Queering the Writing Program: Why Now? How? And Other Contentious Questions

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Though my title alone should go pretty far toward suggesting that this talk is doing the (always) negative work of critique, I’d like to forewarn you further before I start that the talk is written in the critical spirit of “queer pessimism,” which Sara Ahmed characterizes as “a refusal to be optimistic about ‘the right things’ in the right kind of way,” but not thereby a refusal of hope all together (162). The “embrace of negativity” in queer pessimism is not just for the sake of the embrace but for the sense of “possibility opened up by inhabiting the negative” (161–62). In other words, saying no over and over, as it may appear I am doing today, is ultimately an affirmation of an Other way, even if that way is not yet found (Ahmed 107, 207). To put this queer pessimism into the context of this conference, I see this talk as an extended response to the invitation in the call for proposals to acknowledge and give voice to “what we cannot bear to know” (Winans qtd. in CWPA 2013 CFP. See Appendix for text). Specifically, the talk responds to the two central questions posed in my title: Queering the Writing Program—why now? And how? Despite queer theory’s commitment to problematizing linear time, I will go ahead and take them in order.

Queering the writing program—why now? Not only are we two full decades removed from queer theory’s heady heydays of the early 1990s, but we are also several years beyond multiple declarations of being, or needing to be, “after” or “post” queer theory. Before the 1990s had even concluded, special issues of journals began to appear which posited boredom, frustration, or general angst over the present and future state of queer theory and research, a trend which continued throughout the next decade. In perhaps the earliest of these, 1999’s “Anti-Queer” special issue of Social Semiotics, editor Alan Mckee asked in his introduction, “how many times can one read that Queer offers a way of deconstructing the binary categories by which heterosexuality sustains and reproduces itself, and still feel excited?”
In 2005, a special issue of *Social Text* appeared, edited by David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, which asked, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” and worked from the premise that the “contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity” urgently demanded a renewal of queer studies (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 1–2). 2007 gave us *South Atlantic Quarterly*’s “After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory,” where editors Janet Halley and Andrew Parker acknowledged both that “the activist energies that helped to fuel queer academic work in the United States in the early 1990s have declined sharply” and that many founders of queer theory (e.g., Judith Butler, Michael Warner, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) were investing their scholarly energies elsewhere (421–22). They wondered whether queer theory, “if not already passé, was rapidly approaching its expiration date” (421).

Finally, in 2010, Susan Talburt and Mary Lou Rasmussen co-edited an “After Queer” special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, their introduction to which reviews much of the same literature as I just have and then goes on to worry over the past agendas of queer education research—particularly a “restorative agenda” dependant on the “regulatory narrative of progress”—and to locate and propose more “fruitful,” and perhaps *more appropriate* (their word is “proper”), approaches for future research (1–3). With this review of queer theory’s “afters” and “posts” in front of us, or behind us, it is not surprising that on New Year’s Day of 2012, preeminent queer theorist Michael Warner wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that there seems to be a “widespread impression that queer theory is a thing of the past.” Warner calls this impression “tragically mistaken,” yet intimates that queer theory largely does seem to be carried on in the divergent but “vital work that [it has] enable[d]” and often “under other rubrics.”

Meanwhile, in Rhetoric and Composition Studies—home discipline to many of us—there seems an equally widespread impression *not* that queer theory’s “moment in the spotlight” is long past (Warner), but that its light never truly shone on our discipline at all. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes wrote in 2011 that the “queer turn” in rhetoric and composition studies “never actually happened”; that “[s]cholarship about the intersections among queerness, literacy, and writing instruction remains sparse and under-read” (178; see also Alexander and Wallace). So, I am suggesting, by way of this introductory review, that this seems an odd time indeed—a strangely *non-kairotic* moment—to be raising the question of “queering the writing program.” If we’re just now entering the proverbial parlor, we’ve not only come late, the party is over. Or, if it’s a Rhet-Comp shindig, and we
agree with Alexander and Rhodes, there was no party here to begin with; we may be at the wrong address.

Though I am working from a position of negativity, we could, of course, read the belatedness of this year’s CWPA conference theme more generously: as a late but hopefully not last-ditch effort to invigorate “queer” for the field. Or, we could actually take the conference organizers at their word and understand the exigence for this year’s conference to be what the call for proposals said it is: that the conference is “approach[ing] Normal”—that is, Normal, Illinois, the site of the 2014 conference—and that this coming destination provides an early impetus to think about normality/normativity in ways queer theory does best.

