") came crackling and hyphenated over the wires. Loose-jawed, "Who'd a' thunk?" pinballing through my mind, the hiring experience was surreal. It was a job I accepted partially because I did want to work with students whose socioeconomic and regional backgrounds reminded me of my own, but the thing is, my experiences continue to be surreal. Just a few weeks ago, a senior colleague pulled me into her office, a brassy, tenured, New York transplant who is just what this department needs, mysteriously telling me to tread carefully, that our campus is where other campuses were fifteen or twenty years ago. Grateful for the mentoring (which I am increasingly aware of needing), still, I knew she wasn't sharing such warnings with the goateed medievalist whose wife just had a baby.

I don't know if my current university is where other schools were twenty years ago—I waffle between thinking that's an impossible generalization and thinking it's obviously true—but, either way, our institution is changing. For one thing, our university's enrollment has increased 64% in only five years. As what our state system labels a "growth enrollment institution," not surprisingly, our campus faces easily imagined tensions, and a continuum develops, *discomfort* on one end and *excitement* on the other, to describe all of this change. Originally a normal college, the university has mutated from a small, rural school where a tableau of long-time, tenured faculty educated a mostly local, largely working-class, racially diverse group of students. Now, our campus' capital projects can barely keep up with its

growth, and the university has begun vigorous recruitment of students from around the state and the nation and, in some cases, from around the globe.

Due to the swell of enrollees (both locals and those from outside the area), lots of new faculty, many young and many with new Ph.D.'s, have arrived on our campus. In fact, three-quarters of our faculty fall into one of two categories: 14% of our faculty have been here for more than fifteen years while over 59% of our faculty have been here five years or less. It would be too simple a matter to say that a division erupts that falls solely along seniority or age lines, but it would also be remiss to deny that some of that sort of division ends up existing. Particularly salient, it is, of course, senior colleagues (the very colleagues who *sometimes* employ tenets that many new hires might consider bygone—dicta like “We should be in the office five days a week so that our students have access to us” and “Ph.D.'s and subject area expertise matter less than having good teachers in the classroom”) who are the chairs of tenure and promotion committees and of departments. The excitement on our campus, then, can be palpable, but so can the angst, and most everyone, at least at some point, is unhappy about all of this change because (a) it's coming too fast or (b) it's not coming fast enough.

Our department reflects the growing pains of our larger university. When I arrived for my campus visit, anyone and everyone, including my department chair and my hiring committee, told me that this department was looking for a “visionary” to come in and overhaul its composition program. *Visionary*. The word peppered my visit the way church spires peppered the landscape. I've since come to wonder what some meant by the term. Certainly some saw that change was needed and sought it. The fact that, in only a year and a half, we've adopted new outcome statements for FYC, we've overhauled our portfolio system, and we've radically altered our placement process and that we've done these things with nearly unanimous accord demonstrates that the majority of the composition faculty was ready for change. But that opposing minority has been there, and sometimes, they sure seem loud. And powerful. And stealthy, for I am often caught unaware when facing their disapproval. For instance, I didn't expect controversy over what struck me as pretty moderate matters—it never occurred to me that some faculty would want to re-institute a common exit exam that students had to pass in order to complete FYC instead of allowing students to compile portfolios; I never thought that encouraging composition faculty to pick their own textbooks would be considered seditious; and it was never even a blip on my radar that teaching *any* single-themed composition class would be radical.

But radical it was—maybe not according to a great number of objectors but according to at least a single important one: my chair. I didn't anticipate the resistance. After all, before being hired, I'd forthrightly marketed myself as someone who structures nearly all of her composition courses around single themes. Moreover, when I had the previous semes-

ter marched thirty FYC students who'd been studying capital punishment off to the state's death house, the course evaluations (not to mention many campus colleagues' responses) were overwhelmingly positive. Furthermore, when other composition faculty began experimenting with their own themed courses and reporting their own successes, it seemed clear to me that single-themed writing courses were just one of many viable ways to teach FYC at our institution.

Upon first mention of the GLBTQ writing course, however, my chair balked. I had broached the class to him only as a courtesy, knowing that, in attempting to aim the course at our campus' GLBTQ-identified students, I would need to advertise it aggressively and that there might be fallout. I hadn't expected him to withhold permission for the course. I hadn't even known I should ask for it.

