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WRITING INQUEERIES: 
BODIES, QUEER THEORY, AND AN EXPERIMENTAL WRITING CLASS

We begin class with introductions. The twelve students interview each other and introduce their partner to the class. The circle ends with us, the co-teachers of the course. Jennifer introduces Mitch: “This is Mitch. He’s a grad student in American Studies.”

“Wait a minute. Did you just refer to Mitch as ‘he’?” asks one student. Directing the next question at Mitch, he asks, “Are you transgendered?”

“Yes,” Mitch replies.

Jennifer left class feeling invisible. As she later wailed to Mitch, “I’m not even out to the class! I don’t even know if they know I’m gay!” She was afraid she looked too normative, that she wasn’t queer enough beside Mitch’s transgendered body. She felt herself shrinking, afraid of the authority that comes with teacher, with woman, with being fully present and in charge.

Samantha passed around a picture book for her third project. As Samantha explained, the pictures are rooted in the body, in the flesh, in biological womanhood. They included a woman giving birth and a woman who would be called obese standing naked in a field laughing joyously, arms outflung. The

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captions told the story of “A Queer Kind of Love.” Together, the written text and the pictures illustrate a connection between material body and textual representation, a story that neither text could fully tell without the other.

**INTRODUCTION**

We were teaching at a northeastern state university when the University Writing Program invited its instructors to submit proposals for experimental writing courses. Approximately eight 200-level courses were advertised under the title “Experimental Writing Workshops.” The courses were open to all students who had passed College Writing. Students elected to take these courses; they did not fulfill any university requirements. All courses would be team-taught, capped at twelve students, and graded pass/fail. We were invited to create our dream course, risk freeing ourselves from the pedagogical limits that are both institutionally and self-imposed, and experiment with content and pedagogy. The courses needed to focus on writing, but everything else was left up to the instructors who proposed them. Our proposal, “Writing InQueeries,” was accepted.

While our course focused on queerness and writing, other courses took up topics such as “Women and Madness” or “Digital Writing.” Students who took our class represented a range of identity categories and religious beliefs. They varied from freshmen to seniors, and they all identified as white. Most students came from middle-class backgrounds although at least two identified as working class. Most of the students were majoring in the humanities and social sciences. Students entered the course identifying according to a range of sex and gender categories, including lesbian (3), bisexual (2), straight (2), gay (2), transgendered and/or queer (2). For many of these students, categories overlapped, and for some, the categories shifted, changed, or were abandoned over the semester. Thus, in the beginning, all but two were sexual minorities. Most students took the class because they wanted to develop their writing; more particularly, though, students took the class because of its advertised focus on queer or because they were interested in exploring ideas about gender and sexuality.

When we were designing the course, we were challenged by those who reviewed our proposal not only to introduce queer theory and content, but to queer the act of writing. In order to do so, we envisioned complicating traditional divisions and prescriptive literary genres. For example, by recombining genres such as poetry and expository writing, fiction and autobiography and by blurring the lines between public and private writing, we questioned what possibilities for representing selves and cultures would emerge. Our goal was to create the conditions whereby students could articulate realities and use
language and perform in ways that represented what, for each student, might be contradictory, inarticulable, or unrepresentable. For each student, that was different, and it changed throughout the semester. To each, queer writing meant something different.

In the beginning, we struggled to gain a clear understanding of what we meant by queer. Some of our struggle stemmed from the multiple ways queer can be thought of in academe. For example, one can “queer” writing or write about queer topics, and some teachers have experimented with enacting a queer pedagogy. We decided that our course would address both queer content and style and that we would try to employ a queer pedagogy. We hoped to combine traditional elements of a writing course, such as multiple drafts, peer response, individual conferences, and class publications with queer-focused readings, discussions, and pedagogy. We hoped that, through writing, students could articulate realities and perspectives that lacked representation or that have been castigated as “abnormal” or “unnatural.” Ultimately, we hoped that the intersection between queer and writing would be mutually constitutive.

Queers aren’t the first group of people to complicate the genre boundaries in writing or to trouble identity categories. While we think queer texts share many characteristics with certain feminist or other postmodern discourses, for the purpose of our course, we were envisioning texts that were queer as those that questioned fundamental assumptions about identity categories. Furthermore, we saw queer texts as purposefully provocative, edgy, and meant to destabilize the audience’s assumptions about what is “normal” about gender, sexual identity, race and/or class categories. In other words, a queer text, topically and stylistically, somehow asks the audience to acknowledge the contingency of norms.

Creating a queer-focused writing class also helped us to question pedagogy. Defining queer pedagogy is a difficult proposition because it is indeterminate. The purpose is to “be transformative,” to use language to analyze the ways discourse “break[s] apart the usual ideologies that have accrued as ‘the effect of fixity’” (Wallace 53). A queer pedagogy (conceptually and strategically speaking) shifts in relation to subject matter and discipline, to whoever is attempting to use a queer pedagogy, and according to the institutional and demographic context within which the classroom is situated. Despite the fact that a queer pedagogy resists definition, there are elements of a queer approach that make a discussion of queer pedagogy useful and that add to Composition Studies in general. For example, we believed that an encounter with a queer text enables people to risk thinking about identity in less unitary ways.