Yet, predictably, I would like us to think about this phrase, “approaching normal,” in another more skeptical way as we consider the timing of this year’s conference. In a sense, it has never been safer to “be queer”—or at least never more innocuous to invoke the term—and this too has been a cause for much lamentation and aggravation among queer theorists. Warner, in the Chronicle article, rues the day when “queer” became “a cable-TV synonym for gay,” recalling (and reminding us) that the term “was manifestly provocative” and “carried a high-voltage charge of insult and stigma” at queer theory’s founding in the early 1990s. Perhaps most vocal, if not vitriolic, in response to queer’s domestication is Jasbir Puar. In her own manifestly provocative 2007 book, Terrorist Assemblages, which Warner cites as exemplary of “queer theory’s ambivalence about itself,” Puar contends that not only has there been a cultural sanctioning of the term “queer,” but an “emergence and sanctioning,” an “incorporation,” of “queer subjects” into the social fabric as we have moved—or been moved—“from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families)” (xii).

Perhaps more often, queer theorists oppose queer/queerness to—and suggest queer (and queer theory) must be mobilized to oppose—the ever-growing “homo-normative” investments of “the contemporary LGBT movement [in] . . . the flawed and toxic ideological formation known as marriage” (Muñoz 21) and also in military service and other forms of national and nationalist belonging (e.g., Warner; Muñoz 121; Halberstam 72–73). But, whether we understand queer as that which struggles to keep alive an alternative to an increasingly constrained gay and lesbian political imagination, or as participatory in that imagination, there seems to be general consensus in recent queer theoretical work that it is now possible both to invoke the term to no particularly provocative rhetorical effect and to be “properly queer” (Puar xiii), “the right kind of queer” (Ahmed 106; see also Talburt and Rasmussen 12)—at the expense, of course, of those who are
not and only through what Puar describes as “a parallel process of demarca-
tion from [other] populations targeted for segregation, disposal, or death”
(xii). As Lee Edelman has explained of this process, “those of us inhabi-
ting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness [or have it
cast off of us] and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting
the figural burden of queerness to someone else. The structural position of
queerness, after all, and the need to fill it remain” (27, original emphasis).

Puar’s specific contention and concern is that, since 9/11, this position
is being filled by the “queerly raced” and scapegoated “terrorist bodies” of
“South Asians, Arab Americans, and Muslim Americans” (xii-xiii). My
contention and concern is admittedly less global and certainly less urgent:
that we must keep these contentions and concerns about queer’s nor-
malization in the forefront of our minds as we talk about “queering the
writing program” in 2013, especially those of us who wish to retain, or
perhaps reclaim, if that is possible, some of queer’s once provocative force.
Queering the writing program? Why now? What are the current rhetorical
effects—or lack thereof—for using this term, “queering,” as we do indeed
“approach Normal?” in more ways than one and perhaps as never before?
What happens, in this time and place—and what does not happen—when
we use “queering” essentially as a synonym for: “disrupting,” or “trou-
bling,” or “destabilizing,” or “reading against the grain,” or “interrupting
business as usual,” or “questioning received practices,” to cite some verbs
and verb phrases I’ve heard repeatedly at this conference (and read repeat-
edly in queer-themed scholarship)? In the language of the CWPA confer-
ence’s call for proposals, what happens when we use queer as a synonym
for “unsett[ing]”—in this particular case, “what we think we know about
pedagogy, programming, and educational systems” (CWPA 2013 CFP; see
Appendix)? These questions give me pause; I hope they give you pause, and
they lead me directly to the next central question posed by my title and my
talk: queering the writing program—how?

