

## Cultivating the Scavenger: A Queerer Feminist Future for Composition and Rhetoric

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**Abstract:** *This essay argues for and enacts queer and disruptive possibilities for the teaching of writing and for the production of writing itself. Drawing from feminist scholarship and from Judith Halberstam's assertion that queer methodologies are "scavenger methodologies," the essay explores potential outcomes for scholars and students as they engage with unconventional composing processes and as they imagine and write the future of Composition and Rhetoric in queerer ways.*

**Keywords:** *queer theory, pedagogy, feminist, disruption, composition*

The methodology I want to discuss and enact in this essay emerges out of my investments in queer theory and composition. In the introduction to *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam describes one way of understanding queer theory's approach, writing that a "queer methodology is [. . .] a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information" (13). Halberstam argues that a "queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence" (13). Both in my writing and in my classroom, I am interested in experimenting with what it might mean to approach composition through a "scavenger methodology." In this essay in particular, I work to illuminate the ways scavenging, as a writing practice, can disrupt traditional understandings of writing and normative notions of practice and process. I argue that the "scavenger" might complicate and deepen some aspects of composition profoundly valued by feminist and queer scholars within and outside of composition in two significant ways: by disrupting ways of knowing that seem dominant, taken for granted, or obvious *and* by valuing contradiction—what we might also call messiness, fragmentation, or even confusion.

For me, this work has profound political and personal stakes. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Queer and Now," she describes "becoming a perverse reader," a development that she claims is "a prime resource for survival" for young queers. She writes, "We needed there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other" (3-4). This need is crucial for the survival of those of us who don't "line up," those of us whose identities don't signal in conventional ways. And I want to argue that all writers must commit

to learning to disrupt, to read differently, to ask more of texts, to ask more of the world than linear, normative functions allow. This essay invites readers to think about and experience logics that contradict, tenses that shift, genres that mix, futures that are messier than what the present moment seems to allow. Further, it asks scholars of composition and teachers of writing to *become* scavengers and to make seemingly disconnected worlds collide.

The truth is: this essay makes me anxious—the idea of speaking to Composition and Rhetoric’s “next 25 years” of feminist work is unruly, contradictory, and perhaps even, in some ways, impossible. But even as I try, in the face of this impossibility, to articulate some small shard of how work in queer composition might contribute to this conversation about the feminist future, I also consider the ways the future itself is bound to normative ideas about progress. Some scholars in queer theory<sup>1</sup> might even say “fuck the future.” This expression is a way of refusing the heteronormative and linear constructions of time and space that are often used against those of us who are queer and feminist in the service of the dominant narratives—narratives that seek to compel us to “grow up,” to reproduce, to invest financially and emotionally in our normative genders, or to select “properly” gendered partners with whom to couple and marry.

Additionally, I have in my mind Karen Kopelson’s 2008 article “Sp(l)itting Images; or, Back to the Future of (Rhetoric and?) Composition,” in which she invites us to think about “how we might move away from the types of self-referential discussions of our own disciplinarity [. . .] in order to further our status as an interdisciplinary, knowledge-making field of study” (753). Kopelson examines “evidence that we are continuing to preoccupy ourselves *with ourselves*” (774, emphasis mine). It could seem that the answer to this obsession with ourselves would be to look outside ourselves, but that binary logic is precisely the kind of logic that dictates we must either look inside or outside; we must choose either theory or practice; we must either write narrative or scholarship; we must be men or women, scholars or poets. So, with queer values in mind, I want to propose there is a way we can both look at ourselves *and* outside ourselves at the same time; there is a way we can look forward in time and simultaneously problematize the notion of the future; there are ways to embrace the contradictions in our field, in our scholarly writing, and in our classrooms.

Imagining a future, for me, has always been about imagining other worlds, other ways of being outside the ones I had always known. I remember in 1986 when Halley’s Comet was about to rise over Long Island somewhere around three in the morning. I was nine years old, and my mother (against my father’s wishes) snuck me out of bed. It was March, so not quite cold but not quite warm. And my mother watches from the window, doses off from time to time

as I lay on the cool blacktop of the driveway and wait with my cheap grade-school telescope, to see something fleeting, unknowable, and beautiful—to see something that I knew I might only see once. I never did find the comet that night. But it mattered less that I saw it, and more that I imagined doing so. It mattered more that I was up past my bedtime, looking out at a world I knew was beyond my understanding or grasp, wondering about what might be possible.