As the course progressed, we came to two primary conclusions: First, we came to an understanding about the limits and possibilities of enacting queer within the very material context of a classroom. For example, on the first day
of class, we were calling roll. Several times, Jennifer asked for “Sarah? Sarah Jane?” Several times, one young person raised her hand in recognition. Jennifer, however, didn’t “see” her because she was looking for a more feminine body than the one actually embodied by Sarah Jane. While this may seem like a superficial example, we think it illustrates how, as we interact with one another, we rely upon conceptual frameworks, categorizations that shape our assumptions about who people are and who they should be. What we witnessed and experienced illustrated fundamental ways that queer ideologies and practices operate. Linguistic frameworks can be disrupted, but they can’t be eliminated. In fact, as our example illustrates, queer relies upon those categories in order to achieve its disruptive purpose. The disruption that occurred around gender in this example could only happen because language and perception are fundamental means of categorization.

Second, although identity categories do have a material salience in everyday life, they are not immutable. For example, once Jennifer recognized the actual body of “Sarah Jane,” she could reconfigure her assumptions. Her assumptions of who a Sarah Jane was or could be had been exposed; yet, they could also be remapped. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, sexual and gender identities are produced through discourse, and as a result, every discursive production carries possibilities for disruption and for the production of counter-discourses. Although we ultimately recognized that we could not abandon identity categories all together, in our course, we found that given the writing opportunity and theoretical background, students could use the writing classroom as a place to (re)create identity categories and (re)imagine possibilities for self-representation.

These claims have implications for mainstream composition classes. Many scholars express concerns about both the ghettoization of lesbian/bi/gay and queer studies in academia and the tendency to keep queer classroom material inside not only a specific classroom, but specific departments, particularly Lesbian/Gay and Women’s Studies departments. We think this suggests a failure to recognize that we can use queer theory in a writing classroom as a way to explore and challenge the various identities that we as students and scholars embody and the power that accrues to them. Heterosexism is an undertheorized and often unrecognized way of ordering the world. As English and GLBT professor William Spurlin points out, queer “functions as mode of analysis and as a strategy of opposition that circulates in culture and disrupts not only normative ideologies pertaining to sexuality, but . . . . the family, childcare, the body, health care, censorship, health and reproductive politics, citizenship, national affiliation and neo-imperialism” (10). In one way or another, topics such as these are addressed within the framework of a composition classroom. Often, this unnamed ordering is evident in the assumptions that support students’
essays—particularly in what is loosely referred to as the personal experience essay with which many composition teachers begin the course. A queer lens allows students and teachers to explore and acknowledge the heterosexism embedded in these issues.

In “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight,” Deborah Britzman asks what it would mean if we could use queer theories to question “the very grounds of knowledge and pedagogy in education” (151). Intending to explore this question in Writing InQueeries, we hoped that students would leave the course with a better understanding of the ways in which the Foucauldian coupling of knowledge and power works to (re)produce the very basic structures of our society and our identities. We hoped that our students would use writing to reimagine and rearticulate these structures in ways that allow them to reconfigure the mental map with which they navigate the world and understand themselves. By combining the elements of a writing workshop with readings and discussion of queer theory, we hoped to explore what it might mean to write queerly and to queer writing.

**COURSE DESIGN**

We assigned four major projects in Writing InQueeries. We began and ended with autobiographical projects, which were designed to enable students to trace and record their understandings of self, of queer, and of writing as the course progressed. We started with an autobiographical collage whereby we asked students to think about and represent themselves as a writer: “One who uses words, cultural styles, bodies, social ideology, gesture, acts of resistance, and a variety of other cultural practices and artifacts as a means to write him/her/hirself into everyday life and communicating his/her/hir ideas to others” (First Assignment Sheet). The project was two-fold. First, students used some form of visual representation. Second, they produced a written explanation of that component. We encouraged them to move beyond description in order to begin to work with complex ideas about self and about society. Because students’ lived experiences are far more fluid than various identity categories suggest, we wanted to encourage students to represent configurations of identity that were lived and/or felt but not yet articulated. The autobiographical collage seemed to us a good beginning. Because it required a visual as well as a written component, we thought it would introduce students to the possibility of other forms of presentation.

