Reproductions of (Il)Literacy: Gay Cultural Knowledge and First-Year Composition Pedagogy

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“In one moment of sharing . . . the hint of a miracle can occur. But even vague miracles fade, turn inside out” (Rechy, City 340-41).

“If the representations that do exist are normative phantasms, then how are we to reverse or contest the force of those representations?” (Butler, “Against” 19)

Our set of “1963” panels at the 2007 CCCC provided the impetus to revisit the point at which the emergent field of composition studies joined broad, and even global, currents of intellectual inquiry. It was an opportunity to examine what Geoffrey Sirc called the “cultural rhymes” and “roads not taken” within one moment in order, perhaps, to better understand our own. In my view, critical reflections on 1963—from discursive practices of the Civil Rights Movement, to representations of art in Warhol and Godard, to intersections of technology and writing—help to document the processes by which an era’s disruptive aesthetic, literary, and pedagogical moments become normalized and subjected to order. I focus here on John Rechy’s debut novel, City of Night, to consider how cultural pressures, and later disciplinary pressures in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual/queer (LGBT/q) studies, affect the acquisition of critical literacies, particularly among students and scholars who follow the moment of gay emergence Rechy documents in City and in later works. I will also draw some connections between the short history of LGBT/q studies and ongoing conversations among compositionists in order to trace shared tendencies in those fields, which play out in provocative ways around recent applications of multimodal writing pedagogies. As I argue, the fields are particularly connected through the pedagogical pressures that shape ways in which students are either invited into or further distanced from the challenges and complexities of their critical histories. Ultimately, the intersection of gay cultural history and composition theories signal the importance of challenging persistent pressures to accommodate facile, and even injurious, conceptions of normativity at the expense of sustaining critical engagement with the cultural, aesthetic, and institutional problems that originally impelled these two fields. This paper reflects my concerns about the seduction of order, the process of normalization, and the effects of that process on the ways in which we conceive of and draw upon radical traditions.
I. City of Night and the Legacy of Gay Outlawry

Published in 1963, Rechy’s first novel is an unprecedented piece of gay fiction, notable particularly for the ways its explicit, insider’s depictions of gay hustling and the gay underground of the late 1950s and early 1960s diverged from a literary history that had relied primarily on euphemism and code to express gay content. Not surprisingly, then, early critical and popular responses to the novel focused on its sexual themes and on the incongruous image of a male hustler who could nonetheless write an intensely literary and homoerotic narrative. In Outlaw: The Lives and Careers of John Rechy (2002), Charles Casillo explains that the novel’s “unapologetic homoeroticism made the literary intelligentsia—particularly homosexuals—distinctly uncomfortable” (151). In fact, the image of the ideal hustler, straight-identified, “dumb, tough, and ready for sex” (172), so clashed with the novel’s deft analysis of gay culture that Alfred Chester, writing for the New York Review of Books, and later critics challenged the author’s existence, and in turn, the novel’s own authenticity (156-57). Although this incongruity sparked reviewers’ suspicions, it also reflected the relationship between gay culture’s few acceptable roles and the complex identities, desires, and motivations of the men who practiced them; and this is the recurring theme and critical tension at the novel’s heart. Thus, Rechy brought gay sex to the foreground of the narrative to examine the ways in which performative aspects of gay identity were all too often regarded as essential qualities rather than strategically occupied roles. This conflation of appearance and behavior into essentialist categories was reflected in the inability of respondents knowledgeable about gay culture to accept even the possible existence of the novel’s literate hustler-narrator. Rechy would return throughout his career to the systemic problem indicated by the suspicious reception of City: that gay culture often reinforced and legitimated the injurious roles into which it was cast by dominant prejudices, and did so at the expense of its revolutionary potential.

City of Night begins when Rechy’s anonymous narrator leaves his El Paso home, first to discover the male hustling scene in New York, and ultimately to join the “nightworld” of outsiders and outcasts circulating within an apparently monolithic American social landscape of the late 1950s. While uniquely explicit about sex, Rechy subtly retains the legacy of coding in the narrator’s confrontations with the techniques of closeting and masking that tenuously connect gay people to each other, and yet simultaneously bar against forming deep social and emotional bonds. Indeed, Rechy’s narrator is initiated into hustling and gay life by his first score, who separates sex from intimacy with the words, “I’ll give you ten, and I don’t [sic] give a damn for you” (27). The event unfolds around a tension between the two men acting out parts in a social ritual that represses the intimacy and shared sexuality.
they both desire and deny. From this nidus, Rechy repeatedly shows that to survive the gay nightworld is to learn its language and its rituals, which work to maintain the subculture's fantasies about social relationships—between men and women, between drag queens and straight men, and especially between male hustlers and their scores. "I learned," he recalls, "that there are a variety of roles to play if you're hustling. ... And I learned too that to hustle the streets you had to play it almost-illiterate" (36). Ironically, for Rechy's relatively cultured, educated hustler, this street literacy includes, among other traits, maintaining a façade of naïveté—even stupidity—as when the "sexfantasy" of an early encounter evaporates when a potential score discovers Rechy's narrator reading a Colette novel (36-37). Rechy's narrator is denied both money and sex for even momentarily diverging from the code demanding that hustlers fit a narrow, and straight, mold; he too clearly signals his sophistication and awareness of nonnormative sexuality by his attraction to the gay-coded Colette.