While it may seem counterintuitive and even “anti-queer” to attempt
to determine or rethink “the proper subjects, aims, and locations” of queer
projects (Talburt and Rasmussen 1), as Talburt and Rasmussen attempt to
do in their introduction to the “‘After Queer’ Research in Education” spe-
cial issue, I agree that this is important work—again, especially if we agree
that “queer” is running out of steam and that some kind of renewal or redi-
rection or departure is therefore in order. To return once more to the lan-
guage of the call for proposals for this conference, an overarching purpose
of the 2013 CWPA gathering has been to “call upon some of the key con-
siderations of queer theory” to “invigorate our thinking about the admin-
istrative possibilities of our writing programs and our writing classrooms.”
Let me assure you from the outset that, while I know I am going to veer dangerously close, it is not my intention now to rehearse questions about whether or not we can “apply” queer theory to “practice,” both because I think questions about the relationship between theory and practice in our field have been asked and answered to death and because, importantly, I do not think we’ve been invited to entertain such questions at this conference. Instead, and again, we’ve been asked, quite carefully I think, to “consider,” to “unsettle” and “invigorate our thinking about . . . administrative possibilities.” But, still, are the “key considerations of queer theory” a “proper” lens or intellectual apparatus for such tasks, for thinking about “programming,” “policy,” and “institutionalized systems” as we’ve been asked to do this weekend (CWPA 2013 CFP-see Appendix)?

Warner, in the same re-visitation of queer theory’s glory days from which I was quoting earlier, reminds us that queer theory (and activism too) “maintained a skeptical distance from legitimate political processes,” and, we might say, from the “legitimate” more generally. In some of its most radical versions and visions, queer theory has positioned both itself and queerness as “anti-social” and/or “anti-relational.” Edelman, for example, who is certainly the best known, if not best-liked, propagator of the anti-social thesis, maintains in 2004’s No Future that “queer theory . . . marks the ‘other’ side of politics,” and that “the queer must insist on disturbing . . . social organization as such” (7, 17). Even those queer theorists who object to Edelman’s apolitical and “notoriously cranky theories” (Halberstam 149) or his “Anglo-normative pessimism” (Muñoz 96), arguing that we need to hold on to such ideals as relationality, collectivity, futurity, and hope (Muñoz 11), tend to be adamant that queer desire for some kind of better future does not eventuate in a pragmatic response. Muñoz, for instance, notes that “pragmatism has only ever failed us” and is precisely what “has led us to a historical moment” wherein marriage rights and military service have become the gay movement’s chief concerns (121). Relatedly, queer theory has long abjured traditional and regulatory notions of agency (Talburt and Rasmussen 2), and, as Talburt and Rasmussen have already suggested, has similarly rejected the “regulatory narrative of progress” (2–3). Halberstam’s 2011 book, The Queer Art of Failure is notable in this respect, as she describes an “ethos of resignation to failure, to lack of progress” as a potentially “crucial part of a queer aesthetic” (96).

Certainly, these are far from the only key considerations (or contentions) of queer theory, but they are central considerations which would seem to have little to offer us in our considerations of administrative possibilities. Theories (or postures or aesthetics) which maintain distance from the legitimated, reject social organization and institutionalization, refuse
pragmatism, and rebuff agency to celebrate lack of progress make strange bedfellows with questions and issues of “programming,” “policy,” and “institutionalized systems.” We could, of course, see this as an excitingly queer disjuncture, a kinky combination, even. Yet, I would and will argue instead that this conjoining—this marriage, if you will—is dangerously domesticating of queer at a particularly perilous time in queer’s evolution, or perhaps devolution.

Because I am myself on some dangerous turf here, taking the risk, with Talburt and Rasmussen, as I said before, of determining queer’s proper subjects, aims, and scope, and running the risk now not only of policing “what queer theory is and is not” (Talburt and Rasmussen 1), but whether it can or can not inform our thoughts, I will call quickly on some queer compatriots in my home discipline of rhetoric and composition for help, if not rescue. Alexander and Rhodes, in the same 2011 article where they note that a “queer turn” in rhetoric and composition never happened, suggest that the sparseness of queer scholarship in the field may not be such an unhappy circumstance but an inevitability and the result of impossibility. Alexander and Rhodes say they have begun to question “what, if anything, queerness has to say to composition” (179), and they conclude that the answer may well be, and perhaps should be, nothing. “Our field asks, consistently,” they write, “for the right answer, for the best practices, for the way to do things to satisfy different ‘stakeholders’” (190), while “[q]ueerness is a disruption in the service of nothing, pure in its joyful enraged body, sexed up and inappropriate” (186, see also Edelman 5). Criticizing themselves for having “started to forget the power of the queer” in their own previous efforts to bring queerness from the margins to the fore in rhetoric and composition, Alexander and Rhodes assert now that “[q]ueer composition is impossible; the excess and disorientation of one disrupts the containment of the other” (190, 196).