"It's not the subject matter" were the first words out of his mouth that I remember, followed by "It might be a problem." My hackles rose.

Under what was ostensibly a sincere if, in my view, misguided halo of "pro-student" philosophy, my chair set upon *all* single-themed courses. He worried that our average freshman would become bored studying the same topic all semester. He also worried that students who were disinterested in some topics might mistakenly register for or even be forced to enroll in FYC sections that focused on those very subjects. The WPA in me kicked in as I explained that no student on our campus *has* to take a single-themed FYC course as these courses constitute well under 10% of the total FYC classes we offer each semester. Moreover, the themes of all of these courses are advertised (more on that later) so that students can select or avoid these. For that matter, should a student unwittingly end up in a themed course, dropping and adding is always an option that first week of classes. Finally, whether particular themes make the "average college freshman" any less interested than he or she would have been in his or her required, general education composition class is doubtful, particularly on our own campus where such courses have garnered positive evaluations.

Next, he cited authority. Faculty couldn't simply decide to offer a single-themed FYC course. I should, he instructed, get approval for such courses by submitting a proposal for them to our department's Composition Committee, a committee that, as WPA, I chair. It's worth noting that my chair never went so far as to center himself overtly as the ultimate authority on composition in our department, but he did continually decenter my position. Now, as the WPA, I don't think of our FYC program as my own personal fiefdom. However, I do have a problem with seeking approval for a pedagogical initiative from a committee whose majority is 70% staffed by non-compositionist, non-tenure-track lecturers, many of whom received MATs from our own department—a committee make-up that the chair himself

decides and whose members' job stability, given lecturers' tenuous position in any department, almost entirely depends on a good relationship with that chair, a man who, in this case, is also my colleagues' former professor. I didn't say any of that. Instead, I offered, "But this 'approval' will be retroactive? We've already been offering such courses?" Unmoved, he cautioned that my proposal for single-themed FYC courses would eventually have to wind its way through our campus' Curriculum Committee. "Understand that this will take a while to institute," he counseled, suggesting I put off teaching the new incarnation of my GLBTQ writing class for a *couple of years*.

I tried explaining that I wasn't advocating systemic curricular change of the FYC program, that I was simply promoting faculty development, encouraging our colleagues to experiment with new approaches in their writing courses. Maybe next year I'd advocate conference-based courses, maybe the following a service learning course. And thus began a dialogue in which he and I could have defined one another's words but could not fathom the other's message. He kept advocating committee approval; I kept arguing that there was no change to our composition courses per se. He kept warning that we couldn't just do whatever we wanted in our composition classes; I kept protesting that it wasn't like I was asking FYC students to dissect frogs. He invoked uniformity; I said surely not at the cost of innovation. Ultimately, I did take his directives to the Composition Committee, and that Committee "sided" with me, deciding that single-themed courses are, like portfolio-based classes or collaborative writing courses, just one of many feasible ways to teach FYC.

By then, though, a pattern between chair and WPA had begun. Any new development in the composition program about which the chair learned⁴ earned a meeting or an e-mail. In said contact, the chair issued varying degrees of admonition. WPA, now calling up her raising, went "southern female," slapping sugar and smiling, saying things like, "Hmm, I hadn't thought of that" or "Thank you for that suggestion" or "I'll definitely look into that." After exiting the meeting and gargling with Listerine, the WPA then did what she wanted. The chair, trying to be politic in his wariness, had couched his directives ("I think you might want to wait on . . ." or "we need to rethink . . ."), all the while hearing himself say, "Do not do this now." But, in his politic language, she had heard loopholes ("Well, he never said I *couldn't* . . .") and promptly did what she wanted.

In this case, while my chair didn't offer support for the GLBTQ class, he didn't forbid it, so, I just called the registrar myself (normally the chair's prerogative). I told her that we

4. And I would like to say here "any innovative or revolutionary development in the composition program," but it was by that time clear that, given the time and place where I was now planted, I'd lost my ability to discern the radical from the merely different.

were going to offer a small number of themed-FYC classes⁵ and asked if there'd be any problem in getting blurbs indicating which course sections these were and what their foci would be inserted into our electronic registration system. Normally hesitant to customize the electronic system for anyone ("if we do it for you, we'll have to do it..."), she readily agreed, and I told her that I'd send my own blurb over ASAP and instruct the two other theme-based instructors to do the same.