Rechy's narrator is thus compelled to choose access to "sexmoney" or to gay cultural knowledge, as though the two were essentially exclusive, rather than simply signs of normative social positions. Rechy, however, shows gay identities to be largely performative rather than natural; his narrator is especially adept at occupying various, often incommensurable, roles in the community even as he critically examines them to understand their broader social significance. In tracing gay performativity, Rechy illustrates the ability of gay men to create community and rituals to challenge a dominant American society that maintains its own normativity by negating and suppressing difference through its own familial, religious, and juridical traditions. At the same time though, Rechy's examination of gay roles and rituals exposes the ways in which gay men often adopt some of the straight world's most injurious traits of class, wealth, and privilege and reproduce them among already-marginalized people. In the hustling scene especially, Rechy shows older, wealthier, and homosexual-identified men denying the young men the depth and sophistication they reserve for themselves. For instance, when Rechy's narrator tires of Hughie, a potential score—"a rabbity-looking, mincing, effeminate, beady-eyed little old man of about 60"—confusing T. E. and D. H. Lawrence: "I corrected him. 'Oh, dear me,' he said, 'how frightful—an Intellectual! You should have kept your mouth closed, young man. My oh my—oh!—the mind of an old man and the body of a young boy'" (229). Hughie prefers, as he later describes a twelve-year-old neighbor, "The Young One. They read comicbooks—not D. H. Lawrence!" (230). Even in service of preserving the sexfantasy of hustling and other aspects of gay social rituals, when young men are denied literacy and are isolated from each other through enforced straight roles, the gay community risks its own survival by reproducing performative identities so systematically that they begin to look like gay identity itself.²

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Recognizing that *City of Night* was more than a simple documentary of the demi-monde, publisher Michael Denneny observed: "Very few books are dangerous... Very few books are actually threatening to the status quo of society, and *City of Night* was one of them" (qtd. in Casillo 150). As the institutional suspicions of Alfred Chester and other reviewers suggest, the novel posed threats first by exposing a broad U.S. audience to gay society and especially to gay sexuality, and yet perhaps more importantly, by challenging the methods by which gay people's own social roles and rituals work their way from techniques of mutual recognition to those regulating possible expressions of sexuality. As one character reflects on the process: "Certainly the hustler knows he hasn't created the legend of what he is in our world. Like all other legends, it's already there, made by the world, waiting for him to fit in. And he tried to live up to what he's supposed to be" (389). In the hustling scenes of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, men are rewarded for identifying with and reproducing the most injurious dominant notions about gay people; in turn, the hustler's often feigned sexual innocence and illiteracy worked in turn to reproduce an image of the homosexual score as a predator on the young and unsophisticated. Thus, even as he documented the aesthetically performative range—and the revolutionary performative rage—of gay culture, *City of Night* also interrupts reproductive processes insofar as they worked to legitimate and reify gay marginality, especially within gay society.

Certainly, though, Rechy understands the necessity of reproduction and role playing, because the gay community, like any community, recognizes itself through its social and discursive rituals. In order to enter the community, Rechy, like his characters, must be able to perform those rituals as an insider; at the same time, however, Rechy additionally develops a critical literacy through which he analyzes and disrupts roles even as he occupies them. In fact, Rechy developed a wide repertoire of roles in the gay community; especially after *City of Night* became successful, Rechy would unpredictably play, combine, and confound roles of artist, cruiser, teacher, hustler, and public intellectual, among others. As he later writes in *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977), when he shifts his performance from cruising for mutual sex to hustling, "on Selma, the tacky side of the street he will soon move into... he will most often pretend to be 'straight'—uncomfortably rationalizing the subterfuge by reminding himself that those attracted to him will usually... want him to be like that" (39). The tension Rechy lives as both hustler and documentarian, as both public intellectual and anonymous novelist—an "outsider among outsiders" (*Sexual* 39)—is reflected in a larger pedagogical project that encourages his readers to continually recognize and experiment with the possibilities of gay cultural rituals.

