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What does knowledge do—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?

—Eve Sedgwick

As an instructor in the English Department at the University of Florida, I have been teaching various English Composition classes such as “Writing about Special Topics,” “Writing about Literature,” and “Issues in American Literature and Culture.” Under the aegis of these sections, I have taught classes entitled “Writing about Sexual Dissidence,” “Writing about LGBT Literature,” “Un-American Activities—Exploring the Intersections between Sexual and National Identity,” and “Writing about the Ideology of the Normal.” While each class has set out to deal with specific questions concerning the politics of identity, generally speaking all the classes focus on twentieth-century U.S. literature and culture through the conceptual framework of queer and feminist theories. The classes analyze the rhetoric of heteronormativity and the ways in which narratives of heterosexism manifest themselves through larger national, social, and cultural formations. Since the teaching of argumentative writing is the ultimate goal, students analyze arguments that foreground the workings of heteronormativity, identifying the interpretive and rhetorical strategies that make them effective. In various writing assignments, students then attempt to practice these strategies, developing original arguments about the operations of various forms of institu-
tionalized oppressions in sites and spaces that exist around them—the classroom, the university, the state and, most crucially, the nation.

In this paper, I wish to think about the space of the classroom through a theoretical and pedagogical notion of “failure”—or, in other words, through what I wish to term a performative understanding of failure as a moment of pedagogy. I contextualize the analysis of pedagogical failure by situating it locally within the space of the classroom but also more generally as a rethinking of knowledge production under the aegis of the university. I do not wish to think about my class as a space of radical social change where students are “enlightened” about the realities of queer existence or learn how to empathize with marginalized subject positions (which problematically assumes that the very act of “knowing” does something or is axiomatically performative in terms of the effects that supposedly ensue). My analysis of pedagogical failure will concern itself with the teaching of Sarah Schulman’s novel *Girls, Visions and Everything* and Kimberly Pierce’s film *Boys Don’t Cry* in my composition classes. The notion of pedagogical failure becomes apposite in this context because students claimed to have “enjoyed” *Boys Don’t Cry*, while the response to Schulman’s novel was reserved and, at times, blatantly negative. While I do not wish to suggest that a more enthusiastic pedagogical response to *Girls, Visions and Everything* would contribute directly to the “protection” and betterment of queer lives, the response to the text could serve as a cognitive map for identifying (in and out of the classroom) the conditions that limit and enable more affirmative understandings of sexual citizenship. Thus, in attending to the (im)possibilities of knowledge production under the aegis of the classroom and the university, I explore how an understanding of the various institutional constraints and increasing corporatization of the university shape performative interventions in the classroom. As importantly, I am also interested in grappling with what effects the production of knowledge within the classroom could have in creating a critical citizenship that is increasingly being precluded by an understanding of the university as a profit-driven enterprise.

**The Reparative Promise of “Failure”**

One of the more recent challenges for queer theory, argues Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” is to shift from what she calls “paranoid” thinking, which merely exposes the inevitability of a structural violence enacted on the space of the queer, to a more ameliorative response that she calls “reparative thinking” (124).
Reparative responses to institutionalized oppressions are not only attuned to the material circumstances that shape queer lives, but are also invested in mapping ways to actually make these lives better. Consequently, reparative readings break with what Sedgwick calls the "unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance" that characterizes paranoid reading practices (130). An insistence on the failure of a subversive criterion then might seem ironic in an analysis that appears to be invested in reparatively mapping the possibilities of social change in and out of the classroom. I wish to argue, however, that a performative notion of "failure" might paradoxically enable a move away from what Sedgwick has called the "hermeneutics of suspicion that subtends queer theory" (125). Rather than privileging a paranoid hermeneutic of inevitable exposure as the end point of analysis, I wish to begin with such a moment of failure to think beyond the aporias of that moment. A more performative understanding of failure as a moment of pedagogy draws attention to the necessity of altering the conditions and circumstances on which performativity relies. In that sense, a performative understanding of failure could potentially become a moment of pedagogic failure—what Lauren Berlant calls a "national pedagogy of failed teaching" (245).

