

Queering the Process: A Pedagogical Case Analysis of Queer Interruptions in the First-Year
Writing Classroom

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Introduction

“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

All throughout my undergraduate education, when friends and family and coworkers and acquaintances and situationships and absolute strangers learned that I was studying English, they’d say, “Oh, so you’re going to be a teacher.” It was never posed as a question, always an assumption—or an objective truth, apparently, as no one ever assumed my English degree could lead to any other profession. It was the bane of my existence, being asked about what I intended to do with my degree, about why I was pursuing my degree if my intention was not to teach, about why my degree was, for all intents and purposes, obsolete otherwise. Back then, I resented the notion that English equated to teaching, which in my mind was the antithesis of doing. *Writing* was doing, not *teaching* writing.

Now, all these years later, I wonder:

1. How did they know?
2. What the hell did I think teaching was?

The following pages are, in many ways, my attempt at articulating how the act of teaching English, of teaching writing, is all about doing. More significantly, though, it looks at how the act of teaching writing *queerly* is about doing—and *more* than doing. It’s questioning doing, disrupting doing, imagining other ways of doing. *Queering* doing if you will.

This thesis aims to explore the transformative potential of queering the writing process within the first-year writing classroom. Through a pedagogical case study centered on student writing from both semesters of my first-year writing course, *Queering the Narrative*, my analysis aims to uncover the implications of queer interventions in first-year writing instruction.

In Chapter One, I begin with a review on the literature that has most influenced my conception of a queer pedagogy of writing: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks, *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* by Stacey Waite, and *The Queer Art of Failure* by Jack Halberstam. I conclude this chapter by contextually defining “queering,” elucidating its significance as a foundational perspective and practice and arguing that this conceptual framing serves as a legitimate entry point from which first-year writing instructors can approach an array of academic angles within a multidisciplinary class focused on fostering critical inquiry through writing.

In Chapter Two and Three, I examine student writing from our first and second units—Queering the Form and Queering the Genre, respectively. Chapter Two focuses on students’ writing processes throughout their drafting of a personal narrative essay while Chapter Three

focuses on students' writing processes throughout their drafting of a critical textual analysis. Each chapter commences with a brief overview of my conceptualization and rationale behind my methods, highlighting how they reflect an explicitly *queer* pedagogy, and an explanation of the guidelines and expectations for each essay. The concluding chapter encapsulates my reflections not only on the potential impact of a queer pedagogy on these students' writing but on my own experience of teaching them, of engaging them in critical conversation about our collective and subjective comprehension of the world and assisting them in finding the language to articulate that understanding.

Chapter One: Literature Review

The works of prolific pedagogues Paulo Freire and bell hooks have been instrumental to the cultivation of critical pedagogy,¹ a philosophy of education that aligns the acts of teaching and learning with resistance, liberation, and justice. Queer pedagogy *is* critical pedagogy, and as such, these thinkers have influenced my own conception of what it means to teach writing queerly. This literature review first begins with Freire and his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, particularly “Chapter 2: The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education” and “Chapter 3: Dialogue and Conscientization.” From there, I focus on bell hooks’s 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, examining her conception of the classroom as a radical space. The third book I discuss is Stacey Waite’s *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* (2017), which explores the practical implementation of queer theories in writing instruction, drawing from her experiences teaching first-year writing courses. Finally, I turn to Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), focusing specifically on his reimagining of failure as a potential pedagogical tool; I also examine his conceptualization of a scavenger methodology as outlined in his 1998 book *Female Masculinity*.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1968

Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* stands as a foundational work in the field of critical pedagogy. Throughout, Freire critiques what he calls the “banking model of education” that dictates traditional pedagogy, arguing that it perpetuates a system wherein “education ... becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (72). Knowledge production, he continues, cannot happen in such passivity as it “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (72). As it stands, the traditional relationship between teacher and student is one of domination and submission, which only denies agency and hinders the development of critical thinking. Education, says Freire, must rather be a dialogical process that encourages collective understanding through collaboration. Freire defines this process as “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (8). It is only through this dialogue that individuals can develop critical consciousness² and become agents of their own liberation. This conscientization, or the development of an awareness of the “social, political, and economic contradictions” within the

¹ Ira Shor, critical pedagogue and disciple of Freire, offers the following definition:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (*Empowering Education*, 129)

² Critical consciousness refers to an awareness of societal inequalities and the ability to critically analyze and confront oppressive institutions and structures.

world and “taking action against the oppressive elements of reality” (123) aligns closely with the principles of a queer pedagogy, which seeks to empower the individual to question dominant narratives.

What resonates with me in Freire’s pedagogy, and what I strive to incorporate into my own teaching approach, is his perspective on the dynamic between teacher and student. Freire emphasizes that a fundamental aspect of developing a critical pedagogy is to transform this relationship into one characterized by problem-posing. This concept involves moving away from a traditional model where the teacher imparts knowledge unto students toward an interactive process where both teacher and student engage in dialogue, critical inquiry, and mutual learning. In problem-posing education, students are encouraged to actively participate in shaping their own understanding of the subject matter, challenging preconceived notions, and collectively seeking solutions to real-world problems. A queer pedagogy of writing can create opportunities for such dialogue and critical reflection, enabling students to not only critically analyze dominant narratives but to *disrupt* them. This dialogue can benefit first-year writing as students can critically examine their own lived experiences in relation to societal and systemic structures, leading to the development of a critical consciousness that emboldens them to question, and ultimately challenge, the sanctity of the narratives that have henceforth dictated their education.

Teaching to Transgress, 1994

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks, exemplifies the role educator as facilitator of conscientization by offering a profound reimagining of the classroom as a site of radical possibility. hooks advocates for a pedagogy that challenges hegemonic structures and empowers learners to question, critique, and transcend the confines of normative thought. The classroom, she posits, is the transformative space wherein students and educators alike can engage in dialogue and dissent for collective liberation. This radical pedagogy positions “education as the practice of freedom” (2). However, to do this, teachers must create the conditions for a safe and supportive classroom wherein students are *empowered* to question. For hooks, this means creating “classrooms where everyone's presence is acknowledged and everyone's participation desired” (8). Inclusivity, thus, is a prerequisite for these radical possibilities. She emphasizes the importance of educators acknowledging and affirming the identities, perspectives, and experiences of all learners to create a classroom culture that nurtures the potential for collective resistance and solidarity among students from diverse backgrounds.

At the heart of hooks’s philosophy lies a pedagogy of hope—a profound belief in the transformative potential of education to engender personal growth and catalyze societal change. Her insights challenged my preconceptions of teaching, which were informed by the banking concept of education, unveiling the radicalness inherent in teaching, a radicalness I had never once considered. Whereas I once viewed transformative potential solely through the lens of grand achievements like winning the Nobel Prize in literature, to use one outlandish example, hooks’s perspective illuminated for me how teaching itself holds the capacity for impact, shaping not just minds but lives. Indeed, many of the most influential lessons in my life were imparted by my

teachers, *especially* my English teachers. In this light, hooks's emphasis on nurturing agency, purpose, and possibility resonates with my own experiences as a student—and in her framing of teaching as a radical practice, hooks instilled in me the conviction that, as an educator, I have a moral imperative to empower students to envision and pursue this agency, purpose, and possibility. This pedagogy of hope embodies the progressive essence of queerness as articulated by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*: “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). If queerness is inherently tied to the notion of potentiality and possibility, then it aligns closely with the vision of hope hooks invokes. In queering the writing classroom, then, if teachers can facilitate dialogue that nurtures imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills and invite students to explore the failure and fluidity of language, they can empower students to envision and enact a more just and equitable world.

Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing, 2017

Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing by Stacey Waite offers a transformative exploration of queer pedagogy within the context of writing and composition studies. Through an insightful analysis of theoretical frameworks and practical applications, Waite challenges traditional educational paradigms and advocates for a pedagogy that celebrates diversity, fosters critical inquiry, and empowers students to engage with their own identities and experiences. Waite offers a plethora of examples spanning from classroom discussions to student writing from her own first-year writing course to showcase how she embodies queer pedagogy that creates space for marginal experiences by embracing uncertainty and ambiguity, and cultivating a sense of curiosity that encourages radical possibility. By embracing queer methods, creating queer-affirming spaces, and attending to intersectionality, Waite contends that teachers can create a classroom environment that not only engages with the non-normative but *learns* from it, empowering students to reconsider their own identities and experiences beyond the boundary of the hegemonic. In this way, Waite reconceptualizes a queer pedagogy of writing as a potentially incendiary force that challenges normative assumptions and “may construct the spaces through which thinking can become less automatic, spaces where students can intervene in their own thinking, spaces without which alternative ways of knowing cannot develop or emerge” (163).

Waite emphasizes the importance of creating queer-affirming spaces for learning within the writing classroom, a focus I appreciate as queer pedagogy must, first and foremost, consider the lived experiences of queers. Waite demonstrates how educators can foster connections and solidarity among students through practices such as peer feedback, group discussions, and community-building activities. By creating opportunities for students to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives, educators can create a sense of belonging and empowerment that transcends traditional notions of academic achievement. Waite emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in queer pedagogy, recognizing the complex ways in which race, class, gender, and other social identities intersect and shape students' experiences. Through inclusive curriculum design, responsive teaching practices, and critical discussions of privilege and power, Waite

exemplifies the ways in which educators can foster an environment of inclusion that creates space for marginal perspectives to be heard, valued, and legitimized as a viable lens through which scholars can study. Centering the experiences of marginalized students encourages educators to craft critical pedagogical practices that are inclusive and responsive to the needs and knowledges of all learners.

Central to *Teaching Queer* is Waite's integration of queer methods into writing instruction, which she argues can provide students with new tools for self-expression and critical inquiry. Using collaborative writing projects, multimodal compositions, and experimental forms of expression, Waite demonstrates how teachers can encourage students to play with language, exploring its fluidity, fickleness, and perhaps even its facetiousness. For example, Waite writes about how she created a framework of failure in her first-year writing course by encouraging students to "begin with failure" and "to turn [their] attention more fully to what we do not know and, even more importantly, what we cannot know not only about one another but also about ideas, identity, writing, teaching, and the world itself" (68). By positioning failure foremost, the primary objective of writing no longer centers product but process. Furthermore, by explicitly stating that there exists knowledge that we cannot know or do not have access to, she articulates the inevitability of failure. This acknowledgement that failure is an inexorable facet of knowledge, and subsequently learning, creates the conditions for the inclusive classroom that hooks contends is essential to critical pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress*.

The Queer Art of Failure, 2011

In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam speaks to the inherent queerness of failure, of failure as a particularly queer positionality or sensibility. Halberstam contends that failure occupies a central place within queerness,³ due to existing dominant narratives that equate "success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope," queers find themselves in a "failed" state, unable to authentically ingratiate into the world. This queer sensibility, Halberstam argues, "may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world," challenging conventional notions of success, productivity, and normativity (2-3). In this way, Halberstam offers a reimagining of failure that embraces failure as a subversive and liberatory mode of being. At the core of this reimagination is the positioning of failure as a potential productive disruption to prevailing narratives, paving the way for innovative avenues of resistance against the oppressive philosophies that dictate our metrics for success. For Halberstam, failure is not a lack or deficiency but rather a refusal to conform to normative standards of achievement and fulfillment. Failure thus becomes liberatory in this acknowledgement that success for many is unattainable.

This leads to Halberstam's other positioning of failure: as a form of resistance against oppressive systems and structures. Halberstam considers the implications of failure for pedagogy, arguing that traditional educational models often prioritize conformity and obedience over

³ "Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well" (3).

creativity and critical thinking. Disrupting linear modes of learning and assessment, thus, allows educators to create space for marginal perspectives to flourish. Halberstam advocates for a pedagogy that embraces uncertainty and embraces the messiness of learning, allowing students to engage in experimentation and risk-taking without fear of judgment or consequences. By reframing failure as a creative and generative force, students can reclaim agency and autonomy in the face of institutional oppression. In this manner, embracing failure enables the subversion of dominant power dynamics and hegemonic ideologies. Failure can serve as a powerful tool for social critique; it holds the potential for liberation and transformation.

What is Queer Pedagogy?

The context of queering is contentious. In the 1980s and 1990s, during the AIDS epidemic, LGBTQ+ communities began to reclaim the word “queer” as a positive signifier as opposed to a slur meant to oppress and other. *Queering*, thusly, became a tool of resistance, of subversion, of protest of the dominant culture that enforced the continued oppression of the LGBTQ+ community (Escoffier and Bérubé 13-15). It is perhaps instead more productive, then, to consider *queer* as three constituent elements: as a subject position, a politic, and an aesthetic or sensibility (Morris 228). As a subject position, queer is an orientation within the matrix of identity, signifying a digression from the normative narratives dictating gender and sexuality; as a politic, queer is an overt opposition to the normative narratives dictating gender and sexuality and all “the structures that serve to police their boundaries,” including disrupting normative narratives of race, class, and ability; and as an aesthetic or sensibility, queer is a way of “look[ing] for and enjoy[ing] potentially subversive content in cultural texts of any media” or “reading (or listening, or viewing) queerly” (Morris, Shlasko). This understanding of queer, and thus *queering*, introduces an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” to writing and composition pedagogy that has the potential to transform student (and teacher) perception of the writing process (Sedgwick 8).

Queering, subsequently, is not something that exists only in the realm of queer theory or gender and sexuality studies. bell hooks provides a definition of queer that positions “queer not as being about who you’re having sex with” *only*, “but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” In tandem with Patricia Hill Collins’s theory of the matrix of domination or oppression, a queer approach becomes almost necessary to better investigate the ideologies that create certain narratives founded on oppression. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins, “using African-American women’s experiences as a lens ... [examines] race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation as forms of oppression that work together in distinctive ways to produce a distinctive U.S. matrix of domination” (276). This matrix builds on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality as outlined in her 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” which she defines as, “a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and

exacerbate each other” (Steinmetz). Queering as a lens in any discipline, field, or study positions the marginal in the center, granting access to potential alternative perspectives founded on the idea that “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 1). A queer pedagogy of writing is unstable, tense and fractured, but in the subsequent fissures caused by this productive disruption of standardized approaches to writing, students are encouraged to explore the gaps in their knowledge—of writing *and* of the world.

As it is notoriously difficult to define, queer is nebulous quite consciously, and perhaps most significantly for pedagogy, *consequently*. In “Reflections on Queer Studies and Queer Pedagogy” Halberstam posits that queer studies is boundaryless, “not having a clear institutional home ... taught everywhere and nowhere simultaneously” (362). Queer pedagogy hence belongs to no singular academic territory of thought not only because it is ubiquitous by nature of its instability but because it has, historically, been forced to work within the margins of academia. This tension “encourages the field to be multidisciplinary,” (“Reflections” 362) unintentionally—and very intentionally—calling into question the existence of borders in the communion of knowledge. This multidisciplinary approach is crucial for the first-year writing instructor who is ‘simply’ tasked with teaching students from divergent disciplines *how to write*.