In third grade, I had a teacher named Mr. Schellhorn. I distrusted him, my first male teacher—his dark mustache, his hard full chest and thick-rimmed glasses. I never raised my hand to lead the class during the singing of “John Brown Jalopy.” I didn’t raise my hand to turn the pages of afternoon stories. No matter how hard the other children laughed at his character voices, no matter how many times he praised my drawings and even my terrible handwriting, I would not budge. I would not, as it were, love him. Then the science fair. And I hate the other students—their maps of constellations lighting up on cardboard, their mud mound volcanoes erupting over desktops. I don’t want to make anything. I don’t want anything to explode or light up. I don’t want the bad-smelling oak tag, the construction paper dry against my fingers. I would rather make up math problems sitting on the radiator. For a few days, Mr. Shellhorn leaves me there. He doesn’t ask what my project will be. But by the time the light-up planets begin to show he’s back there with black construction paper and a handful of orange tissue paper. He folds the black paper in half and cuts for what feels like a half hour, moving the big “teacher scissors” in curves and inside out holes. And when he opens the paper, it’s wings. He glues the orange tissue paper behind them. “It’s a monarch butterfly,” he says. “They are perfectly symmetrical. Do you know what symmetrical means?” And I’m still not budging. “I don’t care,” I answer, directing my stare through the back window towards the school lot where the cars are lined up in a green blur. I do care. I want to know what symmetry means. I like the sound of it, how his teeth joined at the ‘s,’ his lips touching at the ‘m’ and curling together to end on the ‘try’ of the word. I do love him, you understand. I do make five more butterflies when he goes. And as for symmetry, the dictionary said, “match exactly.”

So, instead of a science project proper, I wrote what I called “a science book” entitled “The Monarch,” and I remember drawing pictures of my family, giving them butterflies as faces. Alongside my father and mother, my siblings and their butterfly heads, I composed narratives that made use of all the science projects I could see in the room. I remember writing down the names of planets, which I used as the names for the characters with the butterfly heads, who were also my family. I remember there were volcanoes, and I remember trying to describe the anatomy of a fly—something Joey Lavarco, who had to repeat third grade twice and who I loved for his irreverence, was working on

in the back row. This is the first time I remember writing queerly and having a teacher who celebrated that sensibility in me.

So in case it's hard to see what's queer about my family with butterfly heads, named after the planets, hanging out with volcanoes and descriptions of a fly body, I'll try to articulate what I see as queer moves, or queer methodologies for composition, methodologies I employ as I try to push against notions of conventional scholarship, methodologies I also try to teach my students.

My body is not coherent. One might say, for example, "This is not a girl" or "This is not a boy." My trajectory as a writer is also incoherent. One might have said, in response to my third-grade "science project," that it was a book of non-fiction, or even science-fiction, "not a science project." One might even say this is not exactly an academic article or not a very dutiful one. And all these claims might be true, and that might be what is so queer about this scavenging, about refusing coherence, about combining that which seems separate or seemingly unrelated.

This, I believe, is deeply political work—feminist and queer work—work we must do as scholars in composition and work our students must do in order to be more complicated thinkers and better writers. To be clear, I don't necessarily mean that we should all assign our students braided, collage-like, narrative essays that look like the ones I tend to write. I mean more that we must find ways to blur the boundaries, so that we can push them, so that we can take our field and our students outside the bounds of where we think we can go, outside the bounds of what kinds of knowledges we can access, and how. If part of our work as scholars of Composition and Rhetoric is to prepare students to fully and complexly engage in a writing public and in civic discourses, then we need to more fully invest in new logics, new approaches, new ways of thinking about a problem. The scavenger methodology can cultivate disruptive thinking, patterns of thought that move against the normative regulations of gender, sexuality, and literacy.

Composing queer and composing feminist means pushing against the normative conventions of gender and sexuality, yes, but it also means pushing against normative conventions of scholarship, of essay, of article, of "student essay." In this sense, much of the work in multi-modal, digital, and collaborative composition is linked to what I am talking about here—work on remixing, work on digital composing, work that troubles our previous notions of originality, linear construction, and single author, single subject cohesion.<sup>2</sup> This is also work that can take us to queerer places, places where possibilities for composing move further outside the norm than we can even imagine them. This has been our project throughout the field's history—to revise and revisit what it means to compose. I want to articulate one possible future among many futures that feminist and queer work in composition makes possible.

I think quite often about that third-grade year. I am pretty sure I was the only third grader who tried to cut gym. When it was time to change clothes, I'd sneakily head down to the library to see if I could get the librarian to talk to me about books long enough to miss gym class and give me a pass. It worked the first couple of times. And I felt relieved of the responsibility of taking off my clothes in the girls' locker room. Instead, I talked incessantly about Jupiter Jones, the star character in *The Three Investigators* series I was reading that year. But eventually my absences were noticed by the gym teacher, who called my mother. *You love sports*, my mother said. *Why would you cut gym class?*

