We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead, there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?

—Michel Foucault

A metaphor can stretch only so far before it snaps you back to the limits of its original comparison. One metaphor that’s engaged composition teachers and proponents of multicultural education in the past decade has been Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone,” the “arts” of which have been widely discussed as paradigmatic for multicultural education.¹ The texts produced in many of our classrooms, however, are neither as distant nor as distinct as Pratt’s examples, the Andean Filipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* and Pratt’s fourth grade son’s essay, “A grate adventchin.”² The limits of the metaphor became most clearly apparent to me in a writing course focusing on queer studies issues that I taught for several years. Queer theory has much to offer to explain why the metaphor breaks down, not only in relation to sexuality but to other identifications as well. I do not intend these remarks to discount the value of Pratt’s original comments because they were catalytic for many of us working in composition. Surely, over a decade after their publication, however, we can begin to separate the metaphor
from the conditions that it revealed to us. By questioning its lexical comparisons we can in fact reach a better understanding of why the metaphor has meant so much to us. The ways it has given us to talk about our anxieties of control in increasingly multicultural classrooms tell us as much about our own limits and potentials for change as they do about our students.

**The Liberal Arts College Classroom as Zone?**

From 1992 to 2001, I taught a composition course at Oberlin College for first and second year students that was focused on lesbian, gay male, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) issues in language. Students who enrolled in the course had voluntarily identified themselves as needing further instruction in writing because Oberlin students are not required to take a writing class, although they may be urged to do so by academic advisors or instructors in another course. Until recently, there have been few introductory courses in queer studies or LGBT-related issues at Oberlin, and so this course juggled the twin purposes of introducing students to the study of sexuality/gender and giving them the opportunity to develop an understanding of writing as a mode of learning at the college level.

It became my intention in LGBT Issues in Language over the years to give students an opportunity to consider what it means to live and work in an environment that encourages them to question heteronormative practices. I invited them to do so by introducing them to texts produced locally and elsewhere that gave them histories and rhetorical analyses through which they could gain perspective on their environment. The course depended on the specific environment of Oberlin College and its reputation as a “gay mecca,” in other words our being in a school known for our large and diverse LGBT population. Sexual orientation has been an explicit category in our institutional Affirmative Action Policy since the early 1970s, and several top administrators are out lesbians or gay men. We have a progressive domestic partnership policy for faculty and staff that extends to declared same-sex partnered students the same rights to live off campus that are accorded to married students. In the past decade the annual “Drag Ball,” sponsored by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Union (a student organization that serves as an umbrella for several other organizations relating to LGBT student issues) has become the largest annual campus party and the stimulus for campus programming about transgender issues. No one can live or work in our campus community without encountering “out” issues and people, both cel-
ebrated and criticized. Heterosexual students, as well as LGBT or questioning ones, have reported that they were attracted to the institution due to that reputation because they assume such openness suggests something about other forms of social progressiveness that they value.

We have also, however, been targeted twice by the Reverend Fred Phelps, who has cultivated a national reputation for staging protests at public events such as the funeral of Matthew Shepard, by employing hate speech designed to incite violence. Lesser-known fundamentalist Christian ministers preach regularly in the local square, decrying homosexual “lifestyles” and urging members of the campus community to seek Jesus and foreswear the sins of fornication and improper gender identifications. Such expressions of homo- and transphobia are not only externally produced; verbal and physical harassment targeting LGBT people have also occurred within our community, although it is forbidden by campus policy and increasingly pursued by town law enforcement as well as college authorities.

Quite literally, Oberlin College is a zone of contact for conflicting discourses of gender and sexuality, but was the LGBT Issues in Language course what Pratt would call a contact zone? Initially she defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). Because of her interests in speech act theory and her background in literary studies, she most tellingly analyzes texts, such El primer nueva coronica y buen gobierno, as the primary sites of those “social spaces.” In other parts of the essay, such as when she describes designing the Stanford Cultures, Ideas, Values course to be a contact zone, her notion of zone becomes more a neutral matter of the time and place in which classes, discussions, and student encounters with texts occur. This use makes the metaphor of zone sound more abstract, ready to absorb different characteristics in a variety of circumstances, more portably applicable, which makes it attractive as a paradigmatic image intended to analyze a variety of actual classroom conditions. Nevertheless, it strikes me as oddly militaristic, growing up as I did during the Vietnam era, hearing reports from the “DMZ.” Labeling a course with a geographical term, as if it were a climate for gardening, also imbues it with connotations of static, ongoing characteristics oblivious to its human interactions. The zone that is Oberlin College, however, is not neutral, and the course that I taught always existed within a specific historical moment, each semester having its own
set of campus issues and crises that influenced both the students and me. *Zone*, in other words, is not the same thing as *place*, and place, and its particular moment in history, made a significant difference in the experiences that students and I had in this course.