The marginal nature of queerness, however, necessitates care in the classroom to ensure the protection of both students and teachers, particularly those who identify as queer. While queer pedagogy offers “queer interventions in sets of dominant discourses—about gender, about philosophy, about sexuality, about identity, and about teaching” (Waite 126), thereby addressing the challenge of navigating unrecognized or inarticulable lived experiences, it is just as crucial to consider how to care for students who may not directly relate to these interventions. Being aware of this, taking account for this, is my way of trying to teach with love as bell hooks discussed in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*:

Teaching at a Methodist liberal arts college where professors and administrators affirmed, to greater or lesser degrees, the need for diversity and appreciation for difference on campus, I was struck by the fact that no one wanted to deal with the reality that most students were coming from homes where religious teachings had encouraged them to fear difference, to exclude rather than include voices and perspectives different from their own, to shun diversity. Attending college and being suddenly presented with a different worldview placed them in an adversarial relationship with the family values and spiritual beliefs they had learned. When no recognition and care is given the inner conflicts they face, students in these circumstances may either ruthlessly uphold the status quo (that is, cling to the way things have always been—repudiating engagement with diversity) or fall into debilitating states of apathy and depression. To avoid stress and conflict they simply shut down. Teachers who extend the care and respect that is a component of love make it possible for students to address their fears openly and to receive affirmation and support. (132-133)

How to implement care may simply mean making space for discomfort, and making it clear early that, if the ideas that we generate when thinking about, talking about, or writing about our subjects of inquiry become troublesome, we can work together to navigate the tumultuous waters of learning and unlearning.

Chapter Two: Failing

“All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

Building upon Halberstam’s reimagining of failure, I introduced a paradigm of failure as a catalyst for creative disruption in the first essay of the course. This interpretation of failure as an interruption to the writing process was prompted by my students’ initial responses to the personal narrative essay assignment⁴ in the first semester of the course. I thought it most beneficial to have students write a personal narrative essay first, allowing them the freedom to choose any topic they wished to explore. Much to my surprise, though, they were rather reluctant. Only having just graduated from high school, most students had written an abundance of personal narrative essays for college applications less than a year prior. They were tired of writing about themselves in a trifecta of contrived themes that cleverly and convincingly articulated how the adversities they overcame warranted their admission to the academy. They were tired, in other words, of the formula. Influenced by the ubiquitous five-paragraph structure that dictates standard composition studies, students often construct essays according to form first, then content. Traditional writing pedagogy often prioritizes this adherence to predetermined structures over genuine exploration and expression. The essay can become, consequently, a rather meaningless exercise to students, who begrudgingly push through for a passing grade instead of truly trying to cultivate their ideas on the page.

However, by adopting Halberstam’s perspective on failure, I aimed to challenge this normative approach, inviting students instead to *embrace* failure as an intrinsic element of the writing process. This approach, rooted in acceptance and humility, provides students with the freedom to explore alternative modes of expression without fear of consequence. By reframing failure as a productive interruption to the writing process, I sought to foster an environment wherein students felt empowered to challenge traditional notions of success and productivity in writing. Rather than relying solely on internal reflection, too, I prompted students to actively seek inspiration and insights from external sources, inspired by Halberstam’s conceptualization of the scavenger methodology as a queer methodology:

A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The 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. (*Female Masculinity* 13)

⁴ See Appendix A.

This external exploration, in tandem with a new framework of failure, was intended to disrupt the writing process by introducing potentially unexpected influences and perspectives, encouraging them to navigate the complexities of the writing process by engaging with an array of inspirations, however incongruent they may seem to academia (e.g., “scavenging” from sources like social media).

As an actively recovering perfectionist, I felt it was imperative that I avoid positioning writing as something *to perfect*. I felt it necessary, in other words, to first model “writing badly” myself to help dismantle the fear of failure that often inhibits creativity.⁵ By intentionally showcasing imperfect writing, I hoped to create a safe space for students to experiment with new writing styles and techniques without the pressure of immediate success. My willingness to embrace failure in front of them served as invitation for students to fail too, to step outside their comfort zones and explore unfamiliar territory in their own writing. In this way, I sought to foster a culture of resilience and risk-taking where students felt empowered to challenge themselves without the fear of judgement or reprisal.

In class we discussed what I, unfortunately, decided to call a "vomit" draft about a point of tension you wish to explore in your personal narrative essay. Let this draft be as slapdash and spontaneous as it can be. This is but a way for you to begin exploring the process of writing, particularly the process of writing an essay.

As I will not ask you to do anything I wouldn't do myself, here is a draft I wrote exploring my own point of tension.

Point of tension: **the progression of time**

One hour left for August. A bittersweet end to a bittersweet beginning as per usual. This is the month my grandfather was born, my mother’s father. It is also the month my mother was born, the month I was born. In reverse order, youngest to oldest: nine, eleven, twelve.

I’m now the age my mother was when she had me. I knew her when she was my age. I may not remember it—and I certainly never will, memory as fleeting as August on a moonlit night, temporal annihilation with a five-star view, but those forty-eight hours are marked in my marrow.

Somehow my blood type is my father’s. O-negative. Rarest type. Universal donor. It’s a conundrum. Blood is the language of my mother, perhaps of all mothers—and it’s a

⁵ The language UVA uses to describe first-year writing emphasizes the collective experience of learning by positioning teachers and students within the same realm of learning. To me, this language reflects Freire’s conception of problem-posing education. I attempt to reflect this ethos by using “we” throughout my syllabus to remind students that I am a part of this process, that I am learning alongside them, that teaching, especially teaching writing, requires humility and curiosity on my part as well. If writing is a process, albeit one we are interrupting, I want students to know that I am committed to being part of that process too.

shared language amongst mothers and daughters. Yet I still can't speak to my mom in Spanish.

And it's September again.

Students responded in kind with their own “vomit” drafts, writing about whatever was troubling them in that moment of intentionally writing and actively emulating—or scavenging from—my own approach. With little else to dictate their thinking beyond a point of tension or passion, students found ways to write meaningful, microcosmic narratives that showcased a curious detour from “standard” approaches to writing, as evidenced in their diagnostic writing and supported by their reflections on the five-paragraph essay. For Ayesha, a student in my spring semester class, her “vomit draft” about peeling oranges, for example, became the basis for a personal narrative exploring her intersectional identity as a queer Arab woman. She opted to scavenge a Q&A format from a blog post she had recently read as she found it to be the most accessible and effective for anchoring her essay. Consequently, each section of her narrative begins with a question that her essay aims to answer:

QUESTION: “If your clothes don't fit, do you change your body?”

QUESTION: Why ask a question that has no answer unless you want someone's tongue in your hand?

QUESTION: “If two rivers only cross paths once, do they cross at all?”

This approach seems to serve a dual function: firstly, it enriches her essay by establishing an undercurrent of motifs that resonate throughout her narrative. Secondly, it effectively partitions the narrative, preventing both the reader and the writer from feeling overwhelmed by the many intersecting themes emerging in her essay. Interestingly, in her reflection, she acknowledges that what she loves about the essay *is* its standard structure, yet ironically, letting go of it was necessary for her:

Essays have generally been a form of work that I never struggled with. I always advocated having an essay rather than an exam and consistently prioritized writing any essay over studying for an exam. While I've always been interested in the sciences, I always knew I was better at the humanities, which proved in all of my grades throughout high school. Beyond the reasoning behind this being my love for creativity and writing, the other part is loving the organization of an essay. I'm drawn to the distinct structure and clear directions, knowing exactly what information should go where. How to format the thesis, where to put supporting evidence, and the conclusion flow.