In "Feminism and Methodology in Composition Studies," Patricia Sullivan calls for feminism to become a "more fully realized voice within composition studies," urging that if our field did not "understand issues of gender difference and sexual politics, we [could] never hope to achieve the full understanding of composing that has been the goal of composition studies from its inception" (138). Nearly two decades later, in 2009, Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace articulate a call to action about the "critical power of queerness," which, they argue, "remains an under-explored and under-utilized modality in composition studies" (301). They ask questions about "what it means to take the queer turn in composition" (302). I consider it a pedagogical imperative to invest in what this queer turn *could* mean, particularly in relation to the generative overlap between feminist and queer visions of our field—not only for composition's longstanding commitment to diversity and social change, but also for students (and for scholars in the field) *as writers*. In this sense, my call for a scavenger-like methodology is both a formal and political argument taking into account both *what* we write and *how* we write (and teach others to write) in our field. If we think of queer composition as offering us, as teachers of writing and writers, the opportunity to consider new methodologies, how might Halberstam's idea of the scavenger function as a methodology for both doing and teaching composition? And what might be the impact on students as composers in their writing classrooms? I focus on this scavenger approach to queer composition, one that while not an entirely new way of composing is worth considering more closely from a queer perspective.

Joey Lavarco was a troublemaker, didn't wash his beautiful red hair very much at all, and had a lisp. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether he was left back because he failed third grade or because he wouldn't survive without Mr. Schellhorn, the generous king of all us weird kids. My parents divorced that year. And I had decided not to talk at school. I don't remember why. But I made exceptions to talk to Joey, who stole erasers from the other kids' desks and wandered off to look at insects during recess. Nothing made sense about Joey, and I loved him with my whole queer heart.

## Disrupting Epistemologies

It's useful, in discussions of methodology and field, to consider a framework of epistemology, to give careful consideration to what it means to "know" or to write in the field of composition. In closing her essay "Making Room for New Subjects: Feminist Interruptions of Critical Pedagogy Rhetorics," Shari Stenberg reminds us that when cultivating feminist perspectives in our work we need to "bring in alternative knowledge" (146). And part of the question Stenberg, and others, raises is about how to "bring in alternative knowledge" in a way that shapes student writing, public discourse, and our pedagogical approaches.

In Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins makes an important distinction between what she calls "alternative knowledge claims" and "alternative epistemologies"—simply put the difference between a mere counter-claim to dominant knowledge and actually changing *the way* we think, the way we arrive at questions or conclusions. For Collins, actually making changes in racist, sexist, or other logics of dominance and superiority means interrogating the ways conclusions are drawn and finding new ways to go through the process of thinking itself. It is about changing patterns of thought and the ways of knowing that *produce* these systems; it's not simply a matter of telling sexists, for example, that their claims about gender are "untrue." Collins writes:

Alternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. (219)

This passage, to me, seems hugely significant in thinking about the field of composition and its future connections to feminist studies. Like Stenberg's article, much feminist scholarship in composition focuses on interruption and/or disruption—using archival, historical, rhetorical, and/or pedagogical study to create a fissure in dominant ideologies, to put a wrench in the wheel of conventional thought.<sup>3</sup> One reason that composition is such a generative field for this kind of work is our commitment to looking to other disciplines to disrupt ourselves, a kind of scavenging itself. In his 2010 article as part of *College Composition and Communication's* Special Issue entitled "The Future of Rhetoric and Composition," Bronwyn Williams uses the solar system as a metaphor for our field and writes, "Ideas and research beyond our scholarly solar system often catch the attention of our field like passing comets" (128). In Williams'

metaphor, of course, I recall the memory of Halley's Comet—or, rather, the memory of never having seen it. In our best moments, comets that catch our attention would actually transform the way we understand our solar system rather than affirm it and change the way we conceive of the field in which we work rather than be a mere passing over of light in the night sky. Many of us seek to create comets for our students, to show them some text, some method, some memory, some critical theory or experience that changes the way they see the solar systems of their lives and political contexts. Particularly for queer and feminist scholars and teachers, the use of the word “system” is quite significant here, signaling that all lives, all areas of study, all knowledges are systemic and therefore require disruption. One way, and perhaps the most common way, we come to know is by learning how systems work and then thinking inside those systems, “logically.” But, of course, the system already predetermines the logic, formulates the bounds of what it is possible to think. But what if we thought another way? What if, instead of thinking systematically, we thought in less obedient, even less “logical” ways?

I want to use, as an example of thinking inside a system, a student essay from a first-year writing course I taught in 2012. I have permission to use this student's work, but he prefers here to be referred to only by the name AJ. In response to an assignment (given after a reading from Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender*) that asked students to explore the ways that others' expectations about their identities influenced or affected them powerfully, AJ wrote a paper about his father expecting him to become a doctor (his father and grandfather were both kinds of surgeons). The essay is a really powerful piece of writing that evolved in my course, and I am going to draw from relevant excerpts below to discuss the ways his process and a more scavenger approach to his writing disrupted usual ways of thinking and improved the quality and complexity of his essay.