Furthermore, Pratt’s use of the word *contact* is problematic for an LGBT-focused course in two ways. The most worrisome is the anthropological tone it gives to the whole enterprise of describing interpersonal interaction in composition classes. Its roots in postcolonial cultural criticism encourage us to reify a view of students as representatives of “cultures” acting like nation-states in which they’re consciously, fully immersed, whether or not they explicitly inform us of that. Connotations of *contact* thereby defamiliarize our students in an appealing way. They enable us to materialize and romanticize students under the illusion of asserting respect for their experiences (real or fantasized), emphasizing their differences from each other and, more seductively, from ourselves. *Contact* as a term for their exchanges has a detached, clinical tone in this context that corrals social interaction in a bland way, and Pratt’s assertions about its “joys” and “sufferings” are rarely conveyed in others’ descriptions of it.

No one, especially at the age of most of the students who took the course that I taught (17–20 years old), was a “native speaker” in the cultural codes of minority sexual orientations, although unexamined assumptions flew back and forth about who could speak authoritatively about them. At any age, sex implicates people personally—both as individuals and as members of cultures interacting with others socially. It is particularly relevant in a small liberal arts residential college where the majority of students are at a time of life when determining the meaning of sex is crucial, as is developing one’s understandings of gender, interpersonal behavioral values, and adult relations with family. No matter what their sexual orientations, students share these issues, although their comfort in directly examining them may vary widely. In discussing topics of sexuality, whenever we ask ourselves to seriously consider what it means to be the other, we are always also considering at a deeper level that we might in fact be the other, no matter what our age or identification of sexual orientation is. Straight/queer cultural boundaries are more difficult to locate than most boundaries, although studying their short histories and panicked impositions inevitably leads us to question the assumed innateness of other identities. We start to see instead how sexuality identities evolve like hybridizations, but here biological metaphors break down. Cultures are more permeable, mixable
than DNA, and reproduce even faster. Very few LGBT people grow up in areas of predominantly queer communities, or even families who understand LGBT life experiences at all. A few LGBT and heterosexual students who took the class that I taught had close relationships with out LGBT parents or relatives or family friends, but they usually had gotten to know queer culture only partially (although it has been interesting to watch the first generations of children to have been raised exclusively by out LGBT partner parents arrive at Oberlin). Perhaps an even better observation is that it’s difficult to use the metaphor of *contact* to describe interactions between people (or their texts) addressing identifications that work more like fluids or gases than solids.

My own reluctance to settle on alternative metaphors for what I nevertheless find important in Pratt’s essays occurs because when I closely examine her use of *contact*, it’s hard to tell what she intends me to “see,” unless I yield to images of business, espionage, electrical wiring, or medical euphemisms for touching bodies, none of which fit the rest of the piece. Pratt’s naming of the *arts* of the *contact zone*, and later scholars’ attempts to further describe what they might be, counteract this problem to some extent, but examinations of exactly what’s being discussed remain vague, especially for a field like composition, in which discussions of practice are so common. It is unclear exactly what qualifies as contact in a *contact zone*. The published texts that students read seem to be what Pratt most often has in mind, but compositionists quickly saw students’ own writing as examples of *contact* as well, although it is often unclear whether that is what students do for the teacher and/or for each other or whether it might pull in with it phantom readers from other discourse communities, such as the teachers of other courses. By using the term *arts* to identify more specific kinds of *contact*, Pratt summons another range of unspecified expectations for the activities possible. An “art” may be highly interactive or completely resist anything but passive reception, yet in any case tends to make us think of someone practicing something with a high degree of determination or the choice to relinquish it.

**Queer Theory Perspectives on Identity**

Even if we interpret the *contact enacted* in the *contact zone* as that of texts, as Pratt tends to do, or as ideas or external discursive influences brought in via our students’ received notions of language, as Miller is wont, the term inadequately accommodates the performative sense of identity elicited by topics of sexuality. Earlier assumptions of gay liberation
movement thinking may be accommodated by the identifications that
Pratt and others seem to assume will occur in *contact zones*, but more
recent queer theory challenges the identity images of that metaphor.
Queer theory, as it has evolved since the late 1980s, draws attention to the
fluidity and mutability of sexual orientation and gender by examining
performative identifications more directly than earlier theories based in
civil rights definitions of group identifications. Writers such as Judith
Butler, Jonathan Ned Katz, Diana Fuss, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, by
playing out poststructuralist and deconstructionist critiques, began to show
how unstable the categories of heterosexual and homosexual identity are
and the fragile polarization of gender on which they depend. They have
drawn our attention to destabilization as an enduring experience of
identity itself.

Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer cite as the "hallmarks" of the
queer theory that has resulted from the work of those writers and
others:

(1) a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied
in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced
through boundaries and binary divides; (2) the problematization of sexual
and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always
on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and know­
ing; (3) a rejection of civil-rights strategies [of early post-Stonewall gay
liberation views of identity] in favor of a politics of carnival, transgres­
sion, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist
readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics; (4) a willingness to interro­
gate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality,
and to conduct queer "readings" of ostensibly heterosexual or non­
sexualized texts. (134)

Steven Epstein finds in queer theory a more varied set of approaches,
describing a different *zone*—of coalitioning ideas, rather than individu­
als' cultural identifications:

The terrain of queerness provides a meeting point for those who come to
the critique of identity from many different directions: those who believe
that identity politics mute internal differences within the group along
racial, class, gender, or other lines of cleavage [. . .]; those who believe
that subjectivities are always multiple [. . .]; and those who are simply
suspicious of categorization as inherently constraining. The point (at
least as I read it) is not to stop studying identity formation, or even to
abandon all forms of identity politics, but rather to maintain identity and
difference in productive tension, and to rely on notions of identity and identity politics for their strategic utility while remaining vigilant against reification. (156)

His assertion that identities will be formed but will be located in constant tension is typical of the writing of many queer theorists in the 1990s who were influenced by the political activism of the brief Queer Nation movement and by critical race theories that examined the hegemonic functioning of race identifications created by specific societies. Increasingly, theorists have turned to examinations of exactly how such tensions are seen in specific performances of identifications and what they mean to the persons performing them, as well as what they say about the societies in which they're enacted.

A provocative contribution to this effort is *Female Masculinities*, in which Judith Halberstam describes ways that biologically born women have performed masculinity that is neither male nor transsexual. Her examination yields a view of gender identification rooted in queer theoretical assumptions:

If three decades of feminist theorizing about gender has thoroughly dislodged the notion that anatomy is destiny, that gender is natural, and that male and female are the only options, why do we still operate in a world that assumes that people who are not male are female, and people who are not female are male (and even that people who are not male are not people!). If gender has been so thoroughly defamiliarized, in other words, why do we not have multiple gender options, multiple gender categories, and real-life nonmale and nonfemale options for embodiment and identification? In a way, gender’s very flexibility and seeming fluidity is precisely what allows dimorphic gender to hold sway. Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male or female, in other words, gender can be imprecise and therefore multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. At the same time, because the definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender. (20)

If identity is as conditional and constructed as such performative views of it suggest—and if the social structures that set the stage for the performance are as pervasive as seen in such an example, then more is going on than contact between individuals from recognizable cultures in our classrooms. We’ve always been aware that students come to writing classes to expand their abilities to use discursive forms, and what Pratt has
alerted us to are the ways in which they pull in culturally specific discursive forms. Queer theory further complicates our view of what is happening by destabilizing the most fundamental categories along which we might start to distinguish cultural difference.

**Personae as Written and Performed Art of the Queered Zone**

Theories such as Halberstam's encourage us to see that the exchanges that take place between our students, ourselves, and the texts of a course (students' writing or assigned readings) are in more dynamic relation to each other, capable of responsive alteration of self-presentation and perceptions of others in constant flux. Harriet Malinowitz describes why performance of identities (which she calls "rhetorical knowledge") comes especially readily to LGBT students who have grown up in a homophobic culture:

> Dealing in myriad situations with issues of secrecy, concealment, and disclosure, as well as anticipating the consequences of disclosure, strategizing how to time and pitch utterances that might reveal something about themselves to various others, trying to figure out appropriate circumstances for revealing or concealing different sorts of information—all of these things have produced a form of rhetorical self-consciousness that is a very frequently utilized instrument in these students' lives. (254)

Malinowitz recognizes that other students may share similar experiences of performance, and she points out why they are particularly fraught experiences for LGBT students:

> For lesbians and gay men, the issue of self-presentation is heightened because the dual options of coming out or not present themselves numerous times every day; each time the benefits of coming out have to be weighed against the benefits of concealment, and an array of factors have to be quickly assessed in order for that decision to be made. These factors include sizing up one's audience, appraising the various ideologies at play in a situation, considering alternatives, deciding what kind and what degree of danger or reward is involved, and taking measure of one's own capacities at the moment. The notion of choice is key here, and can mainly be compared to the experience of ethnic minorities or certain gender transgressors involved in the phenomenon of "passing." Lesbians and gay men repeatedly find themselves in the position of taking this inventory and making the subsequent choice to come out or not, with all that either choice entails. Further, they not only decide how to present
information about themselves, but to themselves, since internalized homophobia usually plays a significant role even in the private thought of lesbians and gay men. (254)

Adopting self-conscious personae often becomes a way for all sorts of students to negotiate these tensions through their writing in LGBT Issues in Language. Because students inevitably learn from each other, are challenged in their writing to borrow writing strategies and standards from each other—but also because sexuality identifications are not necessarily as finalized as they may appear—many students have tried using personae in the LGBT Issues in Language class.