But this does not apply to this essay. Not for a personal narrative like the one I have written. I made it a goal for myself in 2024 that within my creative, non-STEM courses, I would explore myself. I would try different forms of writing and expression. Essentially, if it would give 16-year-old me a heart attack, I would do it. I experimented in other courses and my personal writing with a myriad of writing styles, such as letters, poems, and questions. Choosing to write this personal narrative in question format was terrifying,

simply. The lack of structure and freedom I had was both intriguing and terrifying. But I just wrote. I threw every thought my brain had, every experience I'd gone through, and anything I could verbalize on the paper. My essay, shortly, is an organized and tidied version of my brain. None of this is serious, to an extent, and that's why it's both messy and organized. That's who I am, as any average human, or college student, is. I'm excited to have other opportunities, both in academic and personal settings, to make myself more uncomfortable ...

As uncomfortable as the writing and revision process was, it taught me that art, especially in literary form, is meant to comfort the uncomfortable and make the comfortable uncomfortable. Moreover, my story doesn't have an end. There is no falling action or resolution. My life isn't in *The Odyssey* and will continue to change. I will continue to learn, cry, scream, and laugh. I will probably continue to have an identity crisis and wonder why I am both Arab and Queer. Going into this essay, I firmly believed I would have some resolution to my identity crisis, but now, writing this essay has made me queer my identity, in another sense. My identity is made up of my background but is also comprised of many other things that I will continue to explore, and probably write about.

Three sentiments permeate Ayesha's reflection: discomfort, fear, and failure. While these are not emotions a teacher necessarily wants to inspire in their students, particularly as those students embark on writing "experimental" personal narratives, in Ayesha embracing these "negative" states, she underwent a profound introspection that allowed her to illuminate the tense interplay between her identities. By questioning—or queering—the writing process as she understood it, she was able to "queer [her] identity, in another sense." Ayesha, in navigating this process of unlearning how to format an essay, could consider her identity in a new way—and, perhaps most significantly, to understand that her identity, like her writing, does not have to be fully composed.

Another student, Amaal, did not name the point of tension in her "vomit" draft. Instead of beginning with a narrow perspective or a "little voice," she opted to widen her scope, delving into abstract musings regarding her struggles with communication and her longing for interpersonal connection. In embracing this broader lens or "big voice," it seemed like Amaal could freely write in a stream-of-consciousness style that allowed her uninhibited train of thought to manifest on the page:

Point of Tension —

— Nonverbal or nonstop. I either never know when to shut up or how to speak at all. A mile a minute. My thoughts go a mile every minute.

Never a moment of peace in my mind, my thoughts ricocheting across my brain with no escape. Since when did speaking become harder than dreaming?

At ten years old, my mind never stilled, and my words never did either. Anyone I met was a friend. Everyone was on my side. Everyone I spoke to, I won over. But then I lost a battle, and then I lost a war. Everything changed.

I should've never changed.

If I were to remain stagnant as water, unrelenting without undulating, perhaps I could return to how I was before...

A living legacy. Sometimes I feel like I'm merely the living legacy, a shell of the person I once was. I can only carry the faded embers to creating human connection but can never fan a spark to a flame. A lost ability I am still searching to reclaim.

Amaal's subsequent personal narrative, spurred by reflection, then explores a single moment in time wherein this personal dichotomy manifested: an interaction with a Rohingya girl in Cox Bazaar with her family:

... I went to walk along the open markets under the cool shade of palm trees. Nothing besides spicy pickled mangos typically caught my eye, but I happened to notice one vendor selling citronella oil. Moments later, I realized the girl selling them didn't speak Bengali.

She didn't speak her native language nor the official language of where she lived. Instead, she spoke the Chittagong dialect. She was even better than me, someone born and raised in the district. As a Rohingya girl from a family of refugees, she was unable to learn the language of her ethnicity due to her location and unable to learn the language of her location due to her ethnicity.

Cox Bazaar was my sanctuary for the summer, but for Rohingyas, it was a refuge for generations.

I knew that most adults around me regarded Rohingyas as nuisances tarnishing Chittagong. They equated them to the mosquitoes that chased us to the beach. However, the girl I met was far from that.

I learned that she had four younger siblings. We were both eldest daughters. I learned that she couldn't read. We were both illiterate in Sanskrit alphabets. I learned that, despite her lack of formal education, she whispered oral legends at dusk to her siblings, hoping they could appreciate whatever knowledge she did have to offer. She was a storyteller, and I wanted to hear her story. I was desperate to hear more. Do you come to this market every day? How old are you? What's your name?

But my questions went unasked as I felt a tug on my arm. I whipped my head to see my grandmother eyeing the girl. I could barely utter a farewell before I was whisked away.

"What were you doing? On the floor, talking to a *kalaiya*! Improper, shameful even," Nani said.

I winced at the derogatory language. Dark-skinned girl was an insult I had heard before, but never in such a vicious context. However, dissent equaled disrespect, especially to an elder. So, I feared opening my mouth to defend the girl I had just met ...

Chatting with the Rohingya girl came more naturally to me than anything else had in a long time. I had felt isolated since stepping foot back into Bangladesh—I could never quite connect with my cousins who grew up in a bubble of private international schools bankrolled by businessmen. My working-class dad's background was too lowly for them to even bother talking to me. Perhaps I was akin to the buzzing nuisance of mosquitos in their eyes, the same way Rohingyas were hindrances to this country. I had almost completely forgotten there were people worth talking to around me. Even with the quasi-language barrier between us, she had spoken to me in such a familiar and kind manner. I knew I had to see her before the summer rains started to subside, the mosquitos began to retreat, and we returned home ... At the market, I scoured once again for the sharp scent of citronella. The damp air hampered my senses as I tried to zero into where I met her, tracing back my steps amid the bustle. But it was no use; I'd never find her.

I stared at her empty stall as regret gnawed at me overwhelmingly. Our one and only memory was one of enmity and my shameful cowardice ... Our friendship ended before it even began. I knew nothing about how much it would hurt to lose something that never existed in the first place. I wish I had even the smallest piece of remembrance to hold onto—her name, a farewell, or even, at the very least, a vial of citronella oil.

This narrative not only serves as a poignant exploration of the consequences of harmful ideologies perpetuated by dominant narratives such as xenophobia and racism, but it also offers Amaal the opportunity to deeply introspect herself. Through vivid and rich details of Cox Bazaar and its people, Amaal paints a mirrored portrait of the Rohingya girl, subtly positioning her as a reflection of her own experiences and struggles. She candidly acknowledges the feelings of shame and regret this experience caused her, but she also speaks to her transformation in thought about the sublimity of her meeting the Rohingya girl that stemmed from this pivotal moment:

Writing this was kind of like a punch in the gut. My point of contention exercise was all about how I miss being able to interact freely with others and create friendships similar to easy childhood bonds. I thought about the point when I began feeling isolated from others, and most of it started with feeling disconnected from my home country. Unlike many people who feel an innate kinship to where they were born, I strongly disliked Bangladesh for most of my life. I still cannot bring myself to stomach staying in the same room with ignorant relatives, which is such a shame because my memories of my birthplace are forever tainted by distasteful people.