I immediately set about drafting the blurb to end all blurbs. It spoke of gay culture and lesbian writers, activist texts and emic perspectives, student-centered classrooms and alterior spaces. I wish I could quote it here, but in a rare fit of optimism, I deleted it. I'd typed it up, sent it to the registrar, and never heard another word. For once, no fallout—no follow-up "ahem" e-mail, no "we've got a problem" voice mail. Before defragmenting my hard drive, "No need for this to take up RAM anymore," I'd thought, and deleted the description. "Everything's copasetic." Finally.

Or not.

Days before spring registration was to begin, something told me to double-check our on-line registration system, just to be sure. Clicking on department, then on course number, scrolling down to instructor, there it was, my blurb, edited to say the least: it read only, "Content Varies." I suddenly understood why Chuck Jones drew steam coming from Wile E. Coyote's ears. I thought of picking up my head and carrying it with me to the registrar's office so that I could stand there, head in hand, and just shriek. Instead, for once prudent, I called to my administrative assistant: "Miss Rachel [I'm sticking with pseudonyms but keeping the title by which nearly everyone in our department signals both affection and respect for Rachel], could you please call someone over in the registrar's office. . . ."

Thus began a series of tag-team conversations. Rachel: "They said the blurb was too long, given the electronic registration system's character-limit." Irate Me: "Well, why didn't they *call*! No, never mind. What is the

character limit?" Another phone call and Rachel's reply: "They don't *know* what the character limit is." Smoldering But Pragmatic Me: "Fine. Tell them to put in 'GLBT Writing Course,'" thinking, "*That* ought to fit within their character limit." A phone call and Rachel's wary

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5. I was not the only faculty member who planned on offering a single-themed composition course that spring. Following a meeting of the writing faculty in which I promoted this approach, two tenured professors decided to offer their own themed classes, one the Lewis and Clark class, the other focused on race and ethnicity.

update: "The registrar says that she doesn't know what 'GLBT' means." Indefatigable Me to Rachel, realizing that neither must Rachel have understood the acronym, else she would have explained it to the registrar: "It means 'Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered.'" ⁶ A Composed Rachel: "Well, the registrar says that *she* doesn't know what it means and that the *students* won't know what it means either." Actually, that's a good point, I'd thought to myself—I could imagine that young, just-coming-out GLBTQ students on this campus might *not* know what "GLBT" meant, and neither might straight homophobes—who knew who might end up inadvertently (not) enrolled in the class. Resigned Me: "Just tell her to put 'Gay Writing Class.'" Here, suddenly and inexplicably, Rachel waxed what seem to be sympathetic: "Oh noooo." It was an exhausting time. I didn't know what Rachel meant, and, curiosity beaten down by fatigue, at that moment, I just didn't care. I repeated: "*Tell* her to put 'Gay Writing Class' in the system." It took over a week, and registration was well underway, but ultimately, that's just what the registrar did.

Days later, a colleague dropped by to see me but stood chatting with Rachel first, engaged in an almost parodic dialogue, just outside my open office door. I listened as the two volleyed about my right to exist. "They have a right to live just like anybody else," Rachel proclaimed, her voice rising noticeably above its usual hum. "I know, but some people don't think homosexuality's right," my colleague gently lobbed to her. Rachel replied, "They're human beings, just like you and me." It was a little like watching community theater. Later, the two of us alone, my colleague said, "You know she was saying all that for you, don't you? That's why I just stood there and let her talk." I had known that. It was Rachel's way of offering encouragement and support while leaving our professional relationship and maybe my pride intact. Thing is, her communication *about* me *in the vicinity of* me was to reveal how so many on campus began to communicate *to* me. I seldom had a face-to-face conversation, positive or negative, with anyone about my upcoming queered writing course, about the Illinois course from which it derived, about my research, about GLBTQ studies in general. Instead, I began to hear about *myself* and *my* course (though it was a self and a course I barely recognized) in various and sundry venues.

Examples?