In talking about the way society views doctors, AJ composed the following sentence in his first draft: “When you go to a doctor, you assume he is going to have great knowledge and skill and that he will be able to solve your ailments” (3). First, I want to use Collins' distinction between alternative knowledge claims and alternative epistemologies in order to imagine how I, as a teacher of writing, can respond to this sentence alone. *Option 1*: I can circle the word “he” and write “or she”—highlighting to AJ that he should add this to the text, illustrating to him that academic conventions have changed, that I have an alternative knowledge claim, as Collins would put it, and that my knowledge claim has more authority in the system of my course than his knowledge claim (if we could count a choice of pronoun as a knowledge claim, which I think we should). Of course not only would this decision employ the logic of correction, but as all writing teachers know, it would not work. Besides, “he or she” just

makes the world sound like it's filled with only two kinds of people and a queer approach would always seek to disrupt that "or" between any two categories. *Option two*: I think about how to get AJ to articulate *how* and *why* he arrived at this knowledge claim; I think about how to engage him in the systems that produced his writerly choice of "he." I wonder what question(s) might be the comet that gets his attention. I ask him (and this is a quote, however embarrassingly long, from my marginal notes on his essay): *how did you decide to use the pronoun "he" here? What patterns of thought do you, as a writer, use to make decisions about the words you choose? Or, put another way, did you make the conscious choice to use this word? And if not, what does that tell you?*

This is not one of those moments where readers should be "wowed" by my pedagogical move. In fact, I am sure, given the audience for a piece like this, most readers have made moves like this when talking with students in office hours or responding to papers. But I also think we can all remember times when we have taken the short cut—perhaps even because of our anger, because of how sick we might be of hearing anyone (not just students, to be clear) make those dominant, inside-system assumptions about profession and gender. But if we are willing to truly disrupt our systems (ours genders, our writing, our field), we have to take the time to interrupt the very patterns of thought that produce our genders, our writing, and our field. I want to suggest that both in our field and in our classrooms, our writing risks becoming too linear, too cohesive, too bound to the conventions that stand before us—even as we seek to disrupt. To do this, we have to be willing to accept that, like our students, our ways of knowing are limited, fleeting, and sometimes impossible to see with the naked eye. Much like Halley's Comet, indeed.

But even in my response to AJ's writing above, I am dissatisfied with the options I have for disrupting. And I begin to understand that the systemic problem of *many* writers thinking of the pronoun "he" when they think of a doctor is a problem of great epistemological significance. And that, in order to truly disrupt how writers come to know or understand the world through dominant systems of logic, I might have to teach more unruly kinds of composition; I might have to teach writers to compose outside or beyond the bounds of the system.

## Scavenger Writer

Mr. Schellhorn had a habit of taking me (or any other kid exhibiting behaviors that indicated a rough patch) for walks, leaving the teacher's aid to manage the classroom. When one of the "real girls" in the classroom exclaims loudly that I have hair on my neck, Mr. Schellhorn redirects her to practicing her times tables. *Let's take a walk, champ!* he says, patting my back. I follow him to the courtyard. We walk together along the chain link fence, looking into the



backyards of houses that lined the grounds of the school. *Let's collect things*, he says. And we pick up oak leaves, twigs, wrappers tossed along the path. I gather some pebbles in the front pocket of my hooded sweatshirt. We bring the collection back, leaving the items on the activity tables. *We'll use these*, he says.

Articulating part of what feminism and composition have in common, Susan Jarratt, in the introduction to *Feminism and Composition Studies* (1998), asserts that both areas of study “resist purity of approach and the reduction of their scope by moving in and around many contemporary critical theories and disciplines” (3). The two ideas here—resisting purity and “moving in and around”—are essential to enacting and teaching the kind of scavenger approaches I describe. Of course, these approaches are not without their risks. I was once warned, for example, in writing the kind of “scavenger” book I have been working on since graduate school to “be careful”—that perhaps one needs to earn the right (through obeying the conventions) to break the rules, or to work outside the systems already in place. But I know no other way to write, or teach, that wouldn't feel like coming up with the same answers, like conjuring up that male pronoun for the doctor every time.

What I propose is that we “move in and around” and look even for those things that don't fit, or don't seem to. Feminist scholars are no strangers to being warned about their unconventional approaches or subjects, and scholars who employ disruptions of writing traditions in their fields are always warned of their risks. But think of the texts<sup>4</sup> we would not have available to read if these warnings were heeded—warnings about cohesion, warnings about using too much personal narrative, warnings about making one consistent argument. Since the nineties feminist scholars have been advocating for and exploring the potential and power of personal narrative as part of how knowledge is made.<sup>5</sup>

When Halberstam describes queer methodology as “attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other,” we are asked to consider the possibility that we might write in ways that go against each other, write in ways that purposefully create tension and friction, write in ways that “refuse the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (13). On some level, many of us in composition already encourage this kind of writing when we ask students, for example, to try writing essays *outside* their five-paragraph training, or when we try to complicate our students' writing rules (rules like *don't shift tenses* or *never use the first person in a critical essay*, etc.). We know when we trouble these writing rules, students can feel off-balance or hesitant about how to approach their writing if these kinds of structures are removed or not needed. So we can likely all imagine what might happen if we asked students to (on purpose) draw from sources that *don't* fit together, to write in multiple modes in the same piece of writing, to switch

tenses on purpose, to, essentially, disrupt every basic assumption about writing they (and we) have. I challenge my students to do this kind of scavenger work all the time, and I see it as an essential part of queer pedagogies that seek to interrupt those dominant epistemologies Collins describes.