Reading through the collection of *Essays for a Free Palestine: From the River to the Sea* made me wish I possessed the same intense feelings of love and devotion that these people have for their homeland. The way that they conveyed their emotions, their sadness, and their hope for Palestine is something so beautiful and admirable. Yet it's something I don't think I could ever personally emulate myself, no matter how much I want to.

From all the years and summers I've spent in Bangladesh, I only look back at my time in Cox Bazaar fondly. I took this as my chance to write about what Bangladesh is to me and how it has changed me. Meeting that girl by chance was likely the final time I would

experience the fleeting, adolescent emotion of “friendship at first sight.” I’ve thought about this girl so much in the past six years, and that was the one feeling I hope came across in this essay.

Though this essay was about an overwhelming regret, I wanted to convey that it was still a positive experience. At a time when I felt like there was nobody there for me, hearing her talk about her life brought an unexplainable amount of comfort. At least I got to know her in some capacity at all, even if barely.

While Amaal initially sought to scavenge from *Essays for a Free Palestine: From the River to the Sea*, her intent wasn't to replicate its syntax, style, or structure in her own essay. Rather, she was drawn to the writers' profound "love and devotion" for their homeland, Palestine, which prompted her to reflect on her own feelings towards Bangladesh, *her* homeland. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Amaal explores an opposing phenomenological perspective to understand her disconnect from her home country. Ultimately, she realizes she cannot mirror the same sentiments. In essence, she experiences a dual failure: she fails in her fleeting friendship with the Rohingya girl *and* falls short of nurturing similar emotions for Bangladesh as the essayists do for Palestine.

Not all “vomit” drafts directly inspired a personal narrative, however. Naomi’s essay, for example, evolved as she continued to experiment with different “tools” she scavenged. She recounts in her reflection how our class discussion on various writing techniques provided her with the necessary momentum to begin writing her personal narrative:

... I appreciated getting to discuss what tools we might use in our personal narratives in groups. This also helped me start writing. I started writing my personal narrative after this week's classes. I had been dreading the actual writing and I did not know what to say, but after hearing to write it badly in class, I decided to start. I sat down and I wrote an entire draft using one of the tools I had chosen in class. It may have been the worst thing I have ever written with the intention of turning it in. Luckily, this did not discourage me from writing something else. I started over, and my second attempt was much better. I had to throw the tool I had been using away, which I remembered us talking about in class. Thursday's class also encouraged me to read what I had written and edit. Unless I am writing for an assignment that will determine a very large portion of my grade, I do not ever reread my writing because it is uncomfortable, especially with something like a personal narrative. Because I utilized the write it badly strategy, I figured that reading my writing would be a good idea. I was able to edit it into something much better than my first draft, which I was happy about. The weight of starting was off of my shoulders, which was nice.

Despite her initial apprehension, Naomi embraced the notion of writing “badly” as a liberating tool that allowed her to overcome her trepidation to start. This willingness to experiment, even if initially unsuccessful, reflect her commitment to the scavenger methodology. Naomi’s conception of the writing process showcases the transformative potential of embracing failure and unconventional methods in writing as this shift in perspective led to a significant evolution in her essay.

Chapter Three: Metanarrative

“‘But if we can’t think ourselves,’ the Antichrist continued to the sky, trying to lick his lips, ‘that means we, ourselves, are things that can’t think themselves, and so are the proper objects for our thought; we fulfill the game’s condition, we are ourselves Other. So if we can think ourselves, we can’t; and if we can’t, we can. KA-BLAM, ... There go the old crania.’”

—David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System*

"I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means."

—Joan Didion, “Why I Write”

Writing is a tangible manifestation of students’ thought processes, offering insights into their writing process. To foster this reflective practice, in our second unit, I asked students to reflect *as* they wrote their second essay, a critical textual analysis,⁶ *in* their essay. Specifically, I encouraged them to *interrupt* their own writing as they crafted their critical textual analysis. This, I explained, would result in a metanarrative that exists *alongside* their analysis, providing a potential window into their evolving metacognitive awareness of writing and composition. By actively disrupting their writing process with these reflective asides, students can engage in real-time reflection on their own writing processes, enriching their understanding of both the process and the content.⁷

Students could choose any text to write on. If the text could be read, it could be analyzed. A student in my first semester, Jacob, wanted to write about Donald Trump, to read the former president as a text to argue that his success derives from the careful cultivation of his brand—or, in other words, his narrative. His entry point was genuine curiosity (and disbelief) about Trump’s ascent to the most powerful position in the nation. He wanted to know *how* Donald Trump succeeded, but even more so, he wanted to explore what it meant *to* succeed—and if he even agreed with that definition. While his essay effectively argues the assertion that Donald Trump’s success lies in his branding, his metanarrative, which he writes in purple italics, demonstrates an even deeper introspection into his writing process—and subsequently his *thinking* process:

Last Monday, former House of Representative Liz Cheney visited our Lessons in Leadership class, which covers the legacy of President John F. Kennedy. Led by CNN election analyst Larry Sabato, we have discussed Kennedy’s distinct leadership style, and

⁶ See Appendix B.

⁷ From *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “Action and reflection occur simultaneously. A critical analysis of reality may, however, reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate *at the present time*. Those who through reflection perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action (which should accordingly be postponed or substituted) cannot thereby be accused of inaction. Critical reflection is also action” (128).

more specifically, his showmanship as President. As Professor Sabato notes in his book *The Kennedy Half-Century*, whenever Kennedy spoke in a debate or publicly addressed the nation, “Everyone wanted to catch a glimpse of America’s first made-for-TV politician.”¹ JFK made the public image of the President as important as it is, and few politicians understand this strategy more than former President Donald Trump. Both understood the importance of directly appealing to the American people. Unfortunately, there is one key difference: President Kennedy led with rhetoric and natural charisma, while Trump led with mockery and divisiveness. Ironically, Trump was the sole focus of Liz Cheney’s lecture for our JFK class, and she was remarkably stern about his potential 2024 Presidential run. In fact, she hinted to us that she may run as an independent candidate *for the sole reason of challenging Trump’s campaign*. “There is no greater danger we face than a second term of Donald Trump,” she warned.² Cheney’s fear makes a lot of sense. The United States might re-elect a candidate who has been impeached twice, is currently in the midst of numerous criminal trials, and has polarized America unlike any other political figure in our nation’s history.³ On top of that, he also targets his political rivals without mercy, while growing a cult-like following that supports him no matter how extreme his policies become. All of this chaos begs the question: what makes Trump the way he is? How does he retain so much support even after these controversies? Perhaps the personal brand of Donald Trump is so ingrained into American culture that nothing can break it.

I really wanted to use Liz Cheney’s lecture as a segway to introduce the controversial figure that is Donald Trump. It was pretty shocking to hear how against him she is, especially since she is from the same political party. Cheney’s perspective proves how divisive Trump has become even in his own political party. This leads into my thesis statement, which tries to assess how Trump has been this successful as a politician. My answer is his brand.

¹ Larry J. Sabato, *The Kennedy Half Century* (n.p.: Bloomsbury USA, 2013).

² Liz Cheney (lecture, Minor Hall, Charlottesville, VA, October 30, 2023).

³ Politico Staff, "Tracking the Trump Criminal Cases," Politico.

I appreciate Jacob’s reflection within his metanarrative on his decision to incorporate a lecture he attended for another class into his analysis. Not only does this inclusion expertly exemplify a scavenger methodology by integrating knowledge from different academic spheres into his analysis, thereby enriching his argument, it also invites readers to consider the complex intersections that connect these fields of inquiry. This approach embodies the multidisciplinary nature of queer studies, underscoring how interdisciplinarity can offer new perspectives irrespective of their “designation” within the academy.