Pratt names several specific "literate arts" of the contact zone: "Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression" (37; elsewhere her shortlist, namely "unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique," has been more widely referenced [39]). They are all forms of discourse that students produced in LGBT Issues in Language, but they played out in ways that differ from other discussions of writing classes as contact zones. The discourse maneuver I found in student writing in LGBT Issues in Language that most often challenged both writers and readers was the assertion of purposeful ethos or personae that presupposed a homonormative world view, characters that had a complicated relation to the identity of their writers. Self-consciously manipulated personae, the written performances of fluid identifications in other words, became a highlight of the writing of students in the class, as well as being found in our examinations of already published queer perspectives on language.

One of the earliest examples of this was an essay (see Appendix I) written by Bill Barrett, the only student who chose to self-identify to his classmates as gay the second time I taught the course (in fall 1992). For the initial writing project in that class, I had asked the students to describe their earliest memories of learning a language that identified sexual orientation, and to analyze how it worked in its context, especially how it also involved constructions of race, gender, and other cultural categories. Until this paper was workshopped in the fourth week of classes, no one in the group had mentioned in the class what their sexual orientation was except for several students who identified as heterosexual by prefacing their remarks with phrases like "Maybe it's because I'm straight, but I have a lot of trouble understanding why the character in Edmund White's story did...." In his first paragraph Barrett mentions his
sexuality in passing in the sentence “It was not until late adolescence that I really began questioning a universal orientation, even though I had felt a homosexual orientation for most of my life.” By doing so he became the first person to identify as something other than heterosexual, risking hostility or being tokenized and confronting his classmates with the fact that they could no longer assume that everyone in the room was straight. While keeping his orientation identification private, Barrett had increasingly felt (he told me later) irritated at the way his classmates distanced themselves from the positions of the readings by lesbian and gay male authors we’d read. When he wrote the essay that is reproduced in Appendix 1, he decided he needed to prove that assumption wrong, and so he submitted for class discussion a text with characteristics that I’ve seen in other students’ essays and have since begun to think of as a student genre: the coming out essay.

Coming out essays assert particular identifications, and are often written from a need to say “I am here.” In them students put what they perceive to be an uncommon identity, as a member of a sexual minority, into the discursive mix of the course. In this case, Barrett subsumed that assertion of identification to the request of the paper assignment (also given in Appendix 1); he legitimated it by talking about labeling, especially in terms of gender, but showing how related sexual identification was to gender in his early school environment. He drew readers in by describing the pervasive intimidation he went through before separating the misidentifications of gender he feared from the sexual orientation he felt early but could not acknowledge until late adolescence. Barrett’s classmates received the paper well. It challenged others to see their writing as a chance to talk about something as personally important as Barrett had, to more self-consciously perform identities that might separate themselves from those performed by others in the class.

A particularly creative piece of writing that accomplished a similar assertion of identification was discussed in the fall 1999 section of the course (see Appendix 2). In response to an assignment asking students to analyze a visual code of sexuality at Oberlin College, Christie Sprowles, a first-year college student, also wanted to introduce a more LGBT-identified presence into class papers. This student writing sample, a “handbook” to help students break in their “gay-dar,” was set up as a self-administered quiz. It is a mixture of received forms: teen magazine quiz, Oberlin College student advice materials, medical warning. It’s indirect because the voice is generalized, albeit informal. But it asserts a
homonormative worldview, although incomplete. Initially, Sprowles engaged readers via an excited, celebratory tone ("Congratulations!"), but turned cautionary at the end in the "Sugeon[sic] General’s warning." Sprowles told me that this section was added to prevent the essay from being too "happy" and positing too false a sense of security. This essay also was well received by the class and set off a stream of experiments in personae that included several writings from the points of view of an imagined gay bashing homophobe, three multivocal intertwined narratives of violence, and one adoption of comic cartoon names to protest a sense of being stereotyped in a classroom argument.