As Amy E. Winans suggests in “Queering Pedagogy in the English Classroom: Engaging with the Places Where Thinking Stops,” queer pedagogy “entails decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring the facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation” (106). We don’t often think of our assumptions about writing as being “cultural assumptions” or as having a “geography of normalization” explicitly, but we do have a great body of feminist work that reminds us of the ways rhetorical performance is bound to gender, race, class, and all aspects of identity.<sup>6</sup> Work in queer composition needs to ask more questions about how to think further about our “geography of normalization.” If what we want is students who can think in disruptive, non-normative, and contradictory ways (I know these are the values I want to cultivate), we must ask them to write this way. And we must write this way. We must cause more trouble in our own field, in academia. And if we are to ask our students to question the processes by which identity/writing is made, if we are to ask our students to decenter themselves in relation to the materials of our courses, our teaching and research must also embody this very decentering—not merely *apply* the concept of decentering to teaching. As Kopelson suggests in her article “Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary: ‘Reconstructed Identity Politics’ for a Performative Pedagogy,” queer pedagogy “strives to confuse, as it strives to push thought beyond circumscribed divisions—strives to push thought beyond what can be *thought*” (20).

Some scholars are talking about this pushing “beyond circumscribed divisions” as experimental writing. Take for example, Patricia Suzanne Sullivan’s *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies*, which offers both theoretical and historical views of composition’s relationship to experimentation. Sullivan’s book is one way of thinking about what I am describing, though the scope of Sullivan’s project does not extend to thinking through queer politics and queer theory as having a bearing on how we think about forms of writing. But what might be useful about doing so? To think about this question, I return to AJ’s work.

The first draft of AJ’s paper began with a general to specific introduction about expectations as AJ went on to tell the story of how he was pressured to be pre-med in college since he was in grade school. It’s a solid narrative with a linear argument that could be summed up in a “parents shouldn’t pressure their kids into doing stuff” kind of way. AJ even quoted the Butler essay we read and included two quotes from a psychologist about parenting and the

impact pressure has on high-achieving students. It is a tidy and logical essay, maybe even an “A” essay in many contexts. In our conference, I talked with AJ about the essay being, well, boring. I told him it was boring and full of stuff we (the members of his writing community in class) have heard repeated for years: that parents should let their kids be who they want, that perfectionism is no good, that kids shouldn’t have to be who their parents believe they should be. I talked about the piece as having a conventional approach, which then also meant it was only able to say conventional things—otherwise known as dominant clichés about life.

*So what should I write?* AJ asked. *Just do the whole paper over?*

So the question I take from Halberstam here is: How can I teach AJ to be a scavenger, to draw from more surprising places, to disrupt himself and his usual ways of “knowing” how to write a “paper,” to bring things together that may not, at first, seem to belong together. In one sense, this isn’t queer at all. Creative writers have been saying this for years—that you need to surprise a reader, take turns they can’t predict. And feminist compositionists have told us many complicated things about the use of narrative, about self-implication, about how the personal narrative can interrupt or disrupt conventional knowledge. So how is the scavenger methodology different, or how could it be different?

So I told AJ to go collect some scraps. I talk to my students a lot about scraps, little pieces of the world you pick up as you move through. If Halberstam is right, that a queer methodology is a scavenger methodology, then it might be useful to think about scavenger hunts whereby we look for certain categories of objects to bring together. I asked AJ: If you were on a scavenger hunt for certain categories of things to bring into this essay, what kinds of things would they be? What would you tell yourself to go find? This, of course, was a puzzling question (it’s a puzzling question to me, too), but because AJ is being a good sport and a thoughtful person, he tries it out. *I’d tell myself to find something that goes against what it’s supposed to be?* “OK, write that down,” I said. “Keep going.” AJ ended up with a list of three tasks for his scavenger hunt. His list read: *1. find something that goes against what it’s supposed to be 2. find something that puts pressure on something else and 3. find something disappointing.* I told AJ to find these things and to find a way to bring them into the essay. And so he did. And the second draft was a glorious mess and wonderfully strange. Here’s a piece of it:

My Dad’s a doctor. My grandfather’s a doctor. And I was supposed to be one too by now. When my father and grandfather look at me, they see a doctor. And it’s pretty weird how whenever we look at something, we see what we want to see. I guess I do it, too. Today

when I was walking trying to find the things for this weird scavenger hunt, I noticed myself thinking about this girl I like in my bio lab and how she laughs at my jokes a lot. And I was thinking about how it's probably because she likes me too, and I thought about this paper and how this could be part of my scavenger hunt for related stuff. I am seeing what I want to see, too. But my dad being a doctor doesn't mean I am a doctor, and laughing at someone's jokes doesn't mean you want to hook up.

