Research Review

Queer Ways of Knowing

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When Norbert Elliot invited me to write a review essay on any work that queerly approaches writing program administration, I was honored but also a bit befuddled. Honored in the sense that, as a queer person and a longtime WPA, and as someone who has written about what queer theories might offer composition studies, I am the kind of person who should know and be able to comment on what queer WPA—or *queering* WPA work—might be. Befuddled in the sense that, again, as both a queer theorist and a WPA, I don't necessarily see these things as having much to do with one another, unless we are talking specifically about queer people who do WPA work. I don't know of anyone who has yet done a survey of those folks (apologies if I've missed something out there!), even though I have many friends in the field who are both queer and WPAs. So what I intend to do in this research review is narrate my sense of the relative irreconcilability of queerness and WPA work while also, perversely, maintaining an eye on both for any generative tensions that might yield useful insights. I aim, in other words, to queerly persist in thinking together things that might otherwise be at odds with one another. I want to be both skeptical and hopeful.

The Significance of the Irreconcilable

The possible intersections of queerness and WPA work have already been taken up in the pages of this journal. Karen Kopelson's address to the WPA conference on "Queering the Writing Program" declared that, for the most part, queerness and WPA work have decidedly different aims. Like Kopelson, I've understood the queer theoretical project to be one largely of interrogating norms and undertaking the work of hermeneutical suspicion in questioning normalizing assumptions, specifically around sex, sexuality, and gender, but increasingly around a range of dimensions of embodied

and collective human experience, such as ability, age, class, race, ethnicity and the various groupings and alliances based on such. As Kopelson herself puts it in her summative essay on "queer" in *Keywords in Writing Studies*, "the 'paradoxical reality' of queer is that it remains a 'designation' (for a sexual minority) even as it connotes the rejection or disturbance of processes of designation (that exceed the sexual)" (145). WPA work has generally been much more invested in establishing curricular pathways for students to follow, designing assessments to norm rating protocols and measure student "success," train teachers to offer comparable (if not exactly standardized) curricula, and defend far and wide the teaching of collegiate-level writing as a great common good, the foundation upon which students' future successes are built, and the bedrock of literate citizenship. Epistemologically, queerness as deep skepticism of processes of normalization on one hand, and writing program administration as an instantiation of a normative curriculum on the other, just seem at odds with one another.

Kopelson even uses my own words to turn a skeptical eye toward the "application" of queer theory to the practices of writing program administration, referencing an article I wrote with William P. Banks, "Queer Eye for the Comp Program: Towards a Queer Critique of WPA Work," and a piece that Jacqueline Rhodes and I wrote on "Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition," in which my longtime collaborator and I wax skeptically ourselves about the "impossibility" of merging the objectives of queerness (radical critique embracing excess and the nonnormative) and composition (the call to compose both our writing and ourselves in the production of stable texts that communicate successfully). Kopelson puts the issue this way:

> 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 (204–5).

I appreciate the tenacity here, particularly as it is one of the most salient and useful hallmarks of queer critique in general—the deep suspicion, and the consequent and much needed recognition that "reconciliation" might not be the panacea that our Christianized culture suggests it is. Those of us

who have worked as activists know all too well that attempts to normalize queerness, such as in the extension of marriage rights to gays and lesbians, might offer some relief and benefits to some folks, but it also takes our eyes off even deeper work—and deeper questioning—that needs to be done. I've even heard good straight friends say that, now that we have marriage equality, we can and should focus on other, non-queer issues; instead, those of us inclined toward queer hermeneutical suspicion want to continue interrogating the intertwining of the extension of benefits and legitimacy to certain kinds of relationships represented by the very existence of "marriage." Even as we recognize the relative good of greater rights for some, there can ultimately be no reconciliation here: marriage itself remains the problem.

In terms of WPA work, this irreconcilability might look like the queer questioning that my colleague Daniel Gross and I undertake in our article "Frameworks for Failure" in which we queerly ask why our field (not to mention our culture) seems so invested in the notion of "success," and what kinds of toxic ideologies (such as working ourselves to death) might be unknowingly supported by such a drive to succeed. We also consider queer theory's turn to affect studies and the use of "failure" and "shame" to support our critique. After all, if success is equated with happiness, contentment, and stability, does the pursuit of success short-circuit the potential of creeping feelings of shame or even anger to alert us to discrepancies and inequities in the distribution of goods and access? Don't we actually need some sense of shame at our own success, when others across the world have so little *because of our success*? Can't we use our anger—as many activists are using it right now—to motivate our work toward social equity and justice? Gross and I use such critical energies to interrogate the creation of guidelines and "frameworks" for curricula that, when so focused on skills building for success, potentially elide consideration of "negative" emotions as actually motivational for some people to write, to undertake forms of critique. We think, for instance, about how Peter Elbow's development of something like free-writing has been abstracted from its roots in anti-establishment politics frustrated with the status quo and now seems like a universalized step on the ladder toward writing "success." We ask, what work of political critique can recovering such histories do? This is all the work of queer theory, of the "queer take" on a culture and, potentially, on WPA work—of questioning, interrogating, and ferreting out enabling assumptions that tempt us toward reconciliations, forgettings, or elisions we'd do better to avoid.