Although Sprowles’ piece can be interpreted as a coming out essay, it reads differently because the voice speaking is so self-consciously performing a crafted identity, only partially fictionalized. It affects an optimism that is both assertive and parodic, and the final “warning” of the piece indicates to the reader that the speaker is aware that its homonormativity is more threatened than all the cheery exclamation points and appeals to chicness belie. This piece reads very differently from Barrett’s essay for several other reasons. One is that Sprowles had a different relationship to writing than the earlier student because Sprowles was newer to college and less confident about verbal skills in general than Barrett. But Oberlin in 1999 was also a different place in which to discuss these issues than it was in 1992. The popular culture of television and movies and music that Sprowles’ generation of college students had grown up with included more open recognition of LGBT existence, although the full range of queer culture was not well represented in it. Oberlin was freer in its discussions and more careful in its inclusions of sexual orientations than it was in 1992 (including, for example, more discussion of transgender issues that were nearly absent at the beginning of the previous decade), although it was (and still is) a far from perfect place. The course included a wider range of “texts” discussing sexual and gender identifications, as I became more convinced of the utility of developing visual literacies as a goal for the class.

The differences in historical moment, however, do not fully account for Sprowles’ choice to amalgamate received genres to this extent, although it is harder for me to imagine a student making that choice in the course of the early 1990s. Sprowles was more concerned about how the piece would be received by students in the class who were LGBT or questioning and hardly thought about what reactions heterosexual students might have. When the piece was workedhopped Sprowles was nervous about whether any individuals in the class who identified as
LGBT might mistake the parody for stereotyping and be offended, or whether they would assume that the stereotyping employed for comic purposes was the limit of Sprowles' personal appreciation of individual difference among LGBT-identifying individuals. In other words, Sprowles' homonormative persona was constructed within a very different sense of audience than Barrett's. Both students were performing identifications that they hoped would alter the course and their classmates' perceptions of the subject matter in a significant fashion. When discussing these pieces with me before workshopping, each talked to me more about what their classmates' opinions might be than about my opinion. But both students operated in a time and sense of their classmates that provided very different locations for the performance of homonormativity.

Both pieces, however, encouraged a number of their authors' classmates to try similar assertions of identification. What's striking to me is that our published readings and other texts in the course almost never inspired similar imitations. The chance to discuss the "performance" of sexual identifications with a fellow student exerted a more immediate invitation than a published article or reproduced film to engage other students so thoroughly.

**Teaching and Staying in Contact**

By the end of her essay, Pratt's *contact zone* becomes a "crossroads" where she defines "our job" as making locations such as the Stanford Cultures, Ideas, Values course "the best site for learning that it can be" (40). Scholars in writing pedagogy who have picked up Pratt's term have further tended to concretize it into an ideal that teachers should aspire to for their composition courses. It has become a label for the activity of assessing the quality of the multicultural educational experiences we're trying to provide for our students and how thoroughly we're yielding our authority to the difficult business of helping our students recognize the influence of hegemonic forces constructing their identities. I am most struck by Pratt's descriptions of how notions of appropriate teaching changed in the Stanford course when she and her colleagues explicitly set out to make it function "not like a homogeneous community or a horizontal alliance but like a contact zone" (39). Formal lecturing, for example, was affected:

The lecturer's traditional (imagined) task—unifying the world in the class's eyes by means of a monologue that rings equally coherent,
revealing, and true for all, forging an ad hoc community, homogeneous with respect to one’s own words—this task became not only impossible but anomalous and unimaginable. Instead, one had to work in the knowledge that whatever one said was going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we were neither able nor entitled to prescribe. (39)

If one is not unifying the world in the class’s eyes, however, what is one doing? How can one sit among students exchanging and exploring each other’s performances—what is the point of one’s own performances in the midst of their dramas? I think part of the appeal of Pratt’s phrase contact zone and the pedagogical implications we’ve read into it has something to do with similar anxieties about teaching in a time and place of large demographic shifts when the limitations of our dramatic “monologues” are so manifestly apparent. If we’re no longer lecturers, then perhaps we can be cartographers or participant observers that assist the subjects of our ethnographies.

Identifying as a straight ally teaching a queer studies course from day one each time I taught it, I’ve also performed constantly “in the knowledge that whatever one said was going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we were neither able nor entitled to prescribe” before I read those words. They remain a large part of what I find most helpful about Pratt’s essay. What Pratt and others who have written about the contact zone gave me was a way of thinking about what a college composition course that directly addressed issues of diversity might achieve. The contact I felt most deeply was with the hopes and ideas of other professional college instructors who are dedicated to examining the destabilizations we’re all feeling in this historical moment.