In our second assignment, a textual analysis paper, we encouraged students to produce a more traditional academic project. The point was to wrestle with the ideas in *Stone Butch Blues* and *Queer Theory: An Introduction* in order to “arrive at a fuller, richer reading of each than you might examining them in isolation” (Second Assignment Sheet). In composition and literature
classes, it is a relatively common practice to use theory to understand a fictional work. We wanted to use the very embodied narrative presented by Leslie Feinberg in *Stone Butch Blues* to understand what might be absent from queer theoretical abstractions, such as those presented in Jagose’s *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. We hoped this would be a step toward bridging a gap between the abstractions of queer theory and the embodiment of life. In our third assignment, we gave students the task of somehow performing their identity through visual and aural mediums. We wanted to expand our understanding of writing to one that wasn’t solely relegated to words on paper and to examine the ways we write ourselves in visual culture.

Many of the projects that resulted from these assignments had a power and presence we often sought but rarely received in our mainstream composition courses. This was particularly true for the work students produced in their final assignment. We asked students to combine components of their prior projects in order to radically re(en)vision their first assignment, the autobiographical collage. For example, in his final project, one of our students produced a zine. As he explained it, because he was uncomfortable with his body, his goal was to bring his body (as literally as possible) into the text. In defining his project, he states, “I’m not sure exactly what I have produced: a quasi-autobiographical account of me, something that begins to articulate my queerness, my struggles with such, and how I am searching for conclusion. A mix of memory, dialogue, narrative and rant, this is the closest I have come to articulating myself through text.” The zine was multivoiced, a mixture of autobiography, photography, poetry, dialogue, a way to represent different, fragmented pieces of himself. Fragments of sentences, fragments of photos of himself capture, through pieces, what somehow cannot be represented as whole.

In writing and reading about queer notions of gender, sexuality, race, and class and in working through the four writing projects we assigned, students exposed and critiqued essentialized notions of sexuality and gender that are most often discussed in normative ways. Because power, knowledge, and truth are integrated, Foucault argues that current constructions of gender and sexuality provide an opportunity for us to produce counterdiscourses. As noted in *Understanding Foucault*, “Foucault would not reject modern sexuality because it was coercive. In some ways it certainly is coercive; it also provides us with techniques for living. Where Foucault takes issue with modern sexuality is in its power to constrain us from acting, from explaining and exploring our selves in alternative fashions” (Danaher et al. 145). Our goal was to queer writing in a way that allowed students to experiment with and explore new and more nuanced ways of representing self. In that sense, we believe we did queer identity categories and their representation through writing. We helped
students locate points of resistance within the language that both constrained
and enabled them to define their sexual and gender identities.

**Identity Matters I: Body and Authority**

While queer theory can be a useful lens through which to examine
the various intersections of identity categories, the language used by queer
theorists is often theoretically dense and inaccessible to all but academics.
We were not prepared for the fact that the majority of our students were not
entering the class familiar with this vocabulary. In order to set this founda-
tion, we needed to engage in some very traditional forms of education such
as lecturing and assigning texts that we hoped would provide them with that
vocabulary. As a result, in the beginning, class sometimes felt stiff, forced, as
if we were spoon-feeding our students queer theory. It didn’t feel queer. We
thought a queer-centered classroom should involve some elements of fun as
well as a structure that questions and resists the authority that comes with the
role of instructor.

The ways in which authority plays itself out within the context of a
classroom concerned us before and during the course. If queer is indeed a
theory and form of activism which is meant to subvert social norms and to
show how authority is produced in our society as a way to underpin social and
economic privilege, then what do we do with issues of authority in a queer
classroom setting? How do we address assumptions of authority that remain a
dynamic in teacher/student relationships and those carried into the classroom by
teachers and students who embody particular gender, class, racial, and sexual
identities?

As the designers of and assigned instructors for this course, we strug-
gled with how to queer our own authority within the classroom. The fact that
the course was designated as pass/fail rather than graded gave us a little bit of
wiggle room. Because our students’ writing would not be assigned specific
grades, we hoped class members would perceive that they had more room to
approach writing tasks that were risky or experimental. Still, we could not
escape the authority that came with our positions as instructors and leaders of
the course, and we did not necessarily want to. We did, however, want to come
up with ways to queer authority so that our students looked to themselves and
each other as sources of authority, and we wanted to decenter our authority
enough so that students might work with various forms and genres and see
writing as a tool for representing what they discovered.

Ultimately, much as our students came to work with identity categories
in order to cross, redefine, and keep them fluid (something we will address later
in this article), we attempted to use the authority that came with our positions
in the classroom in a way that simultaneously worked to redefine and even
subvert that authority. We used various techniques, such as peer review, encouraging students to use themselves as texts, asking students to perform each others’ works with few instructor guidelines, and modeling some of the things we asked them to do. We even tried to bring humor into our performances as teachers, but as with many instructors in mainstream composition courses, we often found ourselves funnier than our students did.