In my view, Rechy's project resonates with that of experimental art generally, which, Jean François Lyotard explains, continually puts conventions...
and normative techniques of perceiving the world in crisis, “flushing out artifices of presentation which make it possible to subordinate thought to the gaze” (79). Whether in Lyotard’s exploration of Duchamp and Joyce or in Rechy’s analysis of gay culture, aesthetic and identificatory conventions are exposed as performative and precarious: visible insofar as participants perform roles and rituals, even as they retain the potential for other possible performances. Furthermore, while performing roles is perhaps necessary, as one character in City of Night explains of a hustler who mistakenly conflates role and identity: “pretending that you never, never, never do this or that is fine—or if you dont [sic] now, that you never will. But really never, never, never doing this or that—well, it’s slightly insane” (228). Yet, as Rechy’s narrator notes, gay men are compelled continually by “an insistent refrain” within the community away from experimentation and to reproduce their roles, and “from an acute awareness of the life they—we!—lived” (228-29).

Here, even Rechy’s critically astute narrator identifies the compulsion to reproduce a stable, recognizable role in the community, particularly when the stakes of resistance are so high for gay men who rarely receive recognition outside the gay world.

Later, recognition came with a high price, for Rechy observed over the decades following City of Night gay people gradually gaining the ability to be out beyond the gay community, but doing so while often disabling the experimental, revolutionary danger they posed to American normativity. During the 1970s—which saw both the 1973 elimination of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental disorders and the growth of the gay liberation movement—Rechy observed a certain controlled, normative image of gay respectability emerging in American culture; he suggests throughout Sexual Outlaw that marginal acceptability overshadowed more aggressively revolutionary gay politics of the kind he linked to public sexuality in City of Night. In contrast to an early section of Sexual Outlaw where Rechy argues that public sex signals gay people’s “untested insurrectionary power that can bring down their straight world” (31), he sees young gay people becoming “so unaware, so unconcerned, and so conservative despite their youth, that I have come to think of them as ‘Nephew Toms’. . . As long as they could go to dance bars and hold hands on campus, hey, well, ah, everything was okay, they kept repeating” (243-44). Gay people’s insurrectionary power depends on their imagining themselves as a community that exceeds roles largely given, and certainly predicated upon recognition, by a hostile dominant society. Being out, then, may remain a powerful opening move in challenging dominant identificatory conventions, but without performative ironic experimentation, outness alone remains unable to seriously disrupt those conventions’ ideological foundations.

By the late 1990s, Rechy observes naïveté and illiteracy no longer as roles whose ironic performativity held revolutionary potential but as norms.
shaping the actual self-perception of younger gay people, particularly stu-
dents who find themselves comparatively “[s]afe in sympathetic numbers
[and] propped up by encounter-type jargon” (*Sexual* 243). When he com-
pares activism of the past with the conciliatory behaviors of the present, he
explains:

I’m not nostalgic about past times. I just very much resent attitudes
that were created in the past now being arrogated as only from the
present. . . . Most gay people think history begins the last time they
had sex with somebody. I’ve pointed out that our history is very long,
but the record of it is very short. The gay culture I know is very often
unconcerned about that. (“Transformations” 12)

Michael Warner similarly suggests that the recent appearance of putatively
gay people in American popular culture has created an illusion of accept-
ability that ironically reinforces closeting pressures of the past. Gay people
are now pressured to “repudiate their own sexual culture and its world-
making venues” in order to claim their normalcy within dominant culture
(89). As he continues in “Zones of Privacy,” “Even people who are out will
often go along with the rules of decorum, forgetting in any official context
whatever they might have learned about the queer world. These tacit rules
about what can be acknowledged or said in public are as much a closet
as any, and a politics of identity will be insufficient in fighting it” (100).
The privatizing of sexual cultures (both dominant and marginal) bear es-
pecially profoundly on students who see their identities through the lens
of what Warner calls a “dominant culture of privacy . . . [that] wants you
to pretend that your sexuality sprang from your nature alone and found
expression solely with your mate, that sexual knowledges neither circulate
among others nor accumulate over time in a way that is transmissible”
(97). Those concerns about the increased privileging of uninvestigated
agency and the suppression of critical social and historical consciousness
among gay people reflect broader issues of literacy acquisition, particularly
as the closeting pressures shape academic space, even as that space ap-
ppears to offer unprecedented access to historically marginalized people. In
other words, there are significant pedagogical implications to the intensely
limiting notions of identity and agency which have come to be the matter
of celebration and endorsement rather than subjected to the kinds of criti-
cal engagement encouraged by Rechby and Warner.