Undoubtedly, a performative understanding of failure that articulates or draws attention to the exclusions on which the abject is predicated potentially lapses back into the very hermeneutics of exposure that, Sedgwick argues, requires rethinking. The insistence on "failure" seems to be almost inevitably imbricated in an anticipatory paranoid practice—the idea that there can be no bad surprises or that "bad news be always already known" (130). In other words, failure seems to operate as an unfortunate but all too convenient aporia that dominates the epistemological field, precluding any alternative practices that might offer more reparative methodologies. What if, however, rather than positing "failure" as a theoretical end in itself or as a final "proof" for the necessity of paranoid thinking, it could be theorized as a point from which to begin the process of reparation? In order to move away from a hermeneutic of exposing, it might be useful then to ask what such a moment of pedagogic failure can do, or what effects could failure have in re-articulating the terms and conditions on which performativity relies. In other words, how precisely can one reconcile the idea of "failure" with questions related to the performativity of knowledge production so that it becomes possible to imagine reparative responses to the pedagogy of failure? Such an understanding of "failure" would be reparative since it does not insist on the fixity of the depressive position as an end point of analysis (the
“exposure” of systemic oppressions or the exclusions on which sexual citizenship is predicated) but considers the various resources that enable pleasure-seeking possibilities. Sedgwick remarks, “Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure . . . and because they are frankly ameliorative” (144).

While the theoretical framework of failure draws attention to the necessity of altering the material conditions on which performativity relies, the reparative motives implicit in such a task of exposure can be made explicit through analyzing the production of effects (that is, what knowledge does) that result from the failure of performative practices. If, as Judith Butler has pointed out in Bodies that Matter, a performative act is defined as an utterance that produces that which it names, this production is predicated on a reiterated acting rather than a singular act that culminates in a set of fixed effects (3). The reiterative nature of the performative act suggests that knowledge production (as distinct from a self-contained or fixed understanding of ‘knowledge’) cannot be subsumed within the matrix of fully constituted relations or effects. In other words, if the effects of performatives are theorized in terms of what Butler calls “discursive productions” that “do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance,” there is always the possibility of reworking failure in more reparative directions by identifying the constraints that “mark at once the limits of agency and its most enabling conditions” (241, 228). It is this mutual inscription of limitations with the enabling conditions of agency that marks the reparative potential of a performative understanding of failure.

What would it mean, then, to consider what I have theorized as “a more performative understanding of failure as a moment of pedagogy” in the context of actual teaching practice? In “Is there a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight,” Deborah Britzman points to the ways in which thinking of queer theory as a method or a technique enables “an interest in studying the skeletons of learning and teaching that haunt one’s responses, anxieties and categorical imperatives” (155). Rather than thinking about how students think, the more useful task, according to Britzman, is to think of “the study of limits . . . [the] problem of where thought stops” (156). Britzman’s insistence on looking at what governs the structures of intelligibility or what can and cannot be heard in a pedagogical space suggests that rather than merely drawing attention to new, alternative or positive queer representations in the classroom, it might be more politically enabling to examine the psychic and social
limits on which intelligibility and understanding depend. In terms of the differing responses to *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Girls, Visions and Everything*, the point then is not to think of pedagogical strategies that enable a more enthusiastic or inclusive response to the latter; such a process would only lead to what Judith Butler calls “inclusive representability” that would “domesticate all signs of difference” (53). The point, then, is to pedagogically negotiate the reception of Schulman’s text at the moment when knowledge and understanding meet their limits.

**The Erotics of Ignorance**

My pedagogic intent in teaching *Girls, Visions and Everything* and *Boys Don’t Cry* was to draw attention to the institutionalized and everyday traumas that sexual and gender dissidents experience through their various encounters with different manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality. I consequently felt that both texts could provide a useful platform to analyze everyday concepts, categories, and classifications involved in structuring of gender and sexuality within particular material realities. I especially thought that *Girls, Visions and Everything* would offer a crucially different understanding of what constitutes the category of trauma; unlike *Boys Don’t Cry*, “it does not produce what Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings*, has called “dead bodies or even necessarily damaged ones,” but instead focuses on more insidious traumas that its protagonist Lila experiences—for instance, through the gentrification of her neighborhood and through the lack of recognition for lesbian artists (3). I soon found, however, that my pedagogic intent in extending and rethinking what constitutes the archive of trauma only lapsed into a rather limited “compare and contrast” exercise that could not move beyond a whose-suffering-was-more-catastrophic pedagogic game. The following analysis then, does not set out merely to expose the heteronormative ideologies that structure student responses; such an approach would ultimately only serve to individualize problems that are more systemic and institutionalized. In other words, I do not wish to presume, what Judith Butler has called, a willful or voluntary subject that stands before the process of construction (7). The more useful task would be to inquire into the material and pedagogic conditions that subtend the emergence of the subject in the first place.