Imagine: It Isn't Hard To Do (Even If It Is)

But there I go again, thinking queerly about WPA work. Queer, as Kopelson suggests, is a never-ending project, one that we should rightly stick with. "Yet again," like others in our field, I find myself wanting to question the binary she asserts: queer and WPA—never the twain shall meet (see, for example, Berthoff). Maybe so. While I want to hold on to the never-ending project of queer critique, I am also queerly drawn to the utopian strains of queerness as articulated by the work of Jose Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, in which Muñoz argues for a "queer utopian hermeneutic" that is "shaped by [an] idealist trajectory; indeed it is the work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now" (28). Muñoz is attempting here to intervene in the anti-sociality of queer thinkers such as Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, who, in Edelman's formulation, embrace "no future" as queer's real radicality, a deep questioning not just of norms and processes of normalization but of the investment in any kind of futurity itself as a kind of normalization. Edelman is particularly vexed by the figure of the child, as in, let's do it for the children, let's save the planet for the children, let's fight terrorism for the children. He rightly worries that that formulation—let's do it for the children—is used to justify a lot of "its" that carry within them potential inequities and injustices, such as unnecessarily invading a country to protect the future for our children (my example, not Edelman's). So Edelman's position in his book, *No Future*, is to say fuck the future, we don't need it, we don't want it, and it's potentially very bad for us to be thinking about it and investing so much time, energy, and resources in it. Muñoz wants to flip this script a bit, recovering a sense of openness and possibility for the future that is *not* foreclosed upon by the formulations that (justly) irritate Edelman. His queer utopian hermeneutic does not cede the ground of the future in the way that Edelman's critique does; rather, he sees utopian thinking as both a way to generate openness to future possibility that also returns to critique present inequities and injustices. He draws inspiration from the work of Marxist critique Ernst Bloch, who wrote powerfully that the "essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers" (*Utopian Function* 12). Imagining the future, then, may be one of our most creative and critical ways to understand and "revise" the present.

Extending Muñoz's utopian impulse, E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen argue in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* that writing and composing are some of our best technologies for activating (albeit not neces-

sarily) the dual critique and imagination that characterize Muñoz's queer utopian hermeneutic:

> The temporal complexities between life—as a becoming, as a dynamic process of an individual's vital and embodied engagement with the environment—and language—as reading and writing, narrating, or analysis—have a power to open up innovative forms of intimacy that betoken not only new modes of becoming, but new ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of transmission. (13)

As a scholar, educator, and activist, I want to hold on to such a hope—a hope that Bloch says is necessary as a methodology for critically imagining more equitable and just futures. Like McCallum and Tuhkanen, Bloch invites us to use our writing to dwell "in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy" (*Literary Essays* 341). Such "enduring indeterminacy"—*a refusal to name fully what we know* so as to be open to the future—recognizes that present circumstances need not *determine* a future, which remains malleable as a place in which to imagine better worlds. So, in relation to the deep critique of queering as Kopelson represents it, we might understand a queer utopian hermeneutic as the generative flip side of a hermeneutic of suspicion; they are at least comparable gestures in that both suspicious and utopian impulses assert that they are essentially never-ending projects.

Suspicions, Utopian Impulses, and WPA Work

What do such simultaneous suspicious and utopian impulses have to do with WPA work? Our field has always oriented itself toward the future, and oriented writing and writers toward future activity, being and composing in the world, and the possibility of approaching and engaging what's known and knowable. Naming what we know about writing has been a key component of the activity of teaching and theorizing about the teaching of writing. Of course, I'm thinking about the important collection *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle. We cannot build our programs, much less administer them, without a sense of what we know about writing, and Adler-Kassner and Wardle, in addition to an impressive array of scholars from across the field, marshal decades of research to assert that we know writing is, for instance, a social and rhetorical activity, that it "speaks to situations through recognizable forms," that it "enacts and creates identities and ideologies," and that it is a cognitive activity. Research and practice in our field has demonstrated the degree to which these claims are not

only valid but can ground further scholarly and pedagogical activity. At the same time, while the editors and contributors don't reference Muñoz or Bloch, they want to remain open to a *not-yet known* future in which what we know about writing might change or expand. The editors understand their work as both an assertion *and* "an effort to call and extend discussions" about what we know (9). Theirs is an open and capacious collection in which they productively offer "caveats and cautions," such as advising against using the threshold concepts as a "checklist" for designing a curriculum or evaluating student work (7, 8).