However, given the fact that we were the ones who ultimately gave the pass/fail grades, took attendance, and made the assignments, our success with actually troubling the authority that came with our roles was limited. As we reflect upon the course, we wish we could have given students a larger role in directing the course. When we discussed the course initially, we had hoped to be able to queer authority by structuring class time, choosing texts, and being responsible for discussion prompts. Yet, except for one or two students, most were not entering the course familiar with the tenets of queer theory. We found ourselves needing to be more directive than we had initially planned. For example, we often needed to define various terms and make distinctions that we now take for granted. Our students needed definitions for *heterosexism*, or even the term *queer*, and we spent time discussing the many nuances of postmodernism and why queer theorists make distinctions between gender versus sex and between queer and lesbian/bi/gay/trans.

Authority also seeped into the classroom through the gender and sexual identities that we each embodied. Early on in the course, it became clear that an imbalance of authority was getting played out. Although we both knew that neither of us was more responsible for directing the class or more knowledgeable about course content, in class discussions, the students were repeatedly positioning Mitch as a more authoritative voice. At the time, we weren’t sure if that positioning was linked to gender or perceived degrees of queerness. It may not matter. Because we assumed that it could be related to both, we worked to undermine the effects of authority accruing to masculinity in the classroom. We occasionally redirected questions to Jen that were originally aimed at Mitch; we took turns leading various exercises, and we did funny skits to play with gender. By midterm, we recognized that some of the perceived authority seemed to be more equally distributed.

The last issue that arose for us in regard to authority had to do with who felt authorized to speak in the class. It seemed to us that some of the queer students assumed a right to authority that the others hesitated to claim. However, both Harriet Malinowitz, author of *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities* and Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell, authors of “Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect,” suggest that authority isn’t distributed evenly among students in any given classroom. Sociocultural, economic, and legal forces along with classroom
dynamics and course content communicate who can speak and what subject positions are authorized. For example, de Castell and Bryson describe a class titled “Lesbian Subjects Matter: Feminism(s) From the Margins?” They purposefully didn’t define lesbian or sexual orientation and spent a lot of time in the beginning discussing the ways that difference functions in the construction of identities. They wanted each participant to develop an “ethics of consumption” and a “reflexive gaze” (291). There were 13 white women and 2 women of color, and they represented a range of class backgrounds. They found that “only the students whose lives were constructed within oppression, with or without the added contradiction of privilege subtly and explicitly afforded by, say, white skin—that is, a straight-identified woman of color, and the bisexually-and lesbian-identified women, both of colour and white—could effectively engage in the work we had prescribed for our course” (Bryson and de Castell 291). In their journals, women who hadn’t been “othered” tended to regard the works as ways to consume or reject the material on the basis of abstract arguments and “critical rationality” (291). The instructors found that, despite their intentions, in focusing on lesbianism, they had created an us/them dynamic within the classroom and prevented the students from working across differences. Thus, they suggest that the straight-identified white women would be able to contribute more effectively if they took responsibility for their privilege and power and grounded their contributions in their own experiences.

In our class, two white, middle-class, gay-identified students struggled to articulate and represent the intersections of their various social locations. They worked to explain their race, class, sexual, and gender identities in ways that accounted for their privilege (white, middle-class, male) as well as their oppression (gay). Their connection seemed centered on their nonheterosexual identity, which they appeared to use as a bridge to those other aspects of the normative, more privileged aspects of their identities. On the other hand, two of the students, one male, one female, who were straight-identified seemed less able to account for the privilege (racial, sexual, gendered, classed) they embodied in the same way as the two gay men. In hindsight, we recognize that even these two particular students may have been trying to use other non-normative aspects of their lives as a gateway into the course material and the assignments we asked them to complete. For example, the woman was Jewish, white, middle-class, and straight-identified, and she had a black boyfriend of whom her family disapproved. In her first project, when presenting her autobiographical collage to the class, she shook visibly and seemed to struggle to articulate a connection between the negative reaction she was getting from her family due to her relationship and the outsider status that the queer students and theory were articulating. The man, who was white, male, Christian, and straight-identified also seemed to experience a degree of ostracism from his
Christian friends because he was in the course. Both students were stepping outside of various norms, religious and racial in these cases. If given the opportunity to teach this course or one like it again, we would like to help students make deeper connections about the ways that various aspects of normativity impact our lives. Heteronormativity is always mediated by and understood through norms of race, class, gender, and religion.

Finally, in much the same ways that the lesbian students felt authorized in the course taught by Bryson and de Castell, queer, lesbian, bi, gay, and trans students often feel silenced in mainstream classes. As Malinowitz points out, most lesbian and gay students, in the absence of an explicitly antihomophobic environment, “will choose, consciously or not, to subvert their own most potentially exciting experiments with writing” (39). In most introductory writing classes, instructors use students’ experiences as a way to engage them in the writing process. Yet, as Malinowitz explains, most queer students are aware of the degree to which heteronormativity informs instruction and dynamics of the classroom. Thus, to some extent, the presence of heteronormativity excludes queer students from the safe community many mainstream writing instructors attempt to create. When queer students do take the risk and write about their queer genders or sexualities, their writing too often ends up driven by a need to justify or explain their identities and experiences to a less-informed and heteronormatively privileged audience rather than an exploration of gender and/or sexuality. We think that a classroom that invites queer students to access and explore stories that exist outside of an assumed heteronormativity gives them a rare sense of authority and engagement, perhaps even a sense of permission. In some aspects, our queer bodies and queer course content may have had the reverse effect as de Castell and Bryson’s course and more fully authorized students who identified as or who were exploring the idea of identifying as queer.