Down the street at the capital building, some men are arguing about the Keystone pipeline, a bunch of them putting pressure on the other ones to get them to do what they want. Does this count as something putting pressure on something else?

Full disclosure. I love this writing, and perhaps many writing teachers wouldn't (though I think any feminist teacher should be delighted to receive such a piece of writing from any student). But that's not the important part; the important part is what AJ said about the draft in his author's note, which in part, reads:

I tried to do what you said, but honestly my first paper seems a lot more responsible. This one feels like just random stuff. So I'm really sorry if I mistook what you said.

I am focused on AJ's term "responsible," particularly when, in the first draft, he critiqued his family for thinking being a doctor was more "responsible" than liking history courses. AJ apologizes; he seems to feel his second draft is a disappointment, something to be ashamed of. And, well, that's how doing something queer, something that moves against what seems evident, "natural" even, feels inside a dominant culture. I wasn't proud of that weird science book in third grade, though I admit to being proud of it now and really wishing someone had saved it.

AJ's final draft brought the brief mentions he makes above together quite interestingly in an essay that ends up being about power—about the power of influence, and because of the girl in his bio lab, it also becomes about gender. And not because I told him to get some gender politics in his work, but because he found a way to look around, to scavenge, and to worry about coherence later, or maybe not at all. More composition could happen this way because it is deeply political indeed to be able to see the connections between things—connections that maybe no one wants you to see. As AJ said, we see what we want to see—that is, until something else is brought into view.

I was a senior in college when I heard the news from my father that Mr. Schellhorn had died. In fact, I was in the middle of writing my undergraduate

honors thesis—a collection of disobedient poems that took biblical figures and rewrote their narratives from queer and feminist perspectives. Early that afternoon, before my father called, I had been looking up the word *anachronistic* in, of all things, a dictionary. I was looking it up because one of the professors on my thesis committee, a professor of Religious Studies, had given me feedback on my poems and said they were “going overboard with the anachronism” in the passages of poems where Noah was shopping at Wal-Mart before heading to the ark, and poems where Ruth was stealing rape kits from the local precinct. Looking back, the irony does hit me—that I am now a writing teacher, writing an article about the ways writers might gather seemingly contradictory, impossible combinations to make new knowledge, or to make new pathways to knowing.

### Contradiction, Confusion, Cohesion

In “Confronting the ‘Essential’ Problem: Reconnecting Feminist Theory and Pedagogy,” Joy Ritchie argues that courses that “allowed ideas to be held up to reexamination, to contradiction, and to the multiple stories of women’s lives hold at least some promise to counter the absolutist forms of thinking that prevail in our society and to allow more students to remake their view of the world” (101). Like Collins, Ritchie points to patterns of thought, to “forms of thinking.” And if we think in forms, and write in forms, why not change the forms in order to arrive at different content? We can change the content, yes. We can ask students to write *about* more civically engaged or politically conscious positions. But will that change *the form of the thinking*? Will it change how we come to know in the first place?

In “Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques,” Deborah Britzman asks:

What if one thought about reading practices [and perhaps writing practices as well] as problems of opening identifications, of working the capacity to imagine oneself differently precisely with respect to how one encounters another, and in how one encounters the self? What if how one reads the world turned upon the interest in thinking against one’s thoughts, of creating a queer space where one’s old certainties made no sense? (55)

The scavenger methodology I explore with my students is very invested in the idea of “thinking against one’s thoughts” and embracing (rather than avoiding) contradictions. I am sure all writers can remember a time when a teacher indicated they were “contradicting themselves.” And this indication meant, of course, that contradiction was not something that was supposed to happen in an essay—that an essay was something that made *consistent and linear* points that did not go against one another. From the perspective of queer theory

particularly, I want to argue that going “against one’s thoughts” and becoming curious and writing *into* our contradictions is both what we want to do as scholars and what we want to teach our students to do. We are living in a political moment of “either/or”—we either can carry guns into Taco Bell or we cannot bear arms, we either socialize medicine or privatize it, and so on. The last thing I want to teach my students is to write an essay that fits itself into one of these either/or’s. Rather, I want my students to notice the contradictory nature of the issues themselves. Just as queer theory tries to honor the complex and often contradictory nature of identity, so composition must do the same, even when it is uncomfortable to do so.

