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Last spring, I taught a first-year composition and literature course under the theme “Reading and Writing Popular Culture.” In our final writing unit, we studied Jeanette Winterson’s Written on the Body as a way of investigating gender and sexuality as fluid, as intangible, and as inherently distinct from images in popular media, where binary gender constructions often pervade western cultural consciousness. Focusing on a genderless narrator’s experiences with love, loss, and transformation, the text led us to examine the power of gender in popular culture. When referring to the narrator, students tended to use gendered pronouns accidentally (a “slip” I was guilty of at times), directing us to broader, global discussions in which we considered why we “need” to “know” the narrator’s gender. As a class, we also posed such questions as “why do we want to know the narrator’s gender?” and “what cultural value do we place upon gender?” In many ways, these inquiries are the most difficult but critically crucial questions we can ask regarding our own citizenship and subject positions.

In Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies, Jonathan Alexander poses, answers, and theorizes these “why” questions incisively, as he argues for the implementation of “sexual literacy” in the composition classroom, a space, he purports, that has been excluded from discussions connecting sexuality and literacy in our field’s scholarship and pedagogy. For Alexander, sexual literacy is more than simply knowledge, understanding, and inclusion of sex and sexuality in curricular discourse; it is, instead, “an intimate understanding of the ways in which sexuality is constructed in language and the ways in which our language and meaning-making systems are always already sexualized” (18). Through this definition of sexual literacy, Alexander invites us to consider how students write sexuality as both a personal and political space, how sexuality and literacy are interwoven, and how we can implement pedagogical tactics to assist students in composing sex and sexuality as a means of becoming critical citizens.

In his introduction, Alexander extends his conception of sexual literacy to examine how such a literacy might encourage students to proactively “navigate the wealth of information and media that grapples with sex and sexuality . . . to become comfortable in dealing with such material in a mature, reasonable, and rhetorically savvy fashion” (2). In the James Berlin tradition of constructing critical citizenship through rhetorical awareness, Alexander describes the field’s turn toward social conversations regarding race, gender,
and class; however, these discussions tracing thirty years of Composition and Rhetoric do not, according to him, account for the vast array of opportunities for negotiating sex and sexuality. That is, Alexander advocates implementing discussions of the intersections between sexuality and literacy in the composition classroom. Such conversations can serve as a vehicle to extend students’ critical literacy—as well as our own—so as to interrogate the relationship between power, sexuality, and the prospect of agency. Agency, Alexander argues, is crucial, for sex and sexuality represent “a construct of power” through which we come to understand dominant social narratives, power relations, and our own citizenship: “so many of our most pressing social issues are wrapped up in the power/knowledge complexes of sexuality that participation in our democratic project necessitates fluency with discourses of sex and sexuality. Attention to sexual literacy provides such fluency” (19).

Chapter 1 investigates what Alexander calls “the turn in sexuality studies” through which he grapples with Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s influences on our understandings of grand narratives about sex and sexuality. For Alexander, many of the central tenets of critical theory, including queer theory, inform the possibility for sexual literacy through critical citizenship. While this chapter provides a rich discussion of the intersection between critical theory and “productive” citizenship, I wonder if Alexander also might consider not only how queer theory and post-modernism critique grand narratives, but also who has access to these grand narratives—and how the denial of grand narratives for sexuality impacts one’s cultural intelligibility. I say this because a critical discussion of cultural access reflects many of the arguments he makes through this text, thereby extending his discussion not only to a critique of grand narratives for sex and sexuality but a reflection on how these narratives influence material realities for its citizens.

Using chapter 1 as a vehicle for chapter 2’s discussion, Alexander examines student writing about sex and sexuality, revealing the intricacies and subsequent literacies inherent within the ways students compose sex and sexuality. Arguing that sex and sexuality are often overlooked in popularized rhetoric and composition textbooks, Alexander juxtaposes a lack of conversation in our field with concrete examples of the ways students exhibit literacy about sexuality in non-traditional, informal forums such as blogs, web sites, online networking communities, and university newspapers. Alexander’s insightful discussion delves into the ironic juxtaposition of students writing sex and sexuality—without formal instruction—through critical lenses presented by school codes. That is, although Composition Studies may not invite conversations about sex and sexuality into our ideas about critical literacy and citizenship, our students are still having these conversations and still composing sex and sexuality with incisive, politically-astute rhetorical awareness. Such an idea asks us to consider what our students are writing
outside of the classroom, so that we may better address literacy practices within the classroom.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine three distinct spaces for critical discussion: queer theory for straight students, transgender rhetoric(s), and marriage discourses. In these chapters, Alexander examines how minority discourses that critique dominant cultures and discourses can benefit the critical citizenship of all students in the composition classroom. For instance, chapter 1 reveals the implications for a queer theory for all of his (our) students, as Alexander probes what it means to bring a critical theory essential to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer (GLBTQ) identity to heterosexual students. Drawing upon his own work, Alexander critiques dominant sexual discourses by addressing how “straightness” is composed. Through an analysis of his own classroom activity, he and his students investigate what it is to be straight—how “straight” is, perhaps, performed—through their careful analysis of a web site Alexander created exhibiting a straight male’s online disclosure of his fascination with a boy band, N*Sync—a seemingly “gay” affiliation. He and his students were able to examine the manner in which “straightness,” while a dominant sexuality, is ultimately unstable, a label often given to “gayness.” In chapter 3, he extends these critiques of cultural “knowledge” and “truth” to transgender rhetorics, through which he asks his students to begin reforming and expanding their—and his own—conceptions of gender through a feminist lens. In doing so, he alerts them to their subject position as a means of enabling a critical citizenship to work against dominant power structures. Chapter 4 recounts Alexander’s discussion with students about current marriage debates which often are masked in “for/against” ideologies in popular media. By complicating the idea of gay marriage as a two-sided issue and by expanding discussions of gay marriage to marriage as a whole, he and students begin to understand marriage not simply as a dualistic political debate, but as an intricately complicated commentary on public access, power, and citizenship. In his final chapter, Alexander faces and grapples with resistances to sexual literacy both within and outside of the classroom, while arguing for the implementation of such literacy that interweaves the personal and the logical for enacting local and global change through the composition classroom. Through both case study and personal account, these chapters delve into, complicate, and theorize the practices that elicit critical thought about students’—and our own—subject positions in cultural contexts.

With rich implications for the composition classroom, Alexander’s proposal for the deconstruction of comfort zones creates rhetorical space for challenging cultural “knowledge” and “norms.” Alexander’s careful balance of theory with practice constitutes his call for the implementation of praxis-centered scholarship. That is, his chapters, while bound to theory, could be taken out of the text and implemented in a real classroom context. For the field of Composition Studies, this text will, without a doubt, shape the