- Rachel e-mailed me regarding an odd, hand-delivered missive from our Student Government Association President. According to Rachel, on a half-torn piece of

6. Yes, by this time, at least in my public discourse on this campus, I'd dropped the "Q." I'm not proud of that, but explanatory conversations started to suffocate me: "I'm offering this GLBTQ writing class." "*GLBTQ?*" "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer." "*Queer?* They say that nowadays?" And, mired in terminology, discussion of the class itself, the more immediately important issue, would never happen. Thus, *GLBT*. And, for that matter, it's not as if that acronym was non-controversial. (Sigh.)

notebook paper, scrawled in blue ballpoint, was a note, like the ones my friends and I used to pass in Mrs. Arnold's high school physics class, this one voicing "some concerns about the course you will be teaching in Spring 2005." Among the concerns was "How is this [class] going to benefit students?" (I wondered if the Algebra faculty were getting the same queries.) Our SGA President left her e-mail address and asked that I forward this information to her immediately.

- An older student dropped by my office. A junior now, she'd already completed her first-year composition sequence and wanted to know if she could enroll in my course for upper-division credit. Casually, she mentioned, "Yeah, a lot of the members of the Ten Percent Society⁷ have been acting stupid, saying things like," and here, in a sneering voice, she aped, "Do you have to prove you're *gay* to take the class?"
- "Have you seen *The Pine Needle*?" my partner, on campus for her psychology class, asked, passing me a copy of the school's newspaper. "Why do the gays and lesbians get a special English class? . . . Are they better students than the heterosexuals? Do I have to become gay to get special treatment and one-on-one individual classes customized just for my lifestyle?" (Pruitt 10). So railed one Ernest Pruitt. "[T]he homosexuals were [sic] trying to segregate themselves from the . . . school. . . . [M]ost heterosexual people would not feel comfortable in a class targeted toward gays and lesbians. . . . [I]t is a slap in the face that they get special treatment to take a certain class," he continued (10).

Not one of these questioning or complaining students ever spoke directly to me.

In response to the first scenario, I asked Rachel to contact the SGA President and to tell her that, if she had questions about the GLBT writing course, she was welcome to make an appointment to come by and speak to me. She did make the appointment. She did not show. Later, in the minutes of the SGA meetings that are posted on our university's web site, I read that a student government member "updated us on the Gay/Lesbian English class. This class is open to everyone; however, you do need the permission of the professor to take the class in fear that some student may just sign up for the class to cause problems" ("Minutes"). While that summation was mostly correct, I've no idea how the SGA came by this information as not a single representative ever spoke to me.

Regarding scenario number two, by the time this student stopped in and reported the Ten Percent Society's buzz, I had already e-mailed that organization several times,

7. The Ten Percent Society is a student-run organization that aims to serve students who are members of any minority community on our campus. It is our university's only organization that is outwardly inclusive of GLBTQ students. In the past, its membership has generally topped out at no more than ten or fifteen students.

informing them about my class and seeking their support. I never received a single reply, and none of the students who eventually registered for the GLBTQ writing class was a member of that group.

The third scenario was a more disturbing one for me due to its public nature. Pruitt's letter to the campus newspaper's editor was filled with misinformation, and had he or the paper itself asked me to comment on his allegations, I could have easily countered them. I could have noted that GLBTQ students *do* take "regular classes" at our university. (If, as the American Psychological Association estimates, nearly 20% of college students are GLBTQ-identified (Robison 55)—on our campus, that would mean nearly 900 students—obviously, all of these students were not enrolling in my Comp. II class.) I might have pointed out that heterosexual students were (and always had been) welcome to register for the class (and they, in fact, did). I could have questioned the assumption that "most heterosexual people would not feel comfortable in a class targeted toward gays and lesbians," refusing to believe that "heterosexual" is a synonym for "homophobic." I could have asked Pruitt to consider how GLBTQ students might feel in a classroom that is, even if unconsciously, "targeted toward" straight students. I could have highlighted Pruitt's ignorance of gay and lesbian studies programs that flourish nationwide, citing the 21 different North Carolina colleges and universities that offer GLBTQ coursework (Younger).