Jacob continues to discuss how Donald Trump’s failures have been rewritten as successes to support his narrative. He examines how Trump positions himself within the context of two monumental missteps: the January 6th insurrection and the COVID-19 pandemic:

Instead of fulfilling his duty as the incumbent President to allow for a peaceful transfer of power, Trump rallied his supporters in an effort to dismantle the foundations of our democracy. Although this was the reality of the January 6th insurrection, Trump argued the

opposite during his rally that day. He told his supporters, “We're gathered together in the heart of our nation's capital for one very, very basic and simple reason: To save our democracy.” Trump lit the fire in his supporters to act; he wielded their loyalty for his own political gain. By telling them that the future of their democracy was at stake, they were willing to do anything, which included storming into the Capitol Building. In his speech, Trump also provided a scapegoat that would fuel the anger of his supporters: the Democrats ... In yet another example of Trump shifting the blame, he said his electoral defeat was because of fraud committed by Democrats. Within the quote, he also refers to the ‘China virus’, which places blame on China for the rampage of the COVID-19 epidemic. Trump heavily used China as a means of deflecting accountability for how poorly he led America through the medical crisis. Trump has always resorted to labeling ‘the enemy’ and generating hate against their cause. While this type of rhetoric may achieve his political objectives, it almost always leads to violence against others, which is the last thing any American President should want for their country.

After finding some direction with my second paragraph, the third paragraph was pretty easy to write. So much has been debated about Trump's involvement in the January 6th insurrection. Nevertheless, by the end of this paragraph, I legitimately wondered whether Trump intended everything to go the way it did. Could January 6th just have been a major misfire? He did say in his speech for his supporters to protest peacefully, but that was in the middle of his speech. The tone certainly shifted by the end, when he was urging his followers to “fight like hell.” I'm pretty unsure about what Trump intended.

When analyzing Trump's most egregious mistakes, it appears that Trump could care less about the moral implications of each situation. Whenever Trump insults a fellow politician or uses offensive language, he does so without remorse. He also has shown to hold the unspoken rules of politics in little regard, as he did when he challenged the results of the 2020 Presidential Election. The peaceful transfer of power from one president to another has been the cornerstone of American democracy, yet Trump broke the tradition with a light conscience. His personal objectives in life seem to trump everything else. *No pun intended.*

I want to note how Jacob admits that he does not know what Trump intended. It appears that through his metanarrative Jacob can articulate his uncertainty without compromising the integrity of his argument, showcasing a nuanced approach to his thinking. This perspective often gets overlooked in argumentative or analytical essays, which tend to demand a clear and unwavering stance, neglecting the inherent gray areas where most ideas reside. Here Jacob acknowledges and accepts that he does not know, and frankly, cannot know the true intent veiled by the rhetorical curtain that encapsulates language.

Interestingly, many students chose texts aligned that with American politics. Syed, a student in my first semester, analyzed the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. Board of*

Education, arguing that this case “queered the narrative” by challenging prevailing precedents. In particular, he underscores the judges responsible for arguing and winning the case (his metanarrative highlighted in green in his essay):

The case’s actors cannot be understated. Most obviously, Chief Justice Warren played a critical role in the ruling. In fact, Warren was not on the bench when the case was initially heard, he was only appointed following a sudden death in the court. Initially, the court was divided on whether or not to overturn Plessy as there were questions regarding the legality of the court issuing an opinion that may have been better left to Congress, but Warren remained convinced and the justices followed. It is quite shocking that the changing of one justice, in essence, decided one of the most important cases in American history. Furthermore, the case was argued by the NAACP, most notably, Thurgood Marshall. Marshall would become the first African-American justice only thirteen years after the Brown case, but it was his abilities as a lawyer that helped convince many of the aging justices of not only the heard argument but also of the capabilities of African Americans even in the highest court (Donnelly). Both Warren and Marshall differed and drew away from what was expected within their positions. Warren strayed away from the traditional justices who were incapable and unsure of their own abilities to ensure progress within American society. Marshall’s own capabilities would ultimately result in his appointment to the court, under the chief justice who ruled in his most important case, becoming a Civil Rights icon and ultimately rising from the shackles of a society that tied down his own crusade against injustice.

If it sounds like high praise, then, yes, it is, I am a big fan of these two people. It’s nerdy to say, but these two are some of the people I’ve looked up to as they had the courage to perform when history called upon them. I think this also inhibits my ability to critically analyze their flaws, but in the context of this case specifically, I think they were both at their best.

What stands out in Syed’s metanarrative is his candid acknowledgement of his own bias, particularly his admiration for the judges. This recognition of bias as a potential influence on his analysis is compelling, prompting reflection on our collective inability to fully overcome inherent biases. In a way, this speaks to what bell hooks talks about in *Teaching to Transgress* when she admits that “exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion” (30). A pedagogy of engagement includes an awareness of our own biases and a commitment to ongoing self-reflection despite the discomfort it may cause. Syed’s metanarrative serves as an example of writing that, in its freedom from “standard” narrative approaches, embodies humility, which is not explicitly encouraged in analyses meant to argue a particular position.

Syed’s metanarrative reflection also demonstrates the importance of autonomy in writing as the mere act of broadening our conception of what constitutes a text enabled Syed to explore a subject that truly piqued his interest and that he could connect to the context of the course:

... I liked the freedom this paper gave me in terms of choosing a topic. I thought this was going to be a simple analysis of some literary work but with the (not so shocking) twist of being able to pick a movie or a TV show. I've had assignments like this before and they suck the joy out of the entertainment I enjoy because I was forced to critically analyze some of my favorite movies, books, music, etc. which not only revealed some of the deeper meanings within the text but also revealed the flaws it had as a form of entertainment. So, I usually dreaded these types of assignments because it was like picking one of your children to abandon. However, this paper simply picks a text, which is extremely broad and freeing. It was a bit of a struggle to narrow down what to pick, but I decided to go with something I was genuinely interested in and saw direct connections to how it impacted our world today. Additionally, I found it to reflect a period of history that, in many aspects, is repeating itself with a minority fighting for, objectively, pretty simple rights that don't really harm anyone except people's own perception of the world or whatever. I enjoyed writing and researching the topic further, especially since it's an especially important piece of history that is often glossed over as something that simply started the Civil Rights Movement.

Syed reveals a limitation in mentioning how past writing assignments attempted to alleviate the rigidity of traditional essays. While these efforts aimed to embrace alternative texts, they fell short by narrowly defining what qualifies as "unconventional," like a TV show or film. This inadvertently perpetuates restrictive parameters around writing that, in many ways, discourages students from fully engaging in the writing process.

Other students, like Sabin, have not only incorporated metanarratives into their essays but have also *analyzed* them. In his essay, Sabin reads the American dream as a text. Influenced by the writings of Audre Lorde, he proposes a "queering" of the American dream that centers counter-stories that challenge the dominant narrative keeping the mythos of the American dream alive:

A prime example of how queering the American Dream is the key is the work of the poet and activist Audre Lorde. Lorde was a black, lesbian woman who wrote about the intersection of her identities and the ways in which they shaped her experiences of America. Lorde criticizes the American Dream in her poem by drawing attention to its exclusivity and its emphasis on materialism. She argues that the American Dream is often unattainable for marginalized groups, and that it perpetuates a cycle of poverty and inequality. One way in which Lorde criticizes the American Dream is by highlighting the fact that it is often exclusionary. She writes, "I'm not a part of your American Dream / I'm not a part of your golden gleam." This suggests that the American Dream is not accessible to everyone, and that some people are excluded from it based on their race, class, gender, or other factors. Lorde also criticizes the American Dream's emphasis on materialism. She writes, "I don't want your diamonds and pearls / I don't want your fancy cars and girls." This suggests that the American Dream is often defined by material possessions, rather than by more important things such as happiness, fulfillment, and community.