II. Pedagogies of Normativity

Gary Lehring brings these issues to our quotidian academic context
as he observes young gay people expecting academic experiences to con-
form to their own newly acquired claim on American normativity. Lehring recalls reading Jean Elshtain’s 1981 *Salmagundi* article, “The Paradox of Gay Liberation,” with his contemporary students, who were discomforted both by Elshtain’s anti-gay arguments, and, surprisingly, by positions of gay liberationists themselves. Indeed, liberationist perspectives were so foreign and jarring, Lehring recalls, that his students accused [Elshtain] of . . . having invented the voices of the liberationists, as no one would really have made those claims about destroying marriage, traditional family, and heterosexuality. These students retreated into the superiority of the “present” from which they could cast aspersions on the past. . . . They found it difficult to believe that anyone would ever have such strange and antisocial ideas. (185)

As much as persistent homophobia poses both metaphoric and material threats to our students, like Lehring, Rechy, and Warner, I believe that students’ ahistorical skepticism is significant in its own right. In too many instances, the appearance of supposedly queer people on the dominant cultural stage—and the marginal access of out queers to social spaces of the street and the academy—has come to stand in for liberation itself. Students thus advance instances of queer normativity against Lehring’s social, contextual framework as though personal perceptions of normativity and agency could trump the complex and contentious history of gay struggles, and as though critical inquiry into normative perceptions and assumptions are either nonsensical or downright hostile.

Teachers of gay literature and culture are thus pressured to reproduce and legitimate the kinds of simplistic and comforting narratives young people see regularly in mass culture and to allow students to avoid acquiring more complex and politically disruptive literacies—which in my view is precisely the purpose of academic engagement. Among younger gay people, Rechy’s nightworld recedes into the background of consciousness, occupying—if any place at all—that of a historical footnote or aberration in the odyssey of gay people’s progress toward recognition and normalcy. Thus, the revolutionary spirit Rechy saw informing gay culture generally, and more specifically gay sex, is gradually abandoned in favor of embracing a cultural sensibility that values conformity with and reproduction of injurious dominant representations of gay people. More troubling, as Rechy recognized in the 1970s, the seduction of order shifted gay people’s concerns away from broad revolutionary activism and toward simply petitioning for roles in the very social institutions (marriage, military service, and religious activity) that marginalized them; “revolutions,” he claims, “are thwarted when the threatened established order hands out crumbs” (*Sexual* 246). Gay people, and especially our younger students who have been steeped in an established order that appears to accept at least a tightly constrained gay identity in its

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projection of normativity, are thus seduced into upholding and reproducing order and maintaining a status quo that suppresses tenacious examination and critical inquiry. As Lehring remarks, the “closet lined with liberal good intentions is still a closet” (182). Institutionally, though, instructors and programs are likely to be rewarded (by satisfying student demands, encouraging attendance, attracting future students, and so on) by endorsing rather than challenging the normative notions students bring about themselves, about identity, and about society to the academic table.

The fact that our students hold normative notions should not be surprising. After all, norms appear to be natural, self evident, and irrefutable because they are so ubiquitous, particularly in a society where dominant narratives exist in a veritable vacuum, free from contact with countervailing notions or substantive debate. Lehring persists in explaining the value of helping students develop a more critical literacy about gender and sexuality, and about social structures that place such a high premium on gender/sexual conformity. In order to develop that critical literacy, students’ normative perceptions must be brought into contact with longstanding, contentious conversations about gender and sexuality; and, since those conversations are not part of the dominant cultural monologue—Lehring echoes Rechy, observing that “the voices of rupture... have fallen silent” (191)—some countervailing knowledge is needed to develop a complex discourse that would otherwise be unavailable. As I argue in the remainder of this paper, first year composition courses are also spaces where we face pressures similar to those described by Lehring, and where analogous pressures are exerted by a popular culture that sees itself as natural and self evident against the critical academic work of defamiliarizing and experimenting with existing bodies of knowledge. The suppression of queer critical inquiry dramatizes the stakes of sustaining academe’s defamiliarizing purpose against the pressures to reproduce the familiar for (and by) students.