All metaphors do not necessarily serve well as paradigms, although many paradigms are at their core metaphors. Pratt has given me other terms and a list of “pedagogical arts” that continue to challenge me to extend my perceptions of the varieties of texts that composition students create to address their classmates:

- exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories), ways to move into and out of rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for commu-
nication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of cultural mediation. (40)

This enumeration of the products of the *contact zone* helps me appreciate the work my students are doing. But I’m no longer sure it helps me to view classes themselves as *contact zones* because that term focuses my attention more on the interactions of cultures than individuals. I no longer find the term so easily applied to writing courses, where we are more immediately charged with helping students develop their individual linguistic abilities, as well as their understandings of the cultures they participate in.

Queer theorists have given us extended discussions of active metaphors for expressions of identity—performance, fluidity—that help us attend to the complex experiences of individuals interacting with each other within and across cultures. In those tropes we can find a better understanding of the ways that helping our students examine their identifications inevitably calls into question our own, be they sexuality, race, gender, nationality, or that most fraught of all labeling in American life, economic class. Queer theory has helped me as an instructor not only identify my anxiety over such questions, but devise ways of helping my students think about similar difficulties they experience in trying to find what they have to contribute to the place of conflict and desire in which they find themselves at Oberlin College. The paradigms we’re going to need as composition teachers in increasingly complex multicultural groups will require equal combinations of the personally-focused insights of performativity with the more culturally-targeted notions of constructivists who have already served the profession of teaching writing.

*Oberlin College*  
*Oberlin, Ohio*

**Notes**

1. The version of Pratt’s piece that was initially discussed was published in *Profession 91*; I suspect, however, that many composition teachers have encountered it through its frequent anthologizations, most prominently in *Ways of Reading*. Some scholars, such as Phyllis van Slyck, have seen in the metaphor a way to use the conflictual nature of classes whose participants represent different cultures, nationalities, and so on. Others, notably Patricia Bizzell, see in the metaphor inspiration for a total reorganization of English studies along
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types of rhetorical problems. Richard Miller has offered a carefully considered
description of the difficulties of both, demonstrating that “[r]eimagining the
classroom as a contact zone is a potentially powerful pedagogical intervention
only so long as it involves resisting the temptation either to silence or to celebrate
the voices that seek to oppose, critique and/or parody the work of constructing
knowledge in the classroom” (407). In fact, it tends to be most thoughtfully
deployed in discussions of how professionals themselves interact, as can be seen
in both Miller’s piece and Min-Zhan Lu’s “Redefining the Literate Self: The
Politics of Critical Affirmation.”

2. See Robertson and Martin, who suggest that “culture” itself has become
an overextended metaphor pushed to cover all kinds of difference (501–03).

3. Henceforth, I will use LGBT as an acronym for Lesbian, Gay Male,
Bisexual, and Transgendered because it was a preferred inclusive generic term
at Oberlin for what is known elsewhere as “gay” or “queer” during the period
when I taught LGBT Issues in Language.

4. I did this first as an untenured, then a tenured faculty member who
identifies as a straight ally for LGBT people on campus and who has worked on
LGBT-related issues for over a decade. In 2002, I replaced the version of LGBT
Issues in Language described in this article with a new course “Queering the
Reel” aimed at the same groups of students but using as a basis for writing
assignments and readings the ever-growing collection of films explicitly ad­
dressing LGBT material.

5. Happily, course offerings in sexuality promise to rise with the advent of
Oberlin College’s Comparative American Studies Program, which began offer­
ing core courses in 2003–2004 that examine issues of power and identity
formation in the United States through an interdisciplinary approach to race,
ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Another sign of “things [finally] keep
getting better” was the hire of Meredith Raimondo in Oberlin College’s first

6. In 1993 Newsweek described Oberlin College as “considered to be a gay
mecca by many young homosexuals” (Salholz).

7. It should also be noted, however, that several local Christian and Jewish
congregations have gone out of their way to counteract such demonstrations
with ongoing programming designed to welcome out LGBT and questioning
members of the campus community into their activities and to offer LGBT­
affirming interpretations of religious traditions.

Policies, and the Rhetoric of Rights” in Wendy Hesford’s Framing Identities:
Autobiography and the Politics of Pedagogy for a feminist analysis of another
site of gender conflict at Oberlin, as well as her “Ye Are Witnesses”: Autobi­
ography and Commemorative Practices” for her analysis of one intersection of
racial issues in the same community.

9. Miller has already critiqued this limitation in Pratt’s discussion of the
contact zone from a somewhat different angle (391).
10. Which, of course, they were meant to do: Pratt contrasts contact zone views of multicultural exchanges with romantic notions of classroom “community” that were current when she coined the term contact zone (37–39) and which persist today.