In addition, Lorde argues that the American Dream is often oppressive. She writes, "I'm not a part of your American Dream / I'm not a part of your golden gleam / I'm not a part of your golden team." This suggests that the American Dream can be used to justify the oppression of marginalized groups. For example, the belief that everyone can achieve the American Dream can be used to justify the lack of social programs and safety nets that support those who are struggling. Overall, Lorde's poem is a powerful critique of the American Dream. She argues that the American Dream is often exclusionary, oppressive, and materialistic. She challenges us to rethink what the American Dream should be, and to create a more just and equitable society.

His analysis is astute and assured while still maintaining the humility of a scholar writing through their ideas. He not only critiques the traditional narrative of the American dream but also offers a nuanced exploration of alternative perspective as influenced by Audre Lorde's work. Sabin interrogates established norms, contributing to a richer and more critical conception of the American dream and its implications for other metanarratives. Interestingly, he also *continues* his analysis in his metanarrative, which he bolded in his essay:

Lorde astutely highlights a pervasive issue in today's landscape. Certain politicians, primarily leaning towards one end of the spectrum (it's not hard to guess which), consistently disavow or obstruct the establishment of social programs and safety nets. Their actions seem to align with catering to their multi-billion-dollar corporate benefactors, a trend that, while present on both sides, is notably more pronounced on one. This orchestrated suppression disproportionately burdens the average American, while these politicians prioritize the interests of corporate giants. Media outlets, such as the questionable Prager University and Daily Wire (this should be a pretty good hint), contribute to this narrative by championing the American Dream while simultaneously wielding it as a weapon against social programs designed to uplift and empower specific demographics. This Machiavellian maneuvering, although veiled in plain sight, is a reprehensible practice. Yet, it underscores the effectiveness of subversion in the grand scheme of things. Queering, as a testament to its efficacy, has the power to unveil hidden opportunities and unimagined possibilities, ultimately challenging the status quo. Lorde, in my opinion, acts as a brilliant scientist in a sense because she accurately spots an incredibly dangerous illness that our society as a whole has: Materialism. Life > Materialism. Nuff said.

Sabin's metanarrative commentary allows his reader the rewarding opportunity to hear his ideas in a raw, organic way without having to follow with evidence to support his claim. He is *telling* his reader what *he* thinks, take it or leave it, but when it comes after such a careful, considerate, and comprehensive analysis of the very text he is critiquing, the reader needs little more convincing. In other words, the way he has structured and written his argument, balancing it not only on the physical page with his interjections but in his diction with conversational and colloquial tone, establishes an authority that reflects an autonomy in his writing. This juxtaposition of personal expression and critical analysis resonates with Asao B. Inoue's critique of linguistic expectations in academia, which reflect the dominance of white language patterns that are historically entrenched in our educational institutions. Many college courses, he argues, prioritize

logocentric writing, which emphasizes neutrality, objectivity, and reason. Understanding how to write this way is undoubtedly valuable; the practice of citing sources and incorporating existing discourse into one's own contributions is *essential* to academic writing. However, allowing students to explore other possibilities demonstrates the transformative potential of language when it "fails" to uphold the habits of white language, or HOWL (Inoue). Sabin's method of combining personal reflection and scholarly analysis in his metanarrative almost disrupts the notion that academic writing must maintain a strict sense of detachment to be considered credible.

Chapter Four: Conclusion, or Queering the Narrative

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.
—Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival”

“Contentious” was a word I heard a lot when constructing my course. Folks, some of whom were fellow scholars, were always careful to preface their concern with “could,” though, as in the course *could* be contentious, which seemed to signify their *own* contention with the hypothetical contentiousness conjectured—by *them*, I should add, never by *me*, for it had never occurred to me that anything about my course could *be* contentious—and while a small seedling of unease billowed inside me for months at the prospect of causing some nebulous controversy for wanting students to *queer* the writing process, the adjective never bothered me. It was, after all, the truth. Queerness—the essence of queer, if you will—in all its formlessness, fluidity, and perhaps even facetiousness, is an almost portentous opponent to the status quo.

That was the point. It’s punk rock.

In many ways, queer pedagogy is a punk philosophy, without borders and boundaries, without constraint. I feel most at home suffering through the tumults of queer theory, perhaps because its mercurial existence encourages *unlearning*, a crucial component of any pedagogy that seeks to invite pathways to better ways of understanding and repairing the world. A queer pedagogy of writing should explicitly encourage this unlearning by employing explicitly queer methodologies. A queer pedagogy of writing ought to trouble the hegemonic assumptions of our societal, and thus personal, narratives. It should explore queering *through* writing, engaging with experimental—or otherwise non-normative—forms of expression as an actionable way to challenge and subvert, placing a particular emphasis on writing as action, reflecting on what responsibility we as writers have in challenging—*queering*—the narratives in our lives.

In teaching students to queer the writing process, no matter the context or content of the classroom, and with a certain willingness to liberate ourselves from the normative structure that dictates instruction must reflect a dynamic of power, writing can serve as means to reclaim the autonomy lost to years of traditional pedagogy. Many students entering a college writing course have been taught that writing is a *task*, one they simply must endure. Even students who enjoy writing find it to be a toil, a boulder they must push up a hill for all of eternity as punishment. I, like Camus, like to imagine Sisyphus as happy, but in a writing classroom, it is my responsibility to create the conditions for this happiness to exist in a context that has historically attempted to systemically siphon creativity from the process of writing, redefining it as a mere product. To facilitate this, I encouraged my students to remove the arbitrary and archaic rules that dictated their education hitherto by promoting intentional failure and interruption in the writing process. Soon, writing became a liberation for my students—and for me, my own tendency toward perfectionism thwarted by my desire to *practice what I was teaching*. My students even developed their own

motto—*tools, not rules*—that they employed throughout the semester, emboldened to experiment, to critically engage with their thoughts without restraint. It is my hope that, in continuing to queer the writing process, we can resist the assaults on freedom of thought to introduce radical possibilities for a better tomorrow.

Appendix A

Essay 1: The (Personal Narrative) Essay

Guidelines and Expectations

“The essay is not and has never been genre normative; this is essential to the nature of the essay.”
 - David Lazar, “Queering the Essay”

What is the essay if not queer? It is difficult to define, disruptive and deconstructive, and defies expectations time and again. The essay is boundaryless. You can and will be too.

Guidelines

Let’s make this assignment a little less abstract. By now we have read a handful of personal narrative essays that have, in their own way, queered the narrative—on the page, off the page, or as is often the case, both. In this essay, we will do the same, using an essay, or essayist, as a point of reference for a point of tension we want to question through our writing. To do this, we will employ a scavenger methodology. By emulating the style, structure, or thematic elements of an essay (or essayist) that resonates with us, we will discover unique insights into our own writerly voice.