The connection between developments in LGBT/q studies and composition lies in the assimilation into academe of mass culture’s normative values and practices. In both instances that assimilation is predicated on the suppression of critical inquiry, and on allowing students to simply consume and reproduce the discursive products of dominant culture in the classroom. Longstanding debates persist in theorizing first year writing, pitting the goals of, on the one hand, imparting the kinds of academic-discursive “norms” described most notably by David Bartholomae, against, on the other hand, the invitation in some competing pedagogies for instructors to reward students for simply reproducing the kinds of quotidian rhetorical norms at which they are already adept. The theory and practice of multimodal pedagogies which emerged in the last decade illustrate the tension between these competing positions, particularly in the ways that some approaches risk working from a crucial misreading of students’ adeptness with certain forms and modes of
expression (particularly visual ones drawn from advertising and technological ones drawn from the Internet) as sophistication with those forms and modes. In “Literacy after the Revolution” (1997), Lester Faigley described an analogous relationship between talk radio and the Internet worth developing from our present vantage, for, as the talk radio format creates a seductive illusion of public discourse, the Internet similarly—yet in my view even more effectively—supports a number of illusions of agency, equal access, and democracy, but in the service of disabling those traits in practice. Such illusions are further reified as reproduction of the everyday (a website, a blog, a flash presentation) is mistaken, particularly by instructors less adept than their students in those modes, for critical engagement.

In contrast, Bartholomae describes a first year composition pedagogy that interrupts students’ desires to simply consume and reproduce the ubiquitous discourses and modes in which they are already immersed and with which they are so clearly proficient. Thus, he explains in Writing on the Margins (2005), students come into contact with academe’s “exemplary stylists” who “struggle to make the language do something outside of conventional expectation” (14), and in turn model a way of thinking critically about whatever text, concept, or medium is held to be natural or self evident, whether in an academic discipline or in everyday life. In Bartholomae’s approach, students have a tremendous amount to contribute to the academic enterprise because they add their voices to academic conversations and invest them with new experiences and with new possibilities for future development. What Bartholomae has long argued, however, is that in order for student voices to be heard—and in order for them to become “writers who can make something happen” (13)—they must first be acculturated to ways of thinking (and of course “ways of reading”) and to the inquiry-guided systems of thinking, reading, and writing at work in academic conversations.

This is not to say, however, that student engagement with conventional rhetorical modes and conventions (of movies, the Internet, advertising, and so on) cannot be critically impelled or that critical engagement with those modes cannot be taught; nor would I suggest that every instance of academic writing necessarily reflects critical engagement in ways that other modes cannot. I do believe, however, that current excitement about multimodal literacy risks building a normative framework in the discipline in which multimodal reproduction is privileged, along with attendant notions of agency, as somehow uniquely laudable and in which acculturation into academic discourse and its unique ways of critical inquiry act as nostalgic impediments to acquiring new literacies. Certainly, the New London Group’s work on “multiliteracies” in the mid-1990s shows that the theorization of multimodal communication can be quite complex and critically informed. In turn, Diana George develops ways to intervene between the highly sophisticated communication products of “an aggressively visual culture” and

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the largely passive mass culture reception of those products (15); and, in
order to foster more sophisticated student literacies, George considers ways
of “[shifting] attention, if only momentarily, from the product to the act of
production” (18), which actually distances students from (rather than more
deply embeds them in) normative ways of seeing their world. And yet, as
with gay historical analyses and queer theories before them, theorizations
of multimodal communication are at risk of being interpreted and applied
through their most reductive and simplifying frames. Not necessarily in
theorization, then, but instead in applications of multimodal communication
we can find a repackaging of expressivist practices in which student writ-
ers are engaged in the rather instrumental challenge of simply describing,
picturing, or otherwise representing externally an internally coherent and
meaningful narrative or “text,” but doing so with seductive new technolo-
gies and media.

Indeed, the tendency to reduce a highly complex and purposefully
problematic critical argument to simplistic, instrumental aims finds its
counterpart in the reception of early queer theories. As Judith Butler ob-
served following the publication and widespread acclaim for Gender Trouble
(1990), many readers—not least among them scholars of gender and sexual-
ity—reproduced her challenges to essentialism in line with their own, often
unacknowledged, essentialist commitments. Those readers were able, in
turn, to produce what Butler later called a “voluntaristic account” of gender
and sexuality which ran precisely counter to Butler’s arguments but was
nonetheless attributed to her (“Critically” 16). As she explains in “Critically
Queer” (1996), that voluntarist account “presumes a subject, intact, prior to
its gendering” (16), a subject, in other words, with sufficient power to reflect
upon and ultimately freely choose a gender identity or role. Our work in
teaching composition maybe seen similarly, as precariously situated between
two approaches: as Bartholomae suggests in “Writing Assignments: Where
Writing Begins” (1982), there is a voluntarist, essentialist “pedagogy whose
primary aim is to enable students to work out something that is inside them”
already, which competes with a presumption that knowledge is something
outside the writer and requires a writer to “locate himself convincingly in
a language that is not his own” (Writing 177). Following Butler—and I
think this is the critical force of Bartholomae’s work as well—our students
certainly inhabit and are produced by and through dominant discourses;
they do not, however, own or control those discourses. Imagining students
as already equipped to do battle with discursive rituals that endorse, even
as they severely truncate possible ways of imagining notions of agency and
subjectivity, will likely reproduce those notions instead of subjecting them
to critique. Butler, though, describes a very different critical approach to
thinking about gender and sexuality, which writing instructors might also
adopt in order to test the “limits of discursively conditioned experience”
Gender

9) where power—not only of the juridical structures examined by
Butler and Foucault, but dominant discursive modes generally—"inevitably
'produces' what it claims merely to represent" (2).