Perhaps most importantly, though, I might have deconstructed his references to segregation. To compare GLBTQ people's efforts to have their cultures and experiences reflected in college curricula with racist overseers' attempts to squelch the opportunities for and humanity of African-Americans by imposing a segregated system revealed to me a misunderstanding, not just of GLBTQ life and politics but of American history. Moreover, at a time when, according to national studies, nearly a quarter of all first-year students *admit* to harassing gay men (Robison 55); when less than half of GLBTQ members of Greek societies ever come out within those organizations (Case 69); when 60% of GLBTQ students do not feel safe being open about their sexual orientation during their classes (Renn 232); when nearly 11% of students have heard faculty make disparaging remarks or jokes about GLBTQ people (Renn 232); and *when 53% of GLBTQ students have censored their academic speech and writing in order to avoid discrimination* (Renn 232), I hardly think one GLBTQ-themed composition section, open to all who are interested and required of no one, represents a tidal wave of change. I wish that it did.

I said none of this.

See, the thing is, there are no heroes in this story. I rationalized, "It's a student newspaper. It really ought to be a forum for *student* opinion, not that of faculty." So my own letter to the editor, in response to Pruitt's, remained on my hard drive.

But, the truth is, I was beginning to feel not only angry or dismayed or frustrated. I was beginning to feel scared. For it wasn't just faceless students who were grumbling about the course. It was colleagues, too. From varied corners of the campus, from every level of the campus hierarchy, comments ricocheted. Deans and university lawyers and vice chancellors all began to question the course. And while it's true that I can only surmise what was said in their e-mails that boomeranged across the campus green or in their phone calls that hissed along the wires, the reason that I am left to surmise at all is at least as important to me as what was said, for, like our students, none of these colleagues ever spoke directly to me about this GLBTQ writing class. Instead, most spoke to my *department chair*, sending messages about the course to me through him.

There was no more dramatic a moment than when I received an e-mail from my chair indicating that he needed to see me "pronto." Only hours later, confounded, I found myself staring across his desk, stacked high with reams of white course handouts and white interdepartmental memos—but dotted by one triangle-pink flier.

You see, when it had become clear that our electronic registration system would not include the "gay writing class" tag until well after registration had begun, I'd printed up some thirty or thirty-five fliers that described the course and had posted them, mostly in the humanities building but a few elsewhere on campus. It was one of those fliers that my chair sat holding. He'd taken one down, and he tapped it as he clicked off the administrators who had "expressed concern" about the course.

Seeming to follow Pruitt's lead, some of our university's administrators worried over the potential legal repercussions that these fliers might invite. Pointing to the flier's bulleted list of course features, they questioned my choice to note that the class had been "designed for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students interested in writing about, researching, and discussing issues relevant to the GLBT community." According to our administration, my chair admonished, I *had* to admit heterosexual students into this course. Whatsmore, I had to admit *homophobic students* as well.

I wasn't quite sure where to begin my response. During the time period that I had proposed and then publicized the first incarnation of this course (and thus had dialogued with the directors of Illinois' Women's Studies Program, Unit One, Rhetoric Program, and Registrar's Office—with the entire campus community, as far as that goes, via university listservs), the rights of the *homophobic* had never come up. I was stymied.

The simplest thing to do would have been to note that heterosexual students were, by that time, already registered for the course. Several of my former Comp. I students (in this case, straight ones) wanted to take my Composition II class, and I'd already signed enrollment slips for them. (Whether or not they were homophobic, I couldn't attest.) Or, I might

have clarified that, though I could see how the flier could be misread, I'd never intended to disallow or even discourage the enrollment of straight students. I had meant only that this course would be taught from the first-person plural perspective, where "gays" didn't exist somewhere in the ether but in this very classroom.

However, neither the fact that heterosexual students were already enrolled nor the fact that the flier was being misconstrued was the point. At least not to me. It was the principle of the thing.

First, to paper the campus with fliers that advertised an upcoming course was commonplace. Furthermore, it was hard to imagine that administrators would have balked at the idea of our American Indian Studies program marketing itself to the Lumbee and Cherokee students on our campus.⁸ Would administrators really have been surprised to learn that most of the students who enroll in my own department's African-American literature course are African-American themselves? How many male students on our campus had chosen to enroll in our new Gender Studies minor? This is to say, to me, it was bizarre to consider it unusual or risky to advertise any class the subject matter of which focused on a societal minority to members of that minority. After all, such would likely be the largest and most committed, though certainly not the sole, audience for such a course, and even if that were not the case, this population would still bring unique and, albeit diverse, emic perspectives to the academic table. However, we are a racially diverse campus with a majority of female students, and those segments of our student population can be represented by figures from Institutional Research. Moreover, damnation doesn't automatically accompany race and gender. But, with a smaller, largely invisible, and frequently condemned-to-eternal-hellfire segment of our student population, our GLBTQ students, well. . . .