11. For example, Miller describes his efforts to “reconfigure the power relations in my classroom so that more contact between the competing interpretive systems of the classroom and the worlds outside the classroom might occur and become available for discussion” (399).

12. Barrett was a fourth year student at Oberlin pursuing a five-year double-degree major in Organ Performance and English, and thus a bit unusual for the course, as he was so advanced. He took the course, however, because he was dissatisfied with his writing and had not had time to pursue improving it before that stage of his undergraduate studies. I use the names of students in this essay with their permission.

13. Sprowles at the time was a first-semester first-year student who identified as lesbian. By graduation Chris Sprowles identified publicly as transgendered and with other students in 2001 staged the first drag king show at Oberlin College. I use the name “Christie” here by which Sprowles was known in 1999 with Sprowles’ permission. I avoid gendered singular pronouns for Sprowles, however, in respect for Sprowle’s identification.

14. The student texts in Appendices 1 and 2 have been reproduced with all spelling and punctuation errors present in the originals.

Works Cited


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I will agree that sexual orientation labeling begins to occur in childhood, although the words used for such labeling are more related to gender roles and notions of femininity and masculinity than sexual orientation. As a child there was for me no such thing as sexual orientation. In my mind, boys liked girls and girls liked boys. That was that. What was an issue for me, however, was if I acted like a boy, including liking girls. I felt that I was required to act “as a boy should.” It was not until late adolescence that I really began questioning a universal heterosexual orientation, even though I had felt a homosexual orientation for most of my life. The “discovery” of different sexual orientations was very difficult for me (not to understand, but to ascribe to myself as a label other than heterosexual) because of the gender roles and notions of femininity and masculinity I had been taught in childhood, beginning with “boys like girls; girls like boys.” Naturally, these notions had been encoded and enforced by such things as expected “normative” behavior, codes of dress, and language.

By far, language was the most effective encoder and enforcer of the heterosexual culture, because it is ultimately connected to all codes of behavior. I experienced many instances where the language used by my peers connoted a disapproval of deviation from expected behavior and certain codes of dress. If I didn’t play sports with the other boys, but decided to play on the swings and sing songs with other girls, I was labeled a “sissy” or a “girl.” If I didn’t fight with a boy who annoyed me, I would be called “wimp” or “chicken.” When I wore a pair of new tennis shoes which had light blue stripes on the sides, other boys called them “girls’ shoes.” If I wore pants that went down just over the knees, I was laughed at, the implication being that these pants were not for boys. Wearing no socks was also grounds for similar names.

In all these cases language served to reinforce already established notions of femininity, masculinity, and gender roles. For me at that time, other sexual orientations did not exist. I never felt implicated as being homosexual. I conformed to most heterosexual requirements, including having girlfriends. What I did feel implicated of is femininity. This language usage taught me that I was less than “masculine” because I didn’t always do “masculine” things. This language did have a more profound effect on me later. I began to realize that the things used to judge
femininity and masculinity (behavior, dress, etc.) were superfluous. I knew there must be something more to human gender and sexuality than just acting out certain prescribed roles. When I began to hear the words "faggot" and "queer," I felt the same as I had before—implicated of femininity. But now there was also an implication of homosexuality which I had only vaguely felt or understood in my mind. One boy even mockingly asked for sexual favors, in order to humiliate me. What was it about me that created this type of language use? As far as I can tell, nothing—only a slight deviation from standard accepted codes of behavior. This deviation is plainly connoted in the word "queer." Yet, these words were also gaining a more pejorative meaning on every repetition. I could not even bring myself to say or even think those words. An intense hatred sprang from those words which frightened me and intimidated me.

That fear has been encoded into my consciousness. I don’t remember exactly when I understood and accepted the idea of homosexuality, but until a couple of years ago, it was a very negative thing for me. Accepting the feelings I had for the same sex was very difficult, especially because of the way language had been used to socialize me against homosexuality. After coming out, I recognized that language was being used in a special way. I began to understand the function of those words used in my childhood to frighten and intimidate homosexual people (or even "non-masculine" people) in order to eliminate the threatening reality of homosexuality in a predominantly heterosexual culture, which encodes its participants with the gender roles and notions of femininity and masculinity as described earlier. I began sensitizing myself to the fact that this language is very powerful and, when used for demeaning purposes, is very effective.