Identity Matters II: The (Generative) Trouble of Categories

Many theorists and queer activists have articulated and worked to resolve the contemporary tension between postmodern theories of identity construction and the social benefits and political efficacy of identity categories. For example, in “Must Identity Movements Self–Destruct?: A Queer Dilemma,” Joshua Gamson describes this contemporary “queer dilemma” as one which confronts us with the simultaneity of cultural sources of oppression (which make loosening categories a smart strategy) and institutional sources of oppression (which make tightening categories a smart strategy)” (411–12).¹ In Writing InQueeries, we and our students were challenged by this dilemma. Questions raised by our students mirrored those posed by critics of postmodern conceptions of identity: If identity categories can never be bounded, if their naming
is the result of endless differentiation, what does this mean for individuals who make numerous sacrifices in order to claim what feels like an essential definition of who they are? How does postmodernism affect political activism in a system where rights are advocated based upon essentialist identity categories so that social change can be made? What does it mean for political activism when, even if communities and individuals reorganize around postmodern notions of identity, our society still recognizes, solidifies, and directs hatred toward individuals and groups because of their race, sexuality, sex, and/or gender “noncomformity” as read upon the body? Perhaps not surprisingly, we found ourselves and our students grappling with questions such as these as we attempted to write queerly and to understand queer theory’s applicability to our everyday lives and the writing classroom.

Bodies mattered in our class. First, when we introduced our students to queer theory, they questioned us, each other, and themselves about whether queer theory can have implications for their daily lives and relationships, for the ways their bodies are read and related to by others. Many of their questions about queer theory emerged from the readings, especially one in particular. We selected Anna Marie Jagose’s book *Queer Theory: An Introduction* as the major reading and as an introduction to the tenets of queer theory. We were surprised by the students’ resistance to this text. They complained that it was too abstract and theoretical. “How does it speak to our everyday lives?” they asked. “Can it?” In other words, how would queer theory help them to explain their non-normative gender and sexual identities and expressions of themselves to their parents and roommates? If we need an entire course to help them establish a conceptual framework for understanding queer, how does that enable them to explain themselves to a world in which the term *queer* is still considered (and sometimes used as) an insult? As Sidney, a student in the class stated, “Even though I personally identify as queer, there are definitely a lot of times when it is a lot easier to tell someone I am gay because even the 40-minute schpeil I can give on queer isn’t enough for most people, and you know, if you don’t have time for that, what does that do?”

Students were searching for a way to articulate a queer identity that escapes what they perceived as the confines of essentialist notions of identity yet that adequately accounted for the ways privilege is embodied in our social and economic systems. As we have noted, several students wanted to find a way to resist privileging their sexual identities over racial, gender, and class identities, and they wanted to find a way to represent themselves from multivarious standpoints that simultaneously account for the axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They questioned whether queer, a concept that emerged from and circulates mostly within academic circles, and which is consistently defined against sexual norms alone, could, in fact, accomplish this task. We
helped contextualize (but not necessarily resolve) these concerns by historiciz-
ing that tension within the earlier feminist gay and lesbian movements. For
eexample, Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* was a text with which they not only
readily engaged, but also which raised issues around axes of race, class, and
gender privilege. The protagonist comes from a working-class background,
exploring hir own race and gender prejudices, and tries to make connections
between race, class, gender, and sexual oppression. Other texts included Marlon
Riggs’s ground-breaking documentary, *Tongues Untied*, a video that explores
black, gay sexuality and Ruth Goldman’s essay “Who Is That *Queer* Queer?:
Exploring Norms Around Sexuality, Race and Class in Queer Theory.”

Other students felt that they simultaneously resided in more than one
sexual identity category and wanted a way to represent their identities as shift-
ing, fluid, and in more than one box at once. For these students, the idea of queer
as an umbrella category that accounts for such conceptions of identity seemed
inviting. Oliver claimed that before he was exposed to some of the tenets of
queer theory and some of the ideas as explored by class members and published
authors, “I had rigid structures and no way to go between and understand my
own place. The notion of learning theory, combined with the process of writing
was helpful.” Still, some hesitated to embrace the term *queer* and questioned
whether it would ultimately repeat some of the essentialist underpinnings that it
claimed to subvert. We observed two students in particular who struggled with
the ways their other identities shaped and defined their queer identities. One
white, middle-class, male student often articulated discomfort with the ways
*queer* may or may not be able to account for race, class, and gender inequalities,
and his place within these structures. Another student who was white and from
a working-class background wrote and spoke about how hir gender presentation
was affected by hir family’s economic status. In exposing students to queer
theory and by inviting them to use it to explore ideas in writing, we weren’t
necessarily looking for resolutions. Instead, the exploratory and queer nature
of our course meant that we could raise possibilities and present students and
ourselves with opportunities and a language for queer representations. As we
did so, we found ourselves also examining and attempting to represent ways
that identity matters to each of us—bodily, politically and socially.