III. Technological Seduction and Student Agency

Voluntarist approaches to multimodal theories often hinge on a union
of high technology and popular culture which strategically positions prac-
titioners to appeal simultaneously to the tastes of academic administrators
and students, to claim both institutional and practical significance against
which "traditional" academic literacies fail to measure up. These claims,
however, rest on mistaken, or at least reductively instrumental notions of
technology and cultural significance, particularly as those notions appeal
to commonsense perceptions of agency and interactivity. Anchoring their
argument in the presumably advanced rhetorical sophistication of younger
students, a sort of voluntaristic rationalization finds its way into multimodal
communication's legitimation process, where students' experiences with in-
teractive media—particularly the Internet, new formal-textual technologies
like instant messaging and flash, and a new generation of video games like
first person shooter and other point of view designs—are assumed to pro-
duce in them a sophisticated sense of agency that makes their uses of those
technologies inherently critical. Unfortunately, these assumptions—and the
attendant pedagogies which foster the reproduction of students' quotidian
practices—too often overlook the ways in which new media work to seduce
users with a notion of agency that reproduces dominant rhetorical patterns
and in turn limits creativity and critical engagement.

The conflation of student adeptness and sophistication with conven-
tional texts and modes merges with the notion that students simply pro-
ducing writing—or whatever form of text—has inherent value. Here, it is
assumed, practice in familiar genres and media will transfer into adeptness
with more sophisticated writing, that when we teach discrete "situational
skills" we imagine them to be "generalizable" to other rhetorical situations
or contexts (Downs and Wardle 558). But, the student who begins a blog
or maintains a MySpace or Facebook page is not likely to become critically
conscious of the constructedness of the self simply by reproducing the highly
technologized forms in which it is commonly represented in dominant media.
The assumption of generalizability overlooks the ways in which academic
thinking—whether expressed verbally, visually, in writing, and in any com-
bination or in any medium (or media)—is composed not simply of a skill set
essentially analogous to popular writing situations, but is instead derived
from a fundamentally different orientation to thought. Rather than seeing
reproductive writing skills as analogous, and thus of relative value, the more
credible analogy might be found between queer theories and multimodal theories, where complex approaches to literacy are gradually understood through reductive and reproductive readings that overlook the theories' more radical and disruptive implications, whether for thinking about gender and sexual identities or about student writing.

Finally, and most importantly in my view, the increased attention to reproducing popular texts and media perpetuates student alienation from the conventions of thinking and writing valued in the academic community. In an important sense, at the very moment when students are poised for acculturation to new, and certainly foreign, values and conventions, their entry into the academic community and its conversational ethos is further postponed by first year composition experiences that encourage and reward already-familiar approaches to thinking and writing. Rather than having confronted them, our students are then likely to leave our courses further alienated from active engagement with what Bartholomae describes as the "elaborate deceptions" at work in academic rhetorical conventions (144). While Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle cast this concern in light of retaining authority over the discipline of college writing, they also invite consideration of a larger ethical concern, when they claim that "our cornerstone course must resist conventional but inaccurate models of writing" (557). Specifically, as Bartholomae argues, the acquisition of academic literacy is predicated on subverting rather than reinforcing conventional notions of agency through texts that demand levels of engagement and a communitarian conception of discourse which "students would not (or could not) imagine on their own" (Writing 87). If the course simply reproduces normative rhetorical gestures through conventional media, without an attendant acquisition of more critical, reflective literacies, we may, despite our best intentions, play into the hands of arguments for our field's obsolescence or irrelevance, as it pertains to roles in non-academic and academic scenes alike.