But lists are attractive, even seductive. We have a tendency to fetishize them. We are a pattern-seeking species, and lists, however capacious, can seem like potential paradigms through which to organize structures and establish norms. While we might need such structures and norms to do our work, I can hear my queer colleagues—indeed, I can hear my own queer impulses—cautioning about what's left out, what's elided, as well as what's even made desirable that, in the process of making it desirable, excludes other ways of knowing or thinking about writing. That impulse surfaces too in *Naming What We Know*. Right in the middle of the collection, in the section on how "writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies," Victor Villanueva channels James Berlin to suggest how some of composition's "guiding questions" could be an analysis of "what's being said? and what's left unsaid?" (58). Yes, that seems right. But I was left waiting for more of the "left unsaid," for more of an invitation and more of a space to keep looking for the unsaid, maybe even the unsayable.

In many ways, gestures to what's been left unsaid are common throughout our scholarship, even in work that is invested in the creation and assessment of writing programs that are themselves invested in the establishment of norms both for assessing writing and for articulating what knowledges about writing are transferable across different learning domains. In their generous and smart book, *Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs*, Edward M. White et al. state unequivocally that "our experience with writing program assessment convinces us that it needs to be an expansive and inclusive effort, one based in the local campus environment yet designed for comparative reporting" (7).[1] I trust the expansive thinking of these folks, noting that Peckham, for instance, is finely attuned to the possibilities inherent in working with students from a variety of class backgrounds as well as foregrounding class as a crucial issue in both the teaching of writing and in students' varied literacy practices.

The gesture of expansiveness, however, just as often turns to an assertion of what we know and what is potentially measurable. Our assessors demand that knowing. Our constituents and taxed stakeholders deserve an account-

ing of how we spend their money, but even those most capable and knowledgeable about this work recognize the inherent dilemmas and contradictions in it. In Jessie L. Moore and Randall Bass's collection, *Understanding Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education*, Carmen M. Werder worries smartly over "Telling Expectations about Academic Writing," especially when she acknowledges the complexity of measuring writing transfer and assessing writing:

> Given the range of stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators, employers, and the public) with a vested interest in college graduates been proficient writers, expectations for what constitutes writing proficiency are bound to vary, and the extent of that variance inevitably contributes to the complexity of understanding writing in any given context. (69)

This sentence succinctly articulates the profundity of the problem. Students, as well as all other stakeholders for that matter, do not occupy stable identities or positions. Moreover, "proficiency" can be quite various, as are the expectations that shape what we understand to be proficient, as well as when and how. Scholarly work invested in transfer, as Moore and Bass and their contributors maintain throughout their collection, must be aware of the complexity of such transfer, not to mention the complexity of *writing* itself. Transfer and writing are not easy practices to measure, even if the reasons for developing such quantification are understandable, particularly given the push over the last two decades to assess and account for what we do.

Embedded in the drive to name what we know is an understandable desire to provide students with transferable skills, strategies, and habits of mind—ways of thinking about writing that can become adaptable to different situations, and that can continue to develop as writers mature. These are valuable goals. But I am just as committed to a phenomenology of literacy that breaks the study of writing free from a teleology that envisions, however capaciously, a set of goals and expectations and aims for literacy. I want to recover for writing the possibility that writing will open up for us *things we couldn't even have imagined we wanted to think or know or feel*. In addition to thinking of writing as transfer, I want to think of writing as an *interruption* of our normal, sedimented ways of thinking and being. In addition to our field's increasing scientification of writing, I want to rediscover some of its mystery, to understand writing as a process of engagement with the world that might open us to ways of seeing, thinking, and being we haven't yet envisioned.