Finally, for a person seeking identification and/or a sense of community,
which was true of many of our students and for us as teachers, terms such as
gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, man, woman, or straight can offer a measure
of freedom and a much-needed sense of community. This tension is one that
has been addressed by numerous scholars writing in the field that has come to
be known as queer theory. Throughout the course, this struggle to both claim
and refuse identity created a friction that, on the one hand, complicated and,
on the other, helped sustain our inqueeries. We will more deeply address the impact that this dilemma had on our course in the following section.

One place that this issue arose was in the very material context of the classroom. From the moment we walked in the door, our students were sizing us up and we were checking them out for “queerness.” It is often through signs of queerness—course content, coming out or being known as queer, physical appearance and style, buttons, etc.—that students and teachers alike sometimes communicate and create safe space for classroom dialogue on queer sexualities and genders. Moreover, students and teachers are automatically read as and slotted into the cultural categories of man and woman, categorizations that drive our assumptions and ways of interacting with each other no matter how hard we resist.  

As our opening excerpts illustrate, our students seemed particularly interested in our identities as well as the identities of others in the classroom. While we recognize that queer identities do not necessarily or automatically create a safe space for discussions about queerness, we also cannot deny that such assumptions do inform the politics of a classroom and the risks we are all willing to take in a classroom setting. “[F]or lesbian or gay students to write about their experience in a classroom is to put themselves at great risk—not only socially and psychically, but physically as well” (Malinowitz 112). As Malinowitz notes, it is preposterous to think that a class can operate entirely safely and in a vacuum; yet, we hoped to create a safer space than the ones our students had experienced before.

**WRITING THE ABSTRACT: QUEER REPRESENTATIONS**

Through the course, we wanted our students to experiment with and explore the ways in which writing (defined broadly to include various forms of visual representation) might act as a tool that could bring deconstructive ideas into various material representations. Thus began our careful and always treacherous negotiation between the deconstructive roots of queer theory and the material manifestations of identity in everyday life. Writing, we hoped, would be our chief navigational tool. In fact, the experimental aspect of our course relied upon this hope.

When we think back on the course, several of the writing projects seemed particularly striking and exemplified the ways students used ideas presented in course texts to examine how they might live out and experience queer. For example, Rita’s collage stands out to us as a metaphorical representation of the ways in which identity categories themselves were used within the classroom. Rather than using identity categories separately and finitely as a way to represent her shifting gender and sexual identities, Rita used the categories themselves as a way to create a multilayered and more fluid representation
of gender and sexual identity. On poster board, Rita drew a series of boxes within boxes. Each had a label: *straight, lesbian, asexual, bisexual*. In the middle was a circle labeled *queer*. In Rita’s collage, boundaries and boxes were present, but those boundaries weren’t in place as a way to distinguish separate identity categories as distinct and impermeable. Rather, Rita represented them as layered foundations for, and integral to, one another. She told us about the markers that for her accompanied each; how none seemed to fit for long; how each identity came with a set of beliefs that translated into physical demands about how to look, act, and be; how all those boxes came to feel confining. She was now exploring the idea of queer. Could this label be one that allowed all of her current and past selves to be present without having to call any of them a phase or lie?

It was through the act of creating her collage that Rita seemed to come to an understanding of how she might reconfigure more essentialist notions of identity but not completely dispose of the boundaries and definitions offered by identity categories. Both her writing and her understanding of identity categories were used as material for accomplishing this task. Other students suggested that the representational elements of writing helped them bridge the divide between abstract theories of identity and their own lived experience. Elements in our writing classroom such as peer and instructor feedback, multiple drafts, and the queer readings in our class allowed them to reevaluate the ways they understood their own identity and to rearticulate these identities in new, queer formations. “It really helped for me to write and get feedback. . . . also to help re-evaluate and redefine myself through writing. To be able to understand what I am feeling inside . . . there are times when you just can’t sort that out in your head. You have to write that down and look at it two days later” (Tess, a student in the course).

Tess further describes how writing facilitated an evolution in her identity. In her third project, she claimed she started out writing about girls going to parties. However, once she started writing, she documented a moment when “I remember . . . looking at these two girls dancing and thinking, wait they aren’t going to know I’m gay because I’m wearing a skirt.” Tess said that it wasn’t until she started writing about this experience that she began thinking “about that whole thing about . . . me being femme.” Tess’s comment suggests that she had been very aware of the ways others read and interpreted her body at the party. Until that moment, she had recognized but not really considered that there may be a range of gender expression among lesbians and that, depending upon how that expression is interpreted, we may or may not be read as anything other than heterosexual or woman. For Tess, the destigmatization of terms such as *femme* and *butch* within queer theory enabled her to reconceptualize and
reinterpret her own gender/sexual identity and to situate her relationship with her girlfriend within a wider literary, and perhaps even a queer, framework.