William P. Banks and Alexander make much the same claim about WPA work in particular in “Queer Eye for the Comp Program,” when they point out that “a program . . . is inherently normative in structure and definition” (97, my emphasis). Thus, not only does queer theory “challenge WPA work significantly [+] WPA work . . . challenges the antinormative impulses of queer theory” in ways that may be irreconcilable with and “antithetical to [its] missions” (97). While Banks and Alexander leave open the possibility for what they describe as local and individualized (that is, non-programmatic) “queer guerrilla tactics” which WPAs may be in a position to support and encourage (97), and while Alexander and Rhodes leave open and attempt, yet again, to forge spaces for queer writing and writing instruction, I would actually like to stick much more stickily with the
impossibility and irreconcilability these authors initially posit, and suggest that the potential irreconcilability between queer or queer theory and writing program administration need not trouble us overmuch; that perhaps reconciliation should trouble us more.

To be sure, we have worried over, and many would say, overcome—we have troubled until we have untroubled—similar potential irreconcilabilities before. I am thinking about the happy relationship that came to exist between “queer” and “pedagogy.” In the mid-to-late 1990s, a few years before teacher-scholars in Rhetoric and Composition did, renowned Education scholar Deborah Britzman began asking if there could, indeed, be a queer pedagogy (see “Is There” and “Queer”). In “Queer Pedagogy and its Strange Techniques,” Britzman reminded us that “education is a structure of authority” and thus wondered if it can “become the gathering grounds for ‘deconstructive revolts’” such as those mounted by queer theory (79–80). Queer theory’s “bothersome and unapologetic imperatives are explicitly transgressive [and] perverse,” she writes, sounding much like the queer theorists I’ve quoted earlier; “they turn away from utility” and “attempt to confound instituted laws and practices” (82). “In thinking of a queer pedagogy,” then, Britzman questioned if we could do so in a way that would “still hold onto” what she calls queer’s “first referent, namely transgression . . .” (81). Britzman would ultimately answer her own query in the affirmative, as would many rhetoric and composition scholars who succeeded her: Whether we have understood queer pedagogy as a mode of inquiry for students or as a performative, embodied mode of teachers’ self-presentation, there seems general consensus that, yes, despite pedagogy’s inevitable locatedness in a structure of authority, there can be queer pedagogies—pedagogies that uphold the transgression imperative and “unsettle[] normalcy’s immanent exclusions” (Britzman, “Queer” 80).

In retrospect, the reasons for this seeming consensus are various and may reveal as much about our fantasies and desires about teaching as they do about teaching itself. Scenes of teaching in popular films, Banks and Alexander point out, make it very possible for us to imagine ourselves as “campus radical” (89), for example, and we have an equal number of cultural narratives affirming the existence of the (also transgressive) eccentric professor, or “nutty professor,” or “mad genius” professor. It is easy for queers to project ourselves into any of these roles marked by difference and encouraging of further difference, to imagine ourselves as fringe figures involved in what Halberstam romantically calls “the pedagogical project of creating monsters” (20). Alluring though these scenes and narratives and imaginings are, and precisely because they are so alluring, we might
question how, how much, and to what effects they have informed and constructed our belief in the compatibility of queer with pedagogy.

Though our lived experiences, as students ourselves and then as teachers, as well as a vast amount of scholarship, may insist that pedagogy, and education more generally, can be unsettling, provocative, and radicalizing, and though these experiences are “true,” it is also inescapably true that pedagogy works toward and in the service of normalization and assimilation (e.g., Strickland 93; see also Worsham, “Going”) and that any transgressions that take place, or that we enact, in our classrooms are literally institutionally sanctioned and contained. Further, though it pains me to do so, we may even need to question the usually unproblemized, exalted “first referent” and “imperative” of “queer” itself—transgression. Puar is helpful here, when she argues that the “focus on transgression” posits queerness as somehow free (or at least freer) from norms, thus equating queerness with exceptionalism and individualism and making the “ideal queer” nothing more, and nothing less, than the “fully self-possessed speaking subject, untethered by hegemony or false consciousness” (22–23)—the very “subject” that queer and numerous other theories have long struggled to deconstruct if not destroy. It is the very subject we see in cultural images of heroic teachers passionately creating all of our little monsters.