What would happen, I wondered, if I chose to ignore the class' by then already diverse enrollment and the routine nature of the publicity for the class? What if, instead of sharing information or reasoning that would likely allay the administration's fears, I chose instead to embrace the revolutionary aspects of the class? How, I speculated, would some of my colleagues (those focused on the rights of the *homophobic* if not the rights of the *homosexual*) react if I, for example, argued that GLBTQ students needed, harking back to Canagara-jah, a "safe house"? How might my colleagues respond if I noted that, on a campus far from

8. Our university was the first normal college in the nation designed specifically for Native Americans, and the commitment to our Native American students is, rightly, still strong here. And in fact, when I, the following year, taught a theme-based Composition II class on contemporary Native American issues and advertised the class with a very similar flier, there was, not surprisingly, no erroneous outcry about the legal repercussions of excluding white students.

having a safe zone movement,⁹ one room, designated a safe classroom for some 150 minutes a week, might mean a whole lot? That it might, as Kristin A. Renn directs all faculty to do, at least hamper the victimization of or even support and encourage our GLBTQ students? (236-7). What if I pushed the argument for a separatist space even further? What if I invoked Luce Irigaray, for instance, who has argued, "for women to undertake tactical strikes, to keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn *to defend their desire, especially through speech*"? (33; emphasis added). I wouldn't be arguing, after all, for a members-only clubhouse (a concept already extremist on our campus) but for societal insurrection.

As I sat staring across my chair's desk, though, the words of that tenured New Yorker resounded in my mind: "we are where other schools were fifteen or twenty years ago." Fear crystallized in my gut. Fifteen or twenty years ago? We are where, say, Syracuse was in 1991, when fraternity members of Alpha Chi Rho printed up T-shirts that depicted a gay man lying prostrate and unconscious beneath a spiked club held by a "crow," the edict to "Club Faggots, Not Seals," justified by the ethic of "Homophobic and Proud of It," stamped on the shirts? (Silverman and Kulkus). We are where Brown was in 1987 when some of its football players spat on Asian-American female students, calling them "Oriental faggots"? (Cockburn). We are where East Tennessee State University was in 1986, when a gay male student, "caught" having oral sex with another man, was coerced into a confession by campus police who then turned that man's confession over to the local district attorney who garnered a five-year prison term for the ETSU student and justified the virulence of his prosecution by saying, "I am concerned about it [homosexuality] in this community. In the light of the apparent ease of which I have observed many of these people to engage in homosexual encounters . . . they are endangering everyone by spreading AIDS"? (Miller 284). We are where the University of Oregon was in 1992, admitting in a *self-report* that "the university environment is neither consistently safe for, nor tolerant of, nor academically inclusive of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals"? (qtd. in Watkins 271). We are where, in a 1991 *USA Today* nationwide survey, several universities confessed to being, that is, where "sexual orientation accounted for most acts of intolerance on their campuses" (Watkins 269)—where (in 1989) some 1,329 *reported* homophobic episodes occurred? (Watkins 268). If our campus is where those campuses *were*, "What have I gotten myself into?" I sat (nauseated and) wondering.

So again I admit: there are no heroes in this story. I am certainly not one. What I *am* is an untenured, assistant professor. In my heart, I suspect that it was not the prose on those

9. "The safe zone concept is simple; the college community identifies, educates, and supports campus members who are concerned about the well-being of LGBT students. When a person volunteers to be a safe zone contact, he or she is pronouncing nothing about personal sexuality but is instead underscoring an interest in the college's LGBT population" (Hothem and Keene 364).

fliers that gave rise to concerns. I think the *existence* of the fliers was the dilemma because the existence of the fliers pointed to the existence of GLBTQ students, GLBTQ faculty, and GLBTQ curricula. And here, in this place, I could substitute “extraterrestrial” for “GLBTQ” and

“running on a cocktail
of naivete, passion,
arrogance, mission, and
righteous indignation”

get no more strident a reaction or askew a glance *from some*. However, I said none of that. Instead, I submitted, to the will of my chair, to the will of some members of my administration. I'd been running on a cocktail of naivete, passion, arrogance, mission, and righteous indignation for months. Now, that cocktail was watered down by something as unadorned as job security. In an

ironic backtracking, I walked the campus, taking down my own fliers. There wasn't much work to do. Most of the fliers had already been ripped down anyway.