The fear caused by this special use of language is still not gone. Just this weekend at the Cleveland airport I encountered this use of language. I was waiting in one of the lounges to pick up a friend. Seated behind me was a man who saw a male couple walk past, evidently with their arms around each other (I didn’t see). "Kill them!" I heard him say. "Faggots! Maggots! That’s sick. They’re not normal. I’d like to kill them." My heart raced for fear, and I could not even get the breath to say how offended I was and tell him how bigoted he was. All I could do was get up, making as much noise as possible to show my outrage, and huffily move across the lounge to sit elsewhere. This episode clearly demonstrates two functions of this hate-language. First, the phrase “they’re not normal” confirms my argument that mainstream heterosexual culture creates deeply entrenched gender roles by which each person must conform to be
normal. If one doesn’t, he or she is labeled “sick” or “not normal.” Second, the language creates fear. The phrase “I’d like to kill them” combined with gritted teeth, evil eyes, and disgust creates a hostile environment of fear and the feeling that “you don’t belong. You’re not like us. We hate you.” That night, I fully realized the power of this hateful use of language. It is amazing how effectively the language works, even for someone who understands how it works and why it is used. But I think after this episode I will become more powerful in my use of language to challenge that man’s assumptions and the assumptions of heterosexual culture about gender roles and what it is to be feminine or masculine.

Appendix 2

How to Tell if Your Roommate is Gay

Christie Sprowles

Here it is! Oberlin College’s very first handbook to help people learn how to use their gay-dar. If you have been questioning whether or not someone on this campus is gay and you just don’t know how to be sure, fear not! After you read this handy book, you will be the proud holder of an active gay-dar! As you use your gay-dar, you become more and more qualified to determine whether or not someone is gay! Within only a couple of weeks you will be able to detect gay people from a mile away!

Since the gay-dar needs to be broken in before it is absolutely reliable, this handbook focuses on your roommate. Since you live with this person, you see and know much more about them than you do about some random person walking across Tapan Square. So we figure that you should have no problem determining whether or not he or she is gay. Once you have taken this very important step, your days of detecting gays has begun! Ready to get started? Good!

If your roommate is female, ask yourself these questions and check off any that apply:

- Does she have a shaved head or very short hair?
- Does she have dyed hair? Bleached?
- Does she have body piercings? (gauged earrings included)
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• Does she wear Old Spice deodorant?
• Does she put “Dirty boy, Dirty girl” or some sort of goop in her hair?
• Does her top drawer consist mainly of boy’s briefs and boxer shorts?
• Does she own at least one pair of Dr. Martins or black steel toed boots of any sort
• How many tank tops does she own?
• How many Ani Difranco posters does she own?
• How many hooded sweatshirts does she have and how often does she wear them?
• Has she told you that she plans to play on the rugby team this year?
• Does she have a closet full of button up collared shirts?
• Does she wear cargo pants? Carpenter pants?
• Does she wear a bandanna?
• Does she bite her nails? If not, does she at least keep them really short?
• Does she listen to the Indigo girls, Tori Amos, Ani Difranco, Sarah McLachlan, and Dar Williams and refer to them by their first names?
• Does she have a “tough-girl” walk or attitude?
• Does she wear sports bras? Does she wear a bra at all?
• Has she told you that she has multiple piercings that you can’t see?
• Does she wear leather studded collars and bracelets?
• Does she have any rainbow paraphernalia?
• Does she have hairy armpits?

If you checked off any or all of these characteristics, CONGRADULATIONS! Your roommate is a Dyke!

Now, if your roommate is a male ask yourself these questions and check any that apply:
• Does he pay attention to style?

• Is he clean cut?

• Does he primp and prune?

• Does he have sideburns and use gel in his hair?

• Does he appreciate women for their inner beauty?

• Does he dance well?

• Does he have perfect posture?

• Does he tuck in his T-shirts?

• Does he use his hands excessively when speaking?

• Does he have a lisp?

• Is he particularly effeminate?

• Does he call everyone "honey?"

• Does he carry all of his stuff in an over the shoulder bag instead of a back pack?

• Does he listen to Cher?

• Does he like to go to dance clubs?

• Is he very sensitive and kind to others?

• Does he wear nail polish?

• Does he like techno and dance music?

• Is he flamboyant?

• Is he tidy?

• Does he make his bed in the morning?

• Is he meticulous about hygiene?

• Have you ever seen him cry?

• Is he a good confidant?

• Does he shave his legs?
• Does he use air fresheners?
• Does he say “Fabulous?”
• Is he involved in theater?
• Does he appreciate “The Arts?”
• Does he listen to lots of female “pop” musicians? I.E. Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Whitney Houston, etc.

If you checked one or more of these boxes, CONGRATULATIONS! Your roommate is gay!

Sugeon General’s warning: This device may not be politically correct nor is it always accurate. Many people may be offended if you start using your gay-dar openly. You may want to keep what you have learned to yourself in order to avoid being beaten up.