Being There

In the spirit of thinking openly—and *being open*—to a future of writing that *cannot* yet name what it knows about itself, I have begun to think of writing studies broadly, and my own writing program administration in particular, with both queer suspicion *and* a queer utopian hermeneutics in mind. In terms of the former, I think a queer approach suggests we can—and should—interrogate how norms for proficiency shape expectations for writing. A queer approach—with its valuing of excess, multiplicity, the odd, the stray, and even the unforeseen—might offer counter paths into both construing transfer and undertaking assessment—or at least a revaluation and re-appreciation of the complexity of writing and learning to write across multiple domains, platforms, and ecologies, as well as for a variety of situations, necessities, and possibilities. Such might also attune us to the varying motivations for writing that differently situated folks bring to the classroom, to writing itself. These possibilities put me in mind of the utopian, and I mean utopia in the sense of not just a future that is desired, but also—and here is the queer take on utopia a la Muñoz—a future that is ultimately not yet knowable, even as it is rooted in practice, in the ongoing necessity of living a life, making a living, and making a life work. That is, I mean utopia in the sense of striving for the thing and the place and the being in the world that is *not* pre-determined, that we can only barely glimpse, and that we perhaps can't even catch sight of yet at all. With that striving in mind, as both a writing studies scholar and a WPA, I keep asking myself questions like these:

- To what extent does our field attempt to pre-determine the future of writing?
- Then to what extent does such a predetermination foreclose on an understanding of writing as an opening into the unknown?
- Then yet further, how might we use and understand writing to approach that unknown—openly, critically, carefully?

I was reminded recently of the need to remain open about my own understanding of writing—and of writing as the technology of opening into the not-yet known—by a study we've been conducting at University of California, Irvine. Over the past three years, we have been surveying senior-level students who have completed all of their writing requirements, asking them where they have felt they have learned the most about writing, both in curricular and extra-curricular contexts. I've also asked them to *define* writing, to tell me what they think it is. Of the nearly 150 responses we've collected so far, their overwhelming answer is that writing is a form of *expression*. Not communication, not a strategy for information sharing,

not a transferable skill, but *expression*. There are many ways we could interpret this response, and it's one that begs for interpretation precisely because I cannot locate in our formal curriculum any student-learning outcome or particular focus on the expressive dimensions of composing. I'm tempted to understand WRITING IS EXPRESSION, this student-driven naming of what they know about writing, to be a deeply felt and intuited understanding of writing as connecting who we are, and who we might be, across multiple identities, differences, collectivities, and potentialities. Or, put another way, WRITING IS A CONFRONTATION WITH SELF, with what we know, and what we *could* know. Thinking of my own experience as a writer, I know deeply that, through writing, we explore, encounter, contend, and create. At times we repeat and reify existing norms and ways of thinking, but we also open ourselves to the *not-yet-known*. We probe and invent; we generate thoughts, ideas, affects, feelings, and insights we didn't know we had, or even *could have*. Put another way, there's something that seems to me a bit potentially queer about writing, as though the act of writing might itself be a queer utopian hermeneutic. I can imagine some in our field suggesting that I'm overstating the case, and that we should hesitate to "define" either writing or queerness. Agreed, so instead of defining, I want to ask: is there something potentially generative about pausing here to consider writing as the technology that opens us into the not-yet?

This Is Not a List

With this hermeneutic about writing in mind, then, I am going to refrain from suggesting what a queer WPA work might look like. That wouldn't be a very queer thing to do. I can tell you that I've been drawn to recent work in the field—some overtly queer, some not—that might help us keep a queer utopian hermeneutic at play in our conceptualization and practice of writing program administration work. I'm thinking, for instance, of Eric Darnell Pritchard's lovely *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*. Pritchard combines interviews with sixty black LGBTQ folk, archival research, and analyses of pertinent literature and film to understand better the literacy practices of black queers. He's particularly attuned to the ways in which some black folks have been punished or penalized by literacy instruction, often invited to feel inadequate or inferior for their nonstandard but nonetheless creative use of language. Moreover, black queers in particular have few models and venues for developing the kinds of literacy practices that enrich, much less sustain, their lives. Muñoz's work offers Pritchard the concept of "disidentification," through which black queers have had both to identify *and* dis-identify with the larger culture in

order to find and then actively refashion the resources necessary to make lives livable. They take pop culture figures, for instance, or even songs and hymns from religious cultures and spin them differently to address their concerns. Throughout, Pritchard evocatively and provocatively maintains that love is the key way through which black queers fashion their lives—love for themselves and each other. As he eloquently puts it, "Love, as a centerpiece of restorative literacies, is witnessed whenever research participants 'break through' negative effects of literacy normativity to take moments that induce fear, enact literal and metaphorical violence, abjection, disavowal, and degradation, and pronounce their humanity, their liberation, and their right to live a life on their own terms" (38). This loving into articulation and liberation is a living into the future, however uncertain, tenuous, and unknowable that future might be. As Pritchard puts it, some black queers use their literacies to assert "their right to live a life on their own terms"; that is, they name what they know—even as that naming, knowing, and living must perforce be a fashioning that is constantly ongoing and ceaselessly underway, particularly given the precarity of contemporary social, cultural, and political landscapes for both blacks and queers.