Oliver’s first project also stands out to us. It was a box comprised of panels, and each panel was pasted with pictures and words that represented a different aspect of his identity. For example, on the external part, one panel represented his sense of spirituality as being intricately connected not with church or an organized form of religion, but the outdoors. Another represented his preliminary understandings of how he had been socialized as a boy. For Oliver, this first articulation of “boy” socialization was a catalyst that led him to later more fully explore and challenge various gender norms. He stated that he had thought of gender in primarily normative categories or “Boy/girl, male/female.” As he stated, “They are hard to ignore.” Through the creation of his project, Oliver began to reconsider gender in less binary ways. When presenting his project to the class, he collapsed the box into one large, rectangular collage where the many aspects of his identity mixed and mingled with one another in a way that could not be easily categorized by any one panel standing alone. In this way, Oliver represented queer ideas about identity similar to those we saw repeated in projects by him and others throughout the course. As was true with his project, Oliver did not completely discard the boundaries of identity categories. Instead, he collapsed the boundaries of these categories in a way that allowed him to blend them into new reconfigurations. He used writing to queer content and genre—not to absolve, but to reconstruct categories to allow more fluidity and permeability.

As the course progressed, we watched students use writing to explore and represent the ways in which queer theory could speak to their everyday lives and, for some of them, the shifting understanding of their identities. Oliver claimed, “Before I took the class, I didn’t have the language at all. What queer was has become more complete and intricate.” We came to understand that there was something important to our students about naming and representing self, even if that self is multiple and ever-changing, and that writing queerly could enable such a process. What we did not fully foresee was the way in which writing queerly would also serve as a bridge for some students to move from the concepts of identity they produced through their writing to the literal embodiment of these categories. As Janis stated, writing is “a way to like, make my reality concrete. Pinpoint what I was into at the time, play with it, fictionalize and stretch it.”

Different students seemed to experience these shifts in varying degrees. One student in particular literally changed hir understanding, embodiment, and performance of gender. From our perspective, the moment that marked this shift most clearly took place toward the end of the semester, when students were presenting a performance piece. Amy stood before the class, a girl who...
was a boy. Sie opened a suitcase, removed a jumper, and donned it over hir Salvation Army fatigue pants. Sie told us hir life story, how hir had gone from a child to a tomboy, resisted “girl” socialization and explained hir sense of alienation from that conditioning. As sie removed the jumper, sie knotted a tie around hir neck, pulled a blazer over hir broad shoulders, and explained that sie had adopted the name Al as a gender-neutral identity. Like the example of Rita’s collage and Oliver’s project, this moment served as a metaphor for the shifts in identity that we witnessed as the course unfolded.

As the students imagined and created new configurations of identity, we also saw them experimenting with what it would be like to inhabit these new spaces in their everyday lives. Most often we saw this being exemplified through gender. For example, one male student in the course suggested that, prior to the course, he resisted the notion that others had influenced the (male) person he was and his expression of gender identity. He stated, “I was against the idea that others had shaped me.” However, after the course, he explained, “I could understand where I had been pushed in a certain direction. It’s hard not to go along with social norms and I realized how much I had gone along with them. Since the class, I’ve played around with it a lot. Once I realized how I had been shaped, I tried to get away from it.” One way he “attempted to get away from it” was to experiment with nonnormative expressions of gender. Like Al, he wanted to find ways to embody the discussions we had about queer theory. One day, he wore a skirt to the University dining hall and returned to class to discuss his experience and his feelings.

Queer theory not only helped to reconfigure our ideas of gender, but to reconceptualize writing and the ways writing could intersect with queer theory. As suggested, our goal was not only to write queerly, but also to queer writing. These ideas are interdependent. In order to write queerly (to represent new identity configurations), we found that we had to expand our ideas of what it meant to write. One of two main techniques we used to queer writing was to encourage students to incorporate visual representations within their written pieces. The other technique was to write any given project using multiple genres. We believe that all of the projects we have discussed in this piece have imbibed some of their richness from these two techniques. Rita’s collage, Oliver’s box, Al’s performance—all combined elements of performance, autobiography, queer theory, and the written word to create representations which were multidimensional.