When I ask students to make essays from scavenged parts, from seemingly unrelated fields, styles, areas of their lives, voices, and so on, I am inviting their contradictions into their essays, rather than creating assignments that help students keep their contradictory selves at bay. And I try, in the scholarship I generate, to honor that work—bringing in the aspects of self and story that shape the pedagogies I advocate, disrupting and interrupting myself. Working as a queer person on the subject of queer pedagogies, I have been asked many times some version of the question: *Are you just interested in queer pedagogies because you’re queer?* I get asked this as a kind of “gotcha moment.” But the answer is what the answer could only be: yes, absolutely. I advocate for queer methodologies because I am queer, because queer teenagers all over the world are killing themselves at horrifying rates, because if oppression is really going to change, it’s our civic duty to think in queerer ways, to come up with queer kinds of knowledge-making so that we might know truths that are non-normative, and contradictory, and strange.

I already discussed one interesting moment of contradiction in AJ’s writing—the conflict between his essay (where he critiques the notion of what is “responsible” in the eyes of others) and his author’s note (where he feels guilt that his essay is less “responsible” than perhaps others he has written—others that were likely more tidy, more cohesive than the essay I have urged him to compose). In his subsequent revisions, I asked AJ to push more into this contradiction, to think more about why it’s a contradiction in the first place, and perhaps even about why it might always remain a contradiction. The temptation with contradictions is to *resolve* them. But in writing, as in life, some tensions are not resolvable. And sometimes that impossible resolution is perfectly productive. AJ writes:

The term responsibility is thrown around alot for manipulation. Who doesn’t want to be responsible? When you tell someone what the responsible thing to do is, you are basically telling them there is no other option. Responsibility is a weapon our parents use against us so

that we then learn to use it against ourselves and people we interact with in our lives.

This passage reflects AJ's commitment to pressing into the contradiction, to thinking closely and carefully about the concept of *responsibility* as it works on, against, for, and in us. To accept *responsibility* as good, as right, is the most normative move we can make in our minds. To question that which seems obvious, to, as Britzman says, "think against our thoughts" is to do the real work of composition.

I got mostly A's in elementary school, but I didn't think of myself as a smart kid. I always gave the second answer I thought of, because I thought of my first answer (my instincts) as weird or inappropriate. I learned this from Mrs. Walsh in second grade. I remember being so excited when Charlotte wrote nice things in her web in order to save Wilbur from being slaughtered. I remember that feeling that writing could save me, too. So when Mrs. Walsh asked a question on the quiz about what saved Wilbur, I was supposed to write "Charlotte" but I wrote "writing" instead. She marked it wrong. When I tried to protest, it was of no use. "You have to be more specific," she said. I remember she said my answer was "kind of out there."

## Re-Vision The Future

Most scholars in English are likely familiar with Adrienne Rich's assertion: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (339). As I understand Rich, re-vision is "the act of looking back," but also the act of acknowledging the present and the act of looking forward simultaneously. And that "contradiction" is not only possible but also an imperative for the field of composition. Further, it matters very much *how* we look and from what "critical direction," as Rich calls it. For example, in "Composing a Rhetorical Education for the Twenty-First Century," Jessica Enoch invites us to reconsider the angle from which we look; she calls us to search outside traditional educational contexts, especially to activist communities, in order to "energize our understanding of rhetorical education" (167). Similarly, but with a very different focus, Halberstam argues, in *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, that "part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (2). This is precisely what makes queerness integral to composition. There is something queer about writing—something indescribable, something contradictory, something, at times, dare I say impossible to "teach" in the traditional ways. So if we think of our scholarship (and our students' writing) as having "alternative relations to time and

space," the scavenger methodology is just one way of making those alternative relations visible. And if we take Enoch seriously that, as compositionists, we need to look to our activist communities to illuminate what might be possible in our classroom communities, then the activism of our queer communities should also inform our teaching. This inevitably means we will need to misbehave, to disobey our own disciplinary rules, to push the boundaries of what we think we already know about teaching and writing, to take on the work of teaching students "sexual literacy," as Alexander calls it.

Those of us who work in Composition and Rhetoric know that the field has a deep anxiety about its "home." Some writing programs have broken off from their English Departments, some compositionists are less respected in their more conventional English Departments; and yet the imperative that students must "learn to write" remains explicitly on the shoulders of our field. In thinking about the possible connections between work in queer theory and work in composition, I cannot help but think of Halberstam's "Reflections on Queer Studies and Queer Pedagogy" in which we find a musing on queer theory's location in academia:

The liability of not having an institutional home, of course, is that the study of sexuality is central to no single discipline or program and in fact may be taught everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. However, the advantage of the stealth approach to the study of sexuality is that it remains multidisciplinary, a promiscuous rogue in a field of focused monogamists. (362)

One can hear the same said of composition—that it is "central to no single discipline or program" and that it "may be taught everywhere and nowhere simultaneously." After all, to whom does the teaching of writing *belong*? What fields are *not* the site of composition? In the spirit of queering composition and pedagogy, it is my hope that we truly embrace our multidisciplinary, that we more fully become this "promiscuous rogue in a field of focused monogamists." The scavenger, after all, is promiscuous, licentious—perhaps even, in the best ways, irresponsible.