In a similar vein, though focused more broadly on racial and ethnic identity and never explicitly queer, Juan C. Guerra's *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* promotes the value of constantly "writing across difference" as the only way in which we can live through a world of rapid changes and uncertain futures.[2] For Guerra, we must continually be willing to encounter each other, grappling with what we know and don't know, individually and collectively; survival, much less success, might depend on it. As Guerra movingly attests,

> we must work together with our students to help them develop the linguistic, cultural and semiotic tools they will need to employ to be more dexterous and agile, if only because every social space in which they will be putting these tools to use will be in a state of flux. It should come as no surprise that, through that lens, everything will seem as if it has become unhinged, and the center—the one thing everyone was counting on—has not held. (4)

The future is flux for Guerra, an unknowable terrain, one requiring dexterity and agility. We might have to name what we know at times, but perhaps we should do so lightly, aware that the center is a necessarily moving target, unknowable, unlocatable.

With that unknowability in mind, and perhaps motivated by it, a queer approach is also politically committed, not just to the extension of existing rights to marginalized groups, but to questioning the naturalized construc-

tion of any identity, group, or collectivity in the pursuit of more capacious alliances for the development of new ways of understanding and cultivating what Foucault terms "available freedom." That pursuit of that available freedom is always *in pursuit*, never fixed, never fully realized, and likely never fully realizable. That's a queer utopian hermeneutic: the living, working, and writing toward an always already not-yet. It requires incredible openness, and it's precisely that openness that permeates the ethos of Steve Parks' textbook, simply titled *Writing Communities: A Text with Readings*. For Parks, writing is only writing as it moves in the world, connecting us to one another even in our unknowability. And we need those encounters if we are to engage in the ceaseless project of imagining and striving for utopia. While Parks doesn't work much at all with the concept of utopia in this textbook, it still saturates the ethos of his text: "The purpose of this book is to help you learn how to link the ideas in your classroom with local efforts to improve your community" and "this book will make the argument that by learning how to combine academic and community knowledge, college writing, and everyday speech, you will gain the necessary skills not only to succeed in your college writing courses but also to advocate for change in your local community, in your region, and in your country." Part of this striving toward the future involves the recognition that "[e]veryone is a potential ally" because "everyone is an intellectual" (xxiii). This lovely Gramscian notion, the cultivation of the public intellectual, is designed to open students and teachers into the undetermined and undeterminable worlds of community writing groups, using both face to face and online strategies, in which people write together for a better world. The trick here is that writers will inevitably approach writing with their own biases and predispositions, but the *act of writing*, and writing together, can help participants both confront themselves *and* fashion together ways of being in the world with others. Or, as McCallum and Tuhkanen might put it, this is writing that has the "power to open up innovative forms of intimacy that betoken not only new modes of becoming, but new ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of transmission" (13). I must admit that I'm obviously biased toward Parks' project, in part because he included part of one of my essays on queer theory for straight students. When I picked up his book recently, I confess that I'd forgotten that I'd given permission, and I was startled to see my work recast in this fashion, my own words becoming part of this collective project of community-building and future-making that I had not myself envisioned. My overwhelming feeling at the moment was one of gratitude.

To be fair, this sort of work has long been part of our profession, our scholarship, and our teaching, nurtured by the social turn, the public turn,

and the political turn. So let me be bolder. What do I know about writing, and what can I name that I know? I believe it is irresponsible to think much less practice literacy and writing instruction without being attendant to the political dimensions of what we do. Even more, I believe writing is a fundamentally political act because writing is an act of *world building*. We write; we envision worlds; we normalize some, and we open ourselves to others, to the not-yet. With that in mind, my number one student learning outcome for writing courses is quickly becoming what I *really* know about writing: WRITING IS DANGEROUS. Because through writing, we might discover thoughts we had no idea we had; we might encounter the thoughts of others we had no idea were thinkable; we might open ourselves to the not-as-yet thinkable itself.

So, with no intention of offering reconciliation here, I want to hold on both to the never-ending and deeply suspicious work of queer critique while also being mindful of the never-ending and deeply hopeful work of writing queerly, or at least of thinking of writing queerly. I want to remember the not-yet-known. I want to remember that writing is a technology for recreating ourselves. And I want to teach writing as the potential to imagine ourselves as other than what we are, as the capacity to encounter and grapple with difference, to be more, to be better, to be ourselves but also different than we have been.

Notes

1. This book was reviewed by Katrina L. Miller in *WPA* 40.1, fall 2016.

2. This book was also reviewed by Matthew Tougas in *WPA* 40.1, fall 2016.

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