**Conclusion**

And I think the contradiction ends when I see my life as a woman, with a woman as my partner. I came into the world looking for
myself. I find her in my lover’s eyes, mouth, words and bodies. 
I find her by always going one step deeper into the mud. (quote
from student in class)

We began Writing InQueeries with the desire to explore the terms queer and writing and with the hope of discovering what our students would create out of a merging of these terms. Not all of the students in “Writing InQueeries” embraced the word queer. Although this wasn’t necessarily one of our goals, we came to recognize that a primary purpose of queer theory is to deconstruct and reconfigure identity categories. As the quote from our student above suggests, however, there are material manifestations of race, gender, class, and sexuality that need to be accounted for. We might argue that ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality are arbitrarily defined, but as our experience teaching Writing InQueeries illustrates, such an argument does not erase the social identities written on and through our bodies. These same social identities shape our understandings and expressions of desire and self, and they often intersect in multiple ways. The act of writing enabled students to think through and represent the relationship between body and discourse for an audience and to bring representation to the unarticulated aspects of their identity.

We wanted to resist and challenge the ways class and race inform the structures of queer, lesbian, and gay studies as well as the larger context of academia, but we found that the very language and texts we were using as an introduction to queer theory could not be fully separated from the privileged site of academia that is their birth place. Although we regularly initiated discussions of class and race, we often found ourselves speaking about class, queer, and race as independent identity categories. Despite many queer theorists’ admonitions that queer needs to address interstices between class, race, gender, religion, and sexuality, we found that each of these identity categories seem to operate with a sense of primacy, and queer didn’t operate as the umbrella term that we originally envisioned. In “Who Is That Queer Queer?: Exploring Norms Around Sexuality, Race and Class in Queer Theory,” Ruth Goldman claims that although queer has the potential to examine and encompass other nonnormative aspects of identity, it fails to do so at present because it is being generated mainly by white academics (172). Despite what we witnessed and what queer theorists caution, we suspect that queer remained a white, middle-class, academic term primarily used to address sexual and gender norms. Race, class, and religion were included but not fully integrated into the theoretical framework of queer theory.

Although she advocates queer theory, Rosemary Hennessy has critiqued queer theorists for not acknowledging queer culpability in capitalistic
subscriptions and social constructs that help to shape our ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality. She states, “To the extent that queer tends to advance a subjectivity that is primarily sexual, it can threaten to erase the intersections of sexuality with class as well as the gender and racial histories that still situate queer men and women differently” (145). Our students reminded us and affirmed that the material consequences of our bodies are reflected at almost every level of our individual and collective lives. Yet, they can be (re)configured and (re)presented.

As we continue to reflect on the experiences and issues that arose for us as a result of teaching this course, we ask ourselves, “What might we do differently if we were to teach a similar course?” and “How can we apply some of what we learned from teaching ‘Writing InQueeries’ to our mainstream composition courses?” Our current inqueery indicates that focusing more deeply and specifically on autobiographical writing might help us understand and articulate the tension between queer theory, the materiality of the body and constructs of race, gender, class, and sexuality. In other words, we continue to seek ways to understand how identity can be used in conjunction with queer theory in order to explore the ways that they inform each other. We also look for the ways notions of identity and queer theory can enable us to reach different levels of understandings about our bodies, how they are read and how that reading is internalized by each of us. As we explore this idea, we hope to also look at how autobiographies, contrary to what the term suggests, are not simply individual stories. By queering notions of autobiography, we suspect that queer autobiographies (like those students wrote in the class) tell communal stories, relate histories, and expose social paradigms.

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Notes

1 Other theorists who have addressed this dilemma include Shane Phelan in *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Identity Politics* and William Tierney in *Academic Outlaws: Queer Theory and Cultural Studies in the Academy*.

2 Originally, the interviews were conducted to gather material for a 4Cs presentation. We obtained permission from the students to use this information in our article. Names have been changed to protect the students’ identities.

3 Because this student later came to identify as transgendered, we are referencing hir with the gender-neutral pronouns “sie” and “hir” in place of she, he, him, or her.

4 For more examples of teachers who have struggled with students’ need for an affirmation of identity and queer theory’s insistence on identity reconstruction, see David Phillips’s “Pedagogy, Theory, and the Scene of Resistance”; Mary Bryson
and Suzanne de Castell’s “Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect”; and Harriet Malinowitz’s Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities.

For more on the ways that gender positions and influences students’ and teachers’ readings of each other, see Kathleen Dixon’s Making Relationships: Gender in the Forming of Academic Community; Katherine Canada and Richard Pringle’s “The Role of Gender in College Classroom Interactions: A Social Context Approach”; Michelle Gibson and Deborah Meem’s “Teaching, Typecasting and Butch-Femme Identity”; Janis Haswell and Richard H. Haswell’s “Gendership and the Miswriting of Students”; Harriet Malinowitz’s Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities; Donald L Rubin and Kathryn Greene’s “Gender-Typical Style in Written Language”; and Donnalee Rubin’s Gender Differences: Reading Student Texts.

As we have indicated, our class was not comprised entirely of queer-identified people. We realized that queer-identified students were concerned when two students approached us after the first class and suggested to us that it was important to them that this class remain a safe space for writing about queer issues.

WORKS CITED