The thing is, if there are no heroes, as much as I hate to concede it, there are likewise no villains. If I'm no Superman, my chair is no Lex Luthor. On the one hand, he serves an increasingly young, increasingly diverse faculty that is more and more steeped in its own disciplinarity and pedagogies, sometimes in direct opposition to his own epistemology. On the other hand, he answers to a similarly metamorphosing administration that itself answers to an involved, largely local, largely traditional Board of Trustees, a Board that only recently pushed for Parent/Professor Conferences, federal privacy laws and the fact that a good many of our students are nontraditional adult learners be damned.¹⁰ And there my chair sits, a chimera, part faculty member, part administrator, bridging the widening chasm of changes on this campus. I don't envy him.

I know, as a writer, that I need to conclude this essay, but conclusions keep eluding me. Why? Well, for one thing, there's still so much that you don't know. I haven't told you about the stonewalling of the dual enrollment option for juniors and seniors interested in taking the GLBTQ writing class. I haven't told you about the request from local television that I give an interview about the course. I haven't told you of one colleague's word of warning that I watch over my own and my students' safety. In trying to get this class offered, there was incident after incident. It's hard, then, not to be exhaustive. The isolation that I can feel here tempts me to run after you, tugging at your coattails, adding, “No, no, that's not all. You're not gonna believe what happened next.”

But this conclusion is hard to write not only because I'm abridging this story. It's hard

10. See student journalist Scott Ammons' series of articles in our university's student newspaper for more information regarding this eventually defeated (by the faculty senate) initiative.

to write because conclusions, by their very nature, should provide some pearl, right? They're supposed to say to readers, "Here, take this for your troubles." But, the truth is, I'm not sure what I think the last word is on my efforts to effect, here, in this place, this GLBTQ writing course.

My first stab at writing this conclusion saw me declare that my work is thwarted here. As proof, I found myself quoting from my own research journal. Despairing, one entry reads, "I have come to believe that this work is impossible in this place. My efforts may make others' work possible in the future but . . . right now, in this place, this work can't be done."

Anymore, I'm not so sure of that. After all, I *am enacting* queered composition scholarship and queered composition pedagogy here, ever how contested the work may be. In some ways, the disturbance that the work induces on this campus may even be what is most worthwhile about it. I'm beginning to prize the institutional response as a sign of the work's effectiveness. If nothing else, it is a disruption of, if not a homophobic, at least a heterosexist norm. The debate—from the upper echelons of the campus' administration to the editorial column of the campus' student newspaper—proves to me that a discussion about GLBTQ students' place at this university was needed. That conversation is happening now, even if it does remain to be seen in what ways it will be productive.

I am finding, then, that, here, where it has been a struggle just to scratch out a niche wherein I can do my work, my scholarship is always already praxis, and in exciting ways. Many of us hope that our scholarship will make a difference—in our field, on our campuses, in the lives of our students. In this place, long before research is written up, before it's read by peers or heard at a conference, my work is already realizing those aims, at least somewhat. Maybe, ever how glacially slowly, it helps to pull our campus toward a more progressive space.

The trick is to figure out how to continue the work without getting depleted, fired, or both. The nuggets of support that fell my way during the promotion of this class (the Multicultural Center director e-mailing encouragement; the Gender Studies director volunteering to help post fliers; the registrar jotting, "Thank you for responding to special populations within our university community. I see transcripts from other schools with Gay and Lesbian titles. I understand you are taking some heat. . . . Hang in there") were not too far short of life preservers for me. And the students who e-mailed (as one, for instance, did anonymously, saying, "I've never heard gay stuff discussed positively before") motivated me beyond measure.

Still, it was a lonely, alienating business, and the lack of support does quell the work. But how does one invite support? How does a queer colleague ask straight peers¹¹ to care enough, first, to educate themselves about the peripheral position and then to work to centralize it? I felt that even my closest departmental allies never really understood the fear and the

11. Or a female colleague ask male ones or a Latina ask white counterparts

institutional marginalization and the professional risk I experienced, and that I may still face. And that makes me think that somewhere in here ought to be a call for more gay and lesbian studies programs or GLBTQ academic concentrations or at least more alliance between GLBTQ scholars and their (straight? compositionist?) allies so that individual queer professors (especially untenured ones) don't have to fight these battles in forlorn, hazardous isolation.