While Bartholomae's work plays such a central role in articulating the value of acquiring academic literacies, it is also seen from an expressivist perspective as the most prominent impediment to student freedom and to their acquisition of more valuable literacies. The latter perspective is featured in English Composition as a Happening (2002), where Sirc uses the kinds of experimentation performed by artists he admires, such as Marcel Duchamp in plastic arts, William Burroughs in fiction, and John Cage in music, as models for the kinds of organically derived, self-actualized student work pursued in the "happening" composition classroom. Sirc's pedagogy suggests that first year composition students—if they are not impeded by the restrictive academicism of scholars like Bartholomae—will through improvisation produce writing of a caliber analogous to those artists he admires. Modeled after Burroughs's cut-up style in Naked Lunch, Sirc describes his ideal writer "as viewer, remote in hand, clicking, cruising, blending all televisual texts
into one default program" (41). Its seductiveness notwithstanding, in this line of thinking are two misapprehensions that bear directly on my concerns in this paper. First, Sirc's exemplary artists are, by their literacy—the deep rhetorical, critical, historical, and technical knowledge they have of their fields—entirely distinct from our typical first year composition students. Their experimental art operates in relation to a normative conception or standard of art and aesthetic value; experiments thus respond (especially in the surrealist, Dadaist, and situationist modes Sirc references) to something else, and it is critical literacy with a norm that allows for perception of a distance between it and experimental disruption. Second, Sirc's comparing approaches to form—here between Burroughs to literature and the student to television—dismisses the critical sensibility distinguishing the “pastiches” of, say, Naked Lunch and channel surfing (41). Both by diminishing the significance of critical inquiry into aesthetic and textual practices, and by flattening formal distinctiveness, Sirc appeals to what Lyotard describes as a kitsch, ahistorical eclecticism that confuses rather than, as avant-gardism does, challenges, normative systems and perceptions of value (76).

It appears to me that in Sirc's approach to twentieth-century avant-gardism, as in voluntarist readings of civil rights discourse, gay liberation, and queer theories before him, we encounter a pedagogy that stakes its claim in a rejection of critical inquiry in favor of a celebration of the surface and the relativity of value. This claim has significant implications, for it suggests a troubling scene much like Lehring's with his young gay students, where students' ahistorical perspectives coupled with their saturation in popular culture celebration of limited (and still largely homophobic) conceptions of gay identity compete on an equal footing with historically and critically informed analyses of contemporary gay culture. If it is, as Sirc suggests, “futile to hype the values of contemplation on the information-sick” and if our students' quotidian experiences value the “wow of distraction” over the “literary hmmmm of contemplation” (51), does it follow that we should simply allow for the reproduction of that “sickness” in a college writing scene that abandons, or at least considers superfluous, the academy's critical intellectual enterprise? If students' work is the product of “just putting stuff together” (43), the Happenings Compositionist seems to speed the everyday circulation of uninvestigated, ultimately equivalent bits of information and perception, sustaining that circulation with an unexamined notion of student agency. This vision is quite different than the one advanced in the New London Group's 1996 manifesto, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” which mapped out some ways that students could critically reproduce the everyday in the interstices of analysis and agency. In order to foster this kind of critical literacy, the New London Group emphasizes student alienation from the familiar media and discourses in which they are immersed, noting that teachers “must help learners to denaturalize and make strange again what they have learned.
and mastered.” Sirc’s pedagogy, however, risks disabling in students the very faculties of critical discrimination that, ironically enough, allowed for Duchamp (or Burroughs, or Cage) to both perceive and test the limits of forms and appear to work “without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done” (Lyotard 80-81), and for audiences to perceive in turn the friction between dominant and emergent rules of art.

Nonetheless, I think that Sirc’s goals are laudable, for he wishes, like expressivists before him, to emphasize student freedom and personal discovery through the creation of texts that reflect the ways they perceive themselves and resist conforming to the ways we perceive them. However, Sirc’s emphasis on developing writers’ “impertinence” actually—although strangely—resonates with goals of the compositionists who are repeatedly dismissed in his work (“Composition’s” 23); for his part, Bartholomae argues that we teach students how to enter academic conversations precisely so that they can experiment critically with them, “reconceiving power relations within the academy” (Slevin qtd. in Bartholomae 151), rather than simply reproducing them. Or, as Charles Bazerman claims more recently:

the social powers contained in [disciplinary] discourses are the very reason that they should be studied and the reason students should be given access to them. As far as personal identity, commitments, and interests, students are to be encouraged to find their own meanings and purposes in these disciplinary forms, so that they may inhabit and use them to overcome barriers and to bring diverse perspectives and interests into the disciplines. (89)

The divergence lies, then, not in the shared goal of developing student impertinence, but instead on what Butler once called “rifted grounds” over method and perception of what counts as valuable intervention into normative ways of thinking (“Against” 21). This is the point for me where the paths of gay cultural histories, queer interventions, and current debates over academic activity cross, for each of these paths helps us understand the systematic absorption of difference, techniques of cultural reproduction, and their legacies. As our inheritance of 1963 indicates, seductive illusions of freedom and agency are not coequal with freedom and agency themselves; those illusions are, as Rechy suggests, sometimes the means of aggressively restricting the ways in which revolutionary assessments and reconceptions of identity might be conceived and practiced through highly nuanced approaches to conventional literacies. In turn, critical pedagogies suggest that while we may not be able to offer students the unrestrained freedom Sirc envisions, what we can do is help them become literate in, and thus conscious of, the ways in which free-
dom and discourse meet and may be continually challenged and reconceived within our own academic “nightworld.”