As we look forward to the coming decades in Composition and Rhetoric and particularly as we think about continuing to define and redefine what it means to do feminist work, I invite us to look for more contradictions, more confusion to generate more questions, more dynamic interplay, more reaching for comets outside our solar system. I want us to make more messes, to invite students to make a mess, to be completely *unsystematic* in order to put pressure on the systems we already have in place for thinking about identity *and* about writing.



Perhaps it's naïve to think that changing our patterns of thought can change the world, but, well, I think it can. When Audre Lorde explains, in several of her essays and speeches in *Sister Outsider*, that there is a distinct difference between "revolution" and "reform," I think of changing our methods, our approaches, our ways of knowing as part of the revolution—and as the only way to catalyze changes in consciousness. I've never talked to my student AJ about queer theory explicitly. I never asked him to write a paper on gay marriage, or abortion, or gun violence. But I do believe that the processes he practiced in my course could not lead him to any of the same old binary positions on these matters. I believe he'd have something very complicated to say, maybe even something contradictory. In his final reflective essay for my course, a response to my request that students discuss what they've learned about writing, AJ writes:

Maybe it seems odd, but I think the thing that's improved my writing the most is learning that the first thing I think of is probably not the most well thought out thing I've ever said. In addition, I learned that in some cases outlining an essay before I write it is like a prison and I need to leave myself room for unexpected ideas.

AJ's reflection suggests a way to understand what the scavenger methodology can teach writers. His idea that "the first thing" he thinks of is "not the most well thought out thing" is another way of expressing what it means to think beyond whatever our current patterns and systems of thought allow, or beyond whatever prescriptions might have been constructed for us as we learned to think and write critically. AJ's recognition that an outline has the potential to become "a prison" and that he needs to create the space "for unexpected ideas" signals a dramatic shift in his approach, a shift that means neither his essay nor his thoughts have to obey the logics set before him or conform to predetermined structures or clusters of belonging.

Mr. Schellhorn took us on frequent field trips. And there are some parts of field trips I hate: the bus rides, the lining up, the public bathrooms of visitor centers and rest stops. For one trip, we visit the Long Island Central Pine Barrens. I'm fascinated by the nearly 100,000 acres of plant life said to be growing on "infertile" soil. I'm obsessed with telling my parents, after the trip, "The pine barrens need to burn in brushfires to survive." The idea that sometimes something needs to burn in order to live really appeals to me. Mr. Schellhorn walks me through the woods, along the Peconic River. He tells me this is really the last part of Long Island that is truly wilderness. *Everything else is kept in order by landscapers*, he says.

What I remember perhaps most vividly about third grade was leaving Mr. Schellhorn's classroom on the last day of school, turning to look at the room

as I made my way down the hall. The place was a mess. Unsafe even. Scissors everywhere, dead insects scattered around the microscope, wet paintings hanging in the coat closet. By some measure, he was a terrible teacher—disorganized, partial to particular kinds of misfit students, prone to letting the room “get out of control,” as I heard my father put it. But it was in that room I learned the weird stuff I wrote counted for something and that writing *did* save Wilbur, even if it can’t save all of us. We can, at least, still teach it like it could.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, David Halperin’s *What Do Gay Men Want?*, Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal*, among others.
- 2 See, for example, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber’s “Plagiarism, Originality, Assemblage” in *Computers and Composition*, Lisa Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford’s “Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship” in *PMLA*, the work of Cynthia Selfe, Annette Vee, and of course many others.
- 3 I am thinking here of work by Jessica Enoch, Joy Ritchie, Shirley Wilson Logan, Jenn Fishman, Krista Ratcliffe, Gwendolyn D. Pough, Andrea A. Lunsford, Michelle Gibson, Karen Kopelson, Cheryl Glenn, Jacqueline Rhodes, Jonathan Alexander and the list could go on.
- 4 I am thinking of, and this is just a short list, texts like: Richard Miller’s *Writing at the End of the World*; Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*; Susan Griffin’s *A Chorus of Stones*; Vershawn Ashanti Young’s *You’re Average Nigga*; Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*; Deborah, Michelle Gibson and Martha Marinara’s 2000 article “Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke: Pedagogical Performances of Class, Gender and Sexuality”; Jennifer Sinor’s *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing*. These are just a few from a wide range of selections. This list could go on.
- 5 See, for interdisciplinary examples, Ruth Behar’s *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*, Emily Schnee’s “Writing the personal as research” in *Narrative Inquiry*, Sidonie Smith’s “Who’s Talking/Who’s Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, or Nancy K. Miller’s *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*, among others.
- 6 This, of course, is the basic premise of books like Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald’s *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*, Cheryl Glenn’s *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, or most recently Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch’s *Feminist*

*Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies.*

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