Puar’s dismantling of transgression and likening of the “ideal queer” to the ideal subject of US individualism and liberal humanism stops me in my tracks. I do not know if I am able to go there with her, but the fact that I am so resistant to going there with her actually gets me to where I want to go next, and that is to this assertion: Our theoretical investments are libidinal investments. I want, I desire intensely, to hold onto (and exalt) transgression as queer’s first referent and, yes, to notions of the “ideal queer” subject as freer from norms. Likely (and perhaps because), I even fancy myself to be this “ideal queer,” living outside of—or maybe the more telling descriptor is “above”—those “ensnaring bonds” of marriage, children, or even companionate coupledom (Puar 23), proceeding in some sort of theoretical and political purity while other dupes know not what they do or, worse, know what they do but do it anyway. Exceptional; “queerer than thou”! (Warner).

To move from the individual back to the aggregate, I am asking by extension and implication here, what desires and fantasies have we fulfilled and perpetuated by so happily conjoining queer with pedagogy in a larger culture caught in a long romance with the figure of the radical teacher, and in a field, moreover (Composition Studies), which, as Donna Strickland notes, has for decades liked to envision itself as “radically democratic,” “uniquely counterhegemonic,” and thus in a position of “radical difference from the rest of the university curriculum and the rest of society” (6).
Exceptionalism rears its head again. What desires and fantasies do we fulfill and perpetuate now—about ourselves, about our institutional roles—by attempting to marry queer, at long last, with administration? Are the answers to these questions something we can bear to know?

Whether WPAs conceive of themselves as researchers, theorists, intellectuals (managerial or otherwise) or all of the above, and regardless of whether they consider pragmatism to be an epithet or a progressive intellectual tradition that enables them to be activist WPAs, I agree with Thomas P. Miller and Jillian Skeffington that—to be done to any effect whatsoever—administration demands “a practical, results-oriented mindset concerned with what can be achieved within a given set of constraints” (127). Theories which help us here are those that enable us to “understand more about the nature of institutions and how to change them” (Fox 15), and so it is little wonder that some theories which have flourished in scholarship on administration are materialist theories, pragmatism itself, and, though not without “troubled intersections” (Ratliff and Rickly, “Introduction” vii), certain forms of feminist theories— theories concerned with daily struggle and real change—while other poststructuralist or postmodernist theories have flourished somewhat less so (see Rice 6), and while queer theory has made nary an appearance (Banks and Alexander 88).

Again, perhaps this dearth of inquiry arises not from some failure of imagination—or radicalism—on our part but from the simple, inevitable irreconcilability of queer theory’s aims, scope, and locations with the aims, scope, and locations of administrative endeavors. To frame this irreconcilability as Irwin Weiser and Shirley K Rose might, perhaps queer theory is a “bad theory”—in that it has little “explanatory power”—for writing program administration (185, 190). Perhaps this is not a bad thing. Again I will ask, what do theories (or aesthetics or postures) which deliberately turn away from pragmatism or utility, from the legitimate and legitimated, from institutions and social organization and progress have to say about administrative possibilities? How do we queer a writing program? But, more importantly, even if we can, what I’ve really been asking is why do we want to?

In rhetorical terminology, this question about our desires is one of motives and effects: what do we want from our relationship with queer, and, perhaps most important of all, what will happen if we get it?

In examining her relationship as WPA to “postmodernist, modernist, structuralist, feminist, postcolonialist, womanist, or cultural theories,” Sibylle Gruber has advised that we “ground our theories more fully and honestly in the realities of our practices,” not to understand that, and chastise ourselves when, our practices may “fall short of . . . theoretical guideposts,” but, conversely, to acknowledge that “theoretical guideposts sometimes fall
short of understanding our practices” (49–50). This “practical” honesty is part of what I am advocating—an honesty that would allow for a potential irreconcilability of queer theory (or queer or queerness) with administration—but I am also advocating, in a spirit that I think can be conceived as queer—for intrepid honesty around our desire for reconcilability; for an acknowledgement that our theoretical investments are libidinal investments and for a willingness to explore what these investments may be.