In order to understand the conflicting responses to the texts under consideration, it might be useful to look first at a student response to *Boys Don’t Cry* that serves to contextualize the ambiguous reception to Schulman’s text. Before I discuss any text in class, I prompt my students
with questions via e-mail and they are required to respond on-line and
discuss the reading among themselves. For this discussion, the students
were urged to engage with the question as to why Brandon’s body became
the site of such intense violence. After initiating the discussion with a
couple of questions, my interventions in this space are extremely limited,
although I use the students’ comments on-line as a platform through
which I direct the classroom discussions. While several students claimed
that the film had a tremendous impact on them in its brutal depiction of
the rape and violent killing of Brandon Teena, the following response
differed slightly in its willingness to empathize with a queer subject:

I really enjoyed Boys Don’t Cry. The film was a real eye-opener and like
the rest of you, I was shocked with how it ended. To answer the question
as to why the men were so violent, I think it was because Brandon deceived
them. I don’t want to excuse what they did, but I think that if I was in Lana’s
place, and I was seeing someone, and got intimate with them, only to find
out that it was a guy having a sexual identity crisis as a woman, I would
be really pissed off. I would be violated. Personally, I’m straight. I have
no interest in men, even if they do look like women. If I found out the hard
way, no pun intended, I would be most displeased. I think the important
part is that I would feel lied-to. Therefore I have no respect for Brandon
at all. I don’t really have the words to express how that would make me
feel. It’s not that I’m homophobic, but it’s in a sense taking control away
from me, and I like being in control. Thinking it was a woman, and then
finding out it was a man would just make me feel used, tricked, taken
advantage of. Lana was mislead, and in a sense, taken advantage of. How
was Brandon to know what her sexuality was, in advance? What if Lana
totally freaked out, and was repulsed? I think it would’ve spoken a lot
more for Brandon’s character if she had told Lana that she was a woman
before they had sex. Talk about common courtesy. So far as I am
concerned, I give as much courtesy as I’m physically able. I’m completely
in favor of full equality for these people. However, when it interferes
with my right to choose a sexual partner, there are certain things I’d
want to know about a person, going into a relationship.

While this response expresses concern at the brutal rape and killing of
Brandon Teena, his sexual escapades with Lana throughout the film while
passing as a man are seen as “deceitful.” What is particularly interesting
is the process of self-marking (“I would feel violated,” “lied to”) that
challenges the idea that dominant categories operate only through a
process of invisibility or by benefitting from the privilege of occupying
the unmarked body. In the above example, there is an ambiguous process
of identification that foregrounds the fear of being “used” and “violated,” and yet, paradoxically, there is a desire to occupy the very body that is supposedly being used and violated. Significantly, a film that draws attention to the violence with which sexual and gender dissidents are eradicated from the symbolic and made abject turns into a discussion about the rights of heterosexuals and the potential and hypothetical threats that cross-dressing queers present to unsuspecting and inculpable straight men. The “confessions” of straightness and the denial of homophobia in the above comment all serve to create an identity politics reversal—straight men become the victimized subject position, threatened by the specter of the passing queer that traumatizes the heterosexual imagination. Brandon’s body is threatening not only because it passes unnoticed but also because it is a gender queer body that demands sexual pleasure. In the above quoted comments, the straight male student occupies the subject position of Brandon’s girlfriend Lana and talks about being “tricked,” “violated,” “taken advantage of.”

This characterization of Lana as a passive object who is being deceived not only denies her any form of agency in her relationship with Brandon, but also further reiterates the politics of compulsory heterosexuality by assuming that Lana’s sexual identity is fixed and heterosexual. Consequently, the insistence that Lana is ignorant of Brandon’s queerness represents an active yet unconscious process of disavowal on the part of the student, even as it is this very process of disavowal that the film tries to complicate on numerous occasions. In various scenes, the film draws attention to Lana’s tenuous relation to the process of knowing and unknowing. Thus, while for the student Lana’s assumed ignorance becomes emblematic of Brandon’s deceitfulness, the film clearly points to the ways in which Lana eroticizes this not-knowing so that she can engage in the fantasy more fully. Lana clearly “sees” Brandon’s cleavage when making love to him, but it is this very seeing that is simultaneously foreclosed and fetishized when she recounts the sexual encounter to her friends. The very act of retelling is infused with ambiguity and incoherence: “I feel like I’m in a trance. . . . I can’t talk about it. . . . It’s too intense.” Lana completes her recollection of the moment with a make-believe conclusion—“And then we took off our clothes and went swimming.”