Moreover, we must make manifest facets of academia that often remain implicit. There is programmatic vision and administrative leadership. If, for instance, a given department values diversity, our mission statement must not only affirm so, but departmental plans ought to define it and identify how we plan to evince it, in our faculty and in our curricula. Moreover, both faculty and particularly administrators ought to ensure that their contact with one another does not occur only when faculty feel as if they have been summoned to the principal's office. But there are also the composite values of given departments and the institutional clout of given players, both of which confounded me in my new workplace. As academics, so much of our training is overt: we are raised up in blatantly social-epistemic graduate programs, for instance, or align ourselves with openly Marxist theorists. But there's another kind of training, the Every Day, that hones expectations in often unconscious ways. Studying in an English department like Illinois's, for instance, whose faculty chose to write and sign departmental position statements *against* the university's Chief Illiniwek mascot and *for* graduate student unionization in many ways trained me to expect overt political action at the department level. Furthermore, working at multiple universities where WPAs were plainly recognized not only as scholars in their fields but also experts on their campuses taught me to expect a similar regard. Learning, though, that leftist political action and powerful WPAs were not the tradition in my current department went a long way toward making me more appreciative of where I've come from and more savvy as to where I am.

Double-gestures have become a habit: on the one hand, I think that GLBTQ compositionists have to decipher whether our work is feasible at a given institution. I'm not talking about determining whether our work is *welcome* but if it is *possible*. Because I, upon my arrival at this institution, sought to continue my queered research, resistance to themed courses generally and especially to my GLBTQ one felt not like some irksome, thick-headed puzzle to sort out. It felt like a personal threat. It felt as if conservative forces were attempting to obstruct my scholarship (whether they meant to or not, whether they even *cared* or not). Moreover, given that resistance didn't heighten until the GLBTQ course was proposed and promoted (after all, there were no reprimands about the Lewis and Clark themed FYC class), it felt as if not just the class nor even my research but my career, my life, my right to exist on the campus was being challenged. On the other hand, here I am, and here I'm thinking of staying. I am committed to centralizing GLBTQ students in university curricula, par-

ticularly in FYC programs, partially because that's how I make my academic living and partially because I think it is a matter of justice. Just having a conversation about doing so, on this campus, is, I believe, valuable, if also tumultuous and intimidating. Anything more (like the fact that the class will, despite the controversy, be offered) is concrete progress. The material effects of my scholarship can, then, here, have directly tangible and beneficial consequences. And part of the reason I'm doing this work, be it both painful and rewarding, is, after all, to effect those changes. It's tough going to work and some days feeling not only like the resident lesbian but the resident *alien*. But I do feel alive as a working scholar/teacher. The work is important somehow, maybe more so than it was at Illinois, where it sat among not just queer theory classes but drag shows held at the Illini Union.

I do write with trepidation. I worry that the reflections that I record here will label me a whistleblower or a purveyor of "revenge journalism" or that this very publication will worsen my own condition. But milieu is important—it colors the work and, perhaps, squelches too much of it.

All this and there is still the course to teach. And that brings a whole slew of new questions. How will colleagues respond to the film series that I plan as part of the course, to the guest speakers who arrive on our campus, to the fieldtrips for which I'll request funding? Moreover, if *I* have already faced challenges, what have *my students* lived through—in dorm hallways and in campus cafeterias, in gym locker rooms and fraternity houses? How will their experiences enter into our classroom? There is still so much to come.

The first death threat arrived recently. Well, not a death threat as much as an ugly (here in the South, that means "impolite") request. Rachel had stepped out to lunch, closing the door to her outer office behind her. When I slumped out of my own office, heading down to our copy room, I noticed that one of those old fliers, wrinkled and stained, had been slid under her door and lay there on the floor. Picking it up and turning it over, I found that it bore, "Fagots [sic] go away!" I'm on my way today to our local printers, to have it laminated. I've scrawled a giant, capitalized "NO!" across the bottom in red permanent marker. It should make a nice addition to my office door.

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