Why are we determined, if we are, to make “queer” work in the interest of administration (as we have made it work in the interests of pedagogy)? Might our desire be for a safe flirtation, a little “experimentation,” with queer now that the high voltage charge of insult and stigma has receded and the once utterly contradictory notion of being “properly queer” has become a mundane cultural reality? Or, conversely, might our desire be for “mastery when confronted by . . . the enigmatic other that exceeds and threatens . . . system[s] of meaning”? (Worsham, “Writing” 83). If we (still, somehow) conceive of queerness as Edelman does, and as Alexander and Rhodes have begun to, as an abjected social positioning that accepts and revels in its abjection (Edelman 25, 22), necessarily “unrepresentable” and “illegible” (Alexander and Rhodes 181; see also Muñoz 72), then it would behoove us to remember that queerness “does not want to be brought, from its position on the margin of official culture, into the university” (Worsham, “Writing” 93).

The warnings and admonishments I’ve just been offering are the self-same warnings and admonishments Lynn Worsham offered in 1991 when she wrote that the excessive enigmatic otherness of écriture féminine could “not be brought within the university as we know it” (other than in utterly neutralized form) because—quite like Edelman’s conception of queerness—as what is “truly ‘other,’”“[i]t insists on passage out of the system, any system, every system” (92–3). Written when rhetoric and composition was just beginning to contend with postmodern theories, Worsham’s oft-cited “Writing against Writing: The Predicament of Écriture Féminine in Composition Studies,” advised us, ultimately, to “exercise prudence” in our attempts to incorporate or appropriate écriture féminine for the field; to “conserve some of its energy by realizing,” essentially, what it could not contribute. Similar to what I have been doing, Worsham urged us to focus our own energies on questioning our disciplinary “desires that would rather not be questioned,” such as those that compel us toward incorporation and appropriation of otherness in the first place, and suggested, moreover, that if écriture féminine had relevance for the field it was as a heuristic for “call[ing] into question [these] needs and desires” (97–98).
Clearly, in resurrecting Worsham’s twenty-something year old essay I intend to make an argument that we have been here before and are at risk of losing our way if and as we lose our disciplinary memory. Significantly, for those of you who are finding my “queerer than thou”/older-and-wiser than thou attitude offensive, Halberstam finds much that is queer in such “looping,” “losing,” and “forgetting” (54). While she admits there is a good deal of cultural and political “damage done by forgetting,” she makes a case nonetheless for “the power of forgetfulness in creating new futures not tied to old traditions” (83). Perhaps, then, despite my most strenuous efforts to tie you down, you will not be bound or even bothered by Worsham’s and my admonishments, or by memory, and will go home from Savannah with your thinking about programming, policy, and institutionalized systems fully unsettled and invigorated and with queer administrative possibilities in sight. It is, after all, a new time and place. I would have to agree with you there. It is not 1991 and queer theory is hardly “the latest scandal wrought by a postmodern temperament,” as Worsham said *écriture féminine* was when she hoped we could resist our desires to discipline it and instead conserve its force (86). Indeed, if you agree with the catalogue of lamentations I offered at the outset of this talk, queer theory is hardly the latest scandal wrought by its former self, and “queer” is hardly scandalous at all. Yes, now might be the perfect time indeed—a *kairotic* moment after all—to talk about queering the writing program, to marry queer, at long last, with administration.

To a certain extent our arrival here, and what has happened to queer, was inevitable. “Dominant culture,” after all, “develops and depends on elaborate strategies of containment”[;] “the fate of every practice of resistance may be incorporation and neutralization” (Worsham, “Writing” 94, 101). That is what Worsham wrote in her conclusion to her *écriture féminine* essay, but she also concluded that “it is still possible to set resistance in motion as such”—that is, new cultural practices of resistance may evolve or erupt—and that, as individuals, “all of us have the responsibility to invent our own styles of resistance” (101). I am frankly unsure if “queer” can any longer do this work of resistance or set itself back in motion. Perhaps it has brushed up too close against Normal and its fate is sealed. But if and as and to the extent that we can invent our own styles of resistance, I am suggesting this other way: Though it might seem counterintuitive or even anti-queer, the most resistant approach, the most renewing approach, the most radicalizing approach we might take to queer at this juncture is to “exercise prudence” once more in order to help conserve what little energy and provocative force queer may have left. Rather than seeking reconcilia-
tion between queer and administration, we might simply leave queer to its own proclivities.