It may seem that we’ve gone far afield of the significance of Rechy’s first novel; however, I want to suggest that *City of Night* and its examination of a supposedly obsolete way of conceiving of gay identity leads us into the very heart of disciplinary functions. Moreover, it stands as a stark reminder to the lure of cosmetic radicality—whether we deal with voluntarist approaches to gay identities or with debates in composition studies of the last decade—and the costs in terms of other possible expressions all too often foreclosed as a consequence of following that lure. When students are assured of the sufficiency of their quotidian perceptions, we are rarely inclined to challenge them into exploring other literacies, other possible cultural expressions, particularly that of the academic nightworld; at least, we do not force them out of comfort as much as we allow them to remain comfortable. As Rechy distanced his defamiliarizing of gay cultural roles from the subsequent uncritical reproduction and reification of those roles to the extent that they were mistaken for the totality of viable gay identity, writing teachers, too, might actively distance the kinds of critical work we and our students may do with popular texts and forms from their simple reproduction. That distancing is an ongoing critical challenge to resist the seductions of order, which pressure us both from outside academe—where our own everyday practices are seen as foreign, bizarre, and even wasteful—and from within the field itself, where even the most well intentioned colleagues may wish to mitigate the power dynamic between instructors and their students, and yet do so at the expense of disabling the academic enterprise itself.

There is, then, a provocative legacy connecting Rechy to composition theory, by way of queer theories and the demand for the acquisition of critical literacies shared by each. In *City of Night* and through reflections on fifty years of gay cultural evolution, Rechy works at the point of contact between a demand to occupy normative identities and recognition of the performative nature of those norms, in order to experiment with new possibilities of art and identity. 1963 remains a precarious moment, one which allows us to either reproduce it through nostalgic, voluntaristic frames or to read it as a moment of and for critically motivated self reflection. For his part, Rechy recognized that marginal people do not become free simply by claiming that they are free; in fact, that claim probably marks the moment at which they are most in need of more critical literacy, and in turn poised to develop a voice as part of a community rather than in isolation from it. We also face a stultifying status quo in our writing courses, but it is the pressure of popular perceptions of value, not of the academic enterprise. Perhaps it would be valuable, as Sirc recommends, for students “instead of writing about the sort of essays we talk about when we talk with our colleagues . . . [to] write on how they don’t want to read them” (Sirc, “Composition’s” 23). However,
that writing should not stand as a statement of equivalent value, but rather as a point of departure from which we would have an opportunity to critically engage with their already existing perceptions of value and, in turn, invite them to enter into a discursive space they might value. We would have an opportunity to expose both the artificiality, the constructedness, of our world, but also in turn to help students see the ways in which their own perceptions of order and normativity are constructed.\(^5\)

Notes

1. Rechy reflects on these reviews in more detail in his interview with Debra Castillo (119).

2. Notably, during the 1970s and 1980s, Rechy repeatedly examined gay SM culture, whose role playing (the use of police and Nazi uniforms, slave auctions, and the use of anti-gay epithets) he believed would legitimate gay oppression within the community itself.

3. Rechy described young hustlers of the 1970s, who get “attention only when they’re busted—and in order to whip up homophobia whenever the cops need it,” being encouraged to confirm “grotesquely bloated cop reports issued periodically and aimed . . . at making all homosexuals look like rich predators luring innocent youths” (Sexual 160, 61).

4. This appeal is thus likely to reproduce the narcissistic, or largely hermetic, scene of contemporary American pop culture, where, Hal Niedzviecki writes: “Ersatz rebellion mixes with passive entertainment and ends up occupying the space where real active voice and dissent once had a chance to make a difference. . . . Naturally, all this filters through the net. It commands intense interest, provides the illusion of radicalism and dissent, an entire world of hip-hop listening, extreme-sports-watching, perpetual teenagers who believe in nothing other than their own incarnation of rebel I’m Special self-esteem attitude” (118-19).

5. Thanks to Composition Studies reviewers, my dear colleagues Christa Albrecht-Crane, Doug Downs, and Brian Whaley, and Numsiri Kunakemakorn, whose comments helped me to flesh out and modify a number of issues which, in earlier drafts, were fragmentary or incomplete. Their support and encouragement is, as always, invaluable.

Works Cited


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