- I. **Choose an essay or essayist:** Using either course essays or essays discovered on your own, choose an essay or essayist that compels and captivates you as a writer.
- II. **Scavenge for tools:** Echoing our turn of phrase *tools, not rules*, consider that you were on a scavenger hunt for certain categories of “tools” to bring into your essay; what kinds of tools would they be? You are welcome to go beyond the essay here and scavenge for tools in your other courses, your extracurriculars, your relationships with others, and so on. Furthermore, do not let your scavenged tools define your essay. If you find a tool you have scavenged is no longer useful to you, toss it.
- III. **Archive your ideas:** Begin exploring a point of tension in a narrative of your choosing. Analyze your point of tension by asking questions. Consider the who, what, when, and where secondary to the how and why. For example, when tracing a narrative, ask yourself *how* they are either successfully or unsuccessfully threading together a story and *why* it is either successful or unsuccessful.
- IV. **Trying, writing, failing:** The hardest part of writing, I’ve found, is simply starting. I call it perfection paralysis. I procrastinate writing because I am afraid of my writing being imperfect. Here’s the thing: writing will *always* be imperfect the first go around (and even the second, and the third, and the fourth too, and again and again and again for good measure). Let us not be ashamed or afraid to be seen trying. We all start somewhere. [Here](#) are some drafting strategies to help you if you struggle to just begin.
- V. **Revise:** Intentionally consider your peers’ feedback following our peer workshop. You may want to make some edits, or you may simply want to, in your reflection (see below),

extrapolate on how you may (or may not) incorporate this feedback in your subsequent essays.

- VI. **Reflect:** Submit a reflection (either in the same document as your essay or separately) regarding your writing process. How did the chosen essay or essayist's work influence your writing? What aspects did you scavenge and why? Assess what worked well and what could be improved. Reflect on challenges you faced and decisions you made during the writing process.

Expectations

- I. **Length:** 700-1000 words for the essay and 300-500 words for the reflection. Aim to remain within this range, neither going above nor below.
- II. **Formatting:** You may format your essay according to MLA, APA, or Chicago depending on which style you want to practice. Whichever style you choose will be the style you continue to practice throughout the semester in subsequent written work. As it is easiest for me to read, please submit your document as a 12pt serif or sans-serif font. (You can *write* it in whatever font you want, though. Sometimes switching fonts amid writing helps me when I'm in a rut. And then there's that supposed Comic Sans trick.)
- III. **Drafts:** You will submit multiple works-in-progress throughout the weeks leading up to the final essay's due date. Think of these drafts as small, low-stakes writing exercises that you can either begin to thread together to create an essay or use as a catapult for further questioning your chosen point of tension (i.e., perhaps in writing your point of tension paragraph, you discovered your thesis is not what you anticipated it would be when you began freewriting).

What are we writing to learn (or unlearn)?

- I. **Thesis:** Although we are writing a narrative essay, which does not necessarily make a claim and therefore does not have to be a firm argument or position, it is still important to have a thesis. Where and how you develop your thesis in your narrative depends upon how you choose to structure your essay, but it should be apparent by the end of your essay what the "point" is.
- II. **Structure:** We are trying to abandon the five-paragraph structure that formulated much of our early writing experiences. Yet we still need structure to ensure a coherent, comprehensible narrative. Use your chosen essay or essayist for inspiration. However, don't merely replicate; aim to adapt and integrate. It should be apparent that you have considered how your essay *essays* effectively through its organization.
- III. **Reflection:** Writing takes practice, but practice takes reflection. It should be apparent that you have spent time with your writing, reflecting on the process and how it has changed your thinking, if at all.

Appendix B

Essay 2: Critical (Textual) Analysis

Guidelines and Expectations

“Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world.”

- Paulo Freire, “The Importance of the Act of Reading”

“In the great tradition of Paris Is Burning, bring out your library cards! Because reading is what? Fundamental!”

- RuPaul Charles, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*

Guidelines

Let’s make this assignment a little less abstract. By now we have defined *text* to mean something a little less restrictive than the traditional definition of the word would allow. A text can be a book, a film, a television show, an album, and so on. It can also be something less tangible like a philosophy, a political movement, a meme, a historical artifact, and so on. As such, in this essay, **we will closely read and critically analyze a text that you think queers the narrative.** As long as it is something that can be read, as long as there is a narrative underlying its form, your text can be anything. Furthermore, **we will also closely read and critically analyze our writing process by imbedding metanarrative commentary throughout.**

Expectations (Form)

1. **Length:** 1200-1500 words. Aim to remain within this range, neither going above nor below.
2. **Formatting:** You may format your essay according to MLA, APA, or Chicago depending on which style you want to practice. As it is easiest for me to read, please submit your document as a 12pt serif or sans-serif font.
3. **Drafts:** You will write multiple works-in-progress throughout the weeks leading up to the final essay’s due date. Think of these drafts as small, low-stakes writing exercises that you can either begin to thread together to create an essay or use as a catapult for further analysis of your chosen text.

Expectations (Content)

- I. **Thoughtful and Critical Analysis:** In this essay, your primary task is to engage in a thoughtful and critical analysis of a text that queers the narrative. Thoughtful analysis requires you to carefully examine the text, understanding its core elements, such as plot, characters, setting, and themes. However, what sets this expectation apart is the emphasis on critical thinking. Beyond just summarizing the text, you are expected to scrutinize how the text disrupts or challenges traditional narrative structures. This means looking

for instances where it subverts expectations, questions societal norms, or reimagines storytelling conventions. Your analysis should go beyond the surface and delve into the deeper layers of meaning within the text. It should reveal your ability to interpret and critique the text's content and form effectively. Your critical analysis should also include a consideration of the broader context in which the text exists, addressing questions of culture, identity, or social relevance where applicable. In essence, your ability to think critically and provide a nuanced analysis is paramount in meeting this expectation.

- II. **Inquisitive Metanarrative Commentary:** The inclusion of inquisitive metanarrative commentary is a distinctive aspect of this essay. It requires you to offer insight into your writing process as you work on your analysis. This expectation encourages you to be reflective and self-aware as you write. Your metanarrative commentary should reveal the questions you asked yourself while analyzing the text, the challenges you encountered, and how your understanding evolved as you wrote. It's an opportunity to showcase your thought process, decision-making, and intellectual curiosity. For instance, you might discuss moments when you had to reconsider your interpretation, perhaps because of conflicting evidence or a new perspective that emerged during your writing process. You could also reflect on the research methods you employed, any changes in your initial thesis, or instances where you had to revise your arguments. This metanarrative commentary not only adds depth to your essay but also us to gain insights into your critical thinking abilities and your ability to adapt and refine your ideas as you write. You can include your metanarrative however you would like (e.g., italicized commentary after each paragraph, marginal commentary in your Word document, color-coded commentary interspersed throughout, etc.). Feel free to be creative, funny, and weird with it.
- III. **Meaningful and Productive Inclusion of Evidence and Sources:** In your essay, it's crucial to cite specific passages from the text that substantiate your claims. These textual references should be carefully chosen to illustrate the points you make in your analysis. Your ability to connect the text to your arguments is a key element of your essay's effectiveness. Furthermore, external sources, such as academic articles, books, or critical essays, should be integrated thoughtfully. These sources should provide additional perspectives and context for your analysis. **You must incorporate at least three sources outside of your chosen text, at least one of which must be peer-reviewed.** It's essential that your use of external sources is not only relevant but also enriches your discussion. Your essay should strike a balance between your original insights and the insights of established scholars or experts. The inclusion of these external sources should be intentional and productive, adding value to your analysis and demonstrating your ability to engage with a broader scholarly conversation while making your unique contribution.

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