Appendix

CWPA Conference 2013:
Queering the Writing Program

Savannah, Georgia July 14-21, 2013
(Workshop July 14-17, Institutes July 18, Conference July 18-21)

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. ... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.
—José Esteban Muñoz

The 2013 CWPA Conference in Savannah will be one year away from its 2014 conference in Normal, Ill. As we approach Normal, we’ll take this opportunity in Savannah—city of gardens, Girl Scouts, ghosts—to consider what it means to be “normal” as a WPA, as a program, as a policy, or as an institution. The 19th-century coole normale was formed to provide a model school with model classrooms and model teaching practices; teachers, student teachers, and students worked together to establish teaching standards (or “norms”). Today, in an era that heralds students and teachers to conform to rigid sets of standards, it is crucial to examine what “normal” means and evaluate whether “normal” is what we want. This education become more about discipline than about the messy process of knowledge-making that is “abnormal”? Is?

Muñoz’s musings may inform and invigorate our thinking about the administrative possibilities of our writing programs and our writing classrooms. This CWPA Conference will call upon some of the key considerations of queer theory: acknowledging what, in the words of Amy Whiting, we “cannot bear to know” creating community, advocacy, and activism; arousing the desire to know; filling with ideas; refusing “straight” (or linear) concepts, methods, and systems; discovering where and how normativity exists and how it suffices. We invite presentations, panels, and conversations that unsettle what we think we know about pedagogy, programming, and educational systems. Some possibilities:

• How do our current institutionalized systems keep our students and teachers from fully comprehending (and thus managing) the educational process?
• What do we not teach in our classrooms, and how does that perpetuate ignorance?
• What are the things about bureaucracy, education, and learning that we “cannot bear to know”?
• How do we arouse our students’ (and our colleagues’) desire to know?
• With what new ideas about administration should we flirt?
• What “straight” linear concepts pervade our institutional systems, and how do they inhibit teaching and learning?
• What normativistic institutional policies should we identify and then provoke?

The CWPA Conference 2013 will challenge its membership to consider how we may deepen and shift the pedagogical, administrative, and institutional work that we do. Come fill with ideas in Savannah.

Keynote Speakers:

Harry Denny, St. John’s University, author of “Queering the Writing Center” and Facing the Center
Bobbi L. Meiners, teacher and activist, Northeastern Illinois University and St. Leonard’s Adult High School, author of Right to Be Hostile and Public Acts (http://www.niu.edu/~meiners)
Karen Kopelson, University of Louisville, winner of the CCA Richard C. Braddock Award

Institutes:

—Writing Assessment and Diversity: What Do We Know? What Should We Know? What Should We Be Doing When We Assess Writing?* Leaders: Bill Condon, Ajae Iwude, and Myla Poe
—The “Pro-Labor” Writing Program Administrator: Conditions, Relations, Practices.* Leaders: Seth Kahn and Michelle Flinn
—Effective Faculty Development Workshops: Design and Delivery.* Leaders: Carol Rutz and Steve Wilcox

Notes

1. As Joe Marshall Hardin explains in a different context—in fact, in a discussion of WPAs and complicity with structures of power—this is generally the
distinction drawn between “false consciousness” (knowing not what we do) and “enlightened false consciousness” (knowing but doing it anyway) (142).

2. As readers likely recognize, I was/am invoking here the titles of Rose and Weiser’s 1999 and 2002 edited collections. I am also invoking debates about the term “managerial intellectual,” summarized nicely in Strickland’s introduction to The Managerial Unconscious (see, especially, page 8). On differing views (and connotations) of pragmatism, see, for example, Strickland and Gunner (especially xv) and Miller and Skeffington. Finally, “activist WPAs” is meant to invoke the title of Linda Adler-Kassner’s 2008 book.

3. Two qualifications here: One, I realize there are exceptions to this trend in the form of many individual essays, book chapters, and even entire edited collections, such as 2005’s Discord and Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator (McGee and Handa). Two, Jeff Rice’s take on the absence of certain postmodernist or poststructuralist theories from WPA theorizing and from official WPA statements is different from, in that it is more “suspicious” than, mine—though he does seem to allow for the possibility of irreconcilability: He writes, “Without these or similar theories [he names those of Derrida, Foucault, Stuart Hall, among others], can we think about programmatic moves without falling back on the familiar? How can we think about programmatic decisions in terms of those theoretical positions that have done much work to challenge status quo positions in language, ideology, politics, and even administration? Or can we?” (6).

Works Cited