Lana’s “ignorance” is one among what Sedgwick calls a “plethora of ignorances” (Tendencies, 25); it is not established through an absence or a lack of knowledge but is in fact predicated on an active retelling and an imaginative reconstruction that secures the liminalities of fantasy and
pleasure. In other words, it is an ignorance that is performative. Lana’s claim that she and Brandon take their clothes off and go swimming can be seen as J.L. Austin’s example of a performative speech act—where the issuing of the utterance entails a doing of an action. In *How to do Things with Words*, Austin makes the distinction between “false” and “unhappy” performatives in attempting to define “the doctrine of Infelicities” (14). A performative is said to be “unhappy” if the action that results from the speech utterance is “vitiating by a flaw or hitch in the conduct of the ceremony” (17). Conversely, a performative is set to be “happy” when the utterance of the speech act leads to a set of purported effects that are predicated on the satisfaction of certain conditions and circumstances.

Austin further makes the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts where the former is “an act done as conforming to a convention” resulting in an action at the moment of utterance, whereas the latter is less fixed, so that the “doing” need not take place at the moment of utterance (105). Lana’s speech utterance is both a “happy” as well as an infelicitous performative since the utterance “we took our clothes off and went swimming” might not be illocutionary and literally enact a performance of that very utterance (Lana and Brandon in fact do not take their clothes off and go swimming), but it does enable Lana to maintain the phantasmic promise of her disavowal. In that sense, her utterance is more performative in Butler’s sense of the term or perlocutionary, since the subject does not bring into being that which she names at the moment of naming but secures its permanence over time through the reiterative power of the performative. All throughout the film, Lana attempts to maintain the appropriate circumstances and conditions for a smooth or happy functioning of the performative. When Brandon is in the women’s prison and begins to tell Lana that he has “girl parts and boy parts,” Lana must once again foreclose the illocutionary effects of Brandon’s confession: “That’s your business. I don’t care if you’re half monkey or half ape. I’m getting you out of here.”

Returning to the pedagogical reception of the film, the insistence on reading Lana’s agency as a result of her being “tricked” and “mislead” not only ignores the performative understanding of Lana’s “ignorance,” but also becomes a performative and pedagogical ignorance effect in itself—yet another manifestation of Sedgwick’s “plethora of ignorances.” Like Lana’s own active disavowal of biological “realness,” the assertion that Lana is deceived by Brandon becomes a necessary condition for the “enjoyment” of the film. In thinking through this student response as a moment of pedagogic ignorance or failure, the intention is not to fore-
ground the student’s lack of sophistication in thinking or the political naivete of his response. Nor do I wish to pretend that this student was subsequently enlightened by my pedagogical interventions. Instead, it is a moment within the classroom that can be used to inquire into the terms on which queerness is understood and negotiated, or to put it in a performative theoretical framework, to think about the appropriate circumstances or conditions on which performativity relies. Susanne Luhman has suggested a shift in pedagogical practice from the transmission of knowledge or the concern with what and how to teach to an understanding of “how we come to know” or how knowledge gets produced in the classroom:

The shift is one of pedagogic curiosity from what (and what) the author writes or the teacher teaches, to what the student understands, or what the reader reads. Accordingly, pedagogy shifts from transmission strategies to an inquiry into the conditions for understanding, or refusing knowledge. . . . Where is the resistance to knowledge located? Where does a text stop making sense to a student? Where does the breakdown of meaning occur? (How) can the teacher work through the refusal to learning? What is there to learn from ignorance? (148)

The “inclusive representability” that the film ultimately achieves is confirmed by the student’s response, where, despite his expression of heterosexual anxieties (the fear of being “used, tricked, taken advantage of”), he points to the fact that he “enjoyed” the film—a response shared by a majority of even those students who were not quite explicit in their expressions of violation at being “lied-to.” The response also articulates the contradictory ways in which anxiety and desire are fully embedded in one another, which, in turn points to the symbolic homosociality that is at work here. The fear (desire?) of “being tricked” and penetrated by the malleable phallus that Brandon wields is articulated through a symbolic displacement of and identification with Lana (“if I were in Lana’s place,” “if I found out the hard way”). Ultimately, it is this very experience of enjoyment that is mediated by a melancholic desire that requires the kind of violent abjection that Brandon meets at the end of the film. It is a violence that becomes necessary in order to circumvent the desire and the fear of homosociality, of finding out the “hard” way. In other words, since Brandon’s pursuit of sexual pleasure is explained through a narrative of “deceit,” his killing at the end of the film is justified as an almost inevitable and necessary effect of the attempt to escape the laws of subjectivation that are dictated by the symbolic.
The rereading of Brandon's killing as a consequence of his "deceit" is never clearly articulated by student responses, but what is clearly being constructed is a negative understanding of citizenship—the right for Brandon not to be raped and killed, but not the right for Brandon to experience sexual pleasure outside the prescribed norms of the symbolic order. In her essay "Sexual Rights," Rosalind Petchesky points to the rhetoric of human rights that sustains this negative formulation of sexual citizenship:

Why is it so much easier to assert sexual freedom in a negative rather than an affirmative, emancipatory sense; to gain consensus for the right not to be abused, exploited, raped, trafficked, or mutilated in one's body but not the right to fully enjoy one's body? Aside from tactical positions and defenses against overt homophobia, is there a larger social, political and economic context, as well as a particular ideological baggage, that makes such an approach still quite elusive in this historical moment? (124)

Petchesky's questions hint at the inadequacies of a sexual rights discourse and, by implication, a pedagogy that inadvertently limits itself to an ethics and politics of toleration by foregrounding only the need for a freedom against abuse and coercion. Consequently, the fact that the denial of pleasure cannot be conceived as a form of violence or coercion suggests the need for an epistemological leap that takes into account what Petchesky calls a more "dialectical way in which the affirmative and negative dimensions of [sexual] rights are intertwined" (131). Thus in Boys Don't Cry, the anxieties that are created by queer bodies "demanding" pleasure are circumvented through the narrative of inevitable and necessary abjection, so that Brandon cannot make any disruptive return that opens up the possibility of radical resignification. I have argued thus far that it is precisely this eradication from the symbolic that unconsciously informs the "enjoyment" and engagement with this film. Since the queer body that demands pleasure could potentially perform the enabling disruption that Butler speaks of, this possibility needs to be immediately foreclosed.

It is not without significance that students claim to have "enjoyed" Boys Don't Cry and "felt sorry for" Brandon and Lana, since this enjoyment is achieved only through a sympathetic reading of Brandon that is consistent with an ethic of toleration. The reception of Boys Don't Cry in the context of the classroom illustrates the way in which reparative possibilities get foreclosed through a process of violent abjection that
ultimately fails to matter. In the above pedagogical instance, it is not so much reparation—since the pedagogical moment ultimately disallows any form of ethical, affective, or political possibilities—but rather a precondition for violence that then poses as its result or effect. Consequently, both the film and the pedagogical practices surrounding its analysis are caught in a tautological bind—the exposing of injustice and the unveiling of violence only serve to secure sympathetic responses that re-affirm a politics of inclusive toleration, which in turn is rooted in the very injustice that performs the killing of Brandon in the first place. If the above illustration of pedagogical failure marks the limits of agency and the (im)possibilities of thinking reparatively, how, then, could a performative re-working of these limits enable more reparative understandings of sexual citizenship? In other words, since the production of knowledge operates through “discursive productions” that are not fixed in terms of the effects that are achieved, how might the reparative reworking of pedagogic failure operate in the context of the classroom?

**Failures that Matter**

Before attempting to grapple with the above question in relation to the pedagogical reception of *Girls, Visions and Everything*, I wish to consider for a moment the various social contexts that inform pedagogical practices in the classroom. In other words, how are the material conditions that surround the classroom inextricably linked to the failures within the classroom? The intent here is not to reduce pedagogical practices to an unmediated consequence of larger superstructural formations, which suggests that performative interventions in the classroom are impossible or inconceivable until more “important” work outside the classroom gets taken care of. Instead, I wish to suggest that the classroom shapes but is also shaped by a variety of historical and material relations that operate as the constitutive constraints on pedagogical practice. At a fundamental level, the increasing privatization of the university circumscribes its potential in creating the conditions for a critical citizenship or a participatory democracy. The university while ostensibly representing a space for the construction of democratic or critical citizenship has, in a post-Reaganite U.S., become what Jeffrey Williams has called “a substantial banking franchise . . . a licensed storefront for name brand corporations” concerned with the accumulation of private profit and the managerial training of students for the future of corporate America (23, 15). In this sense, the university is the ultimate emblem of what Lauren Berlant terms the “intimate public sphere” where the goal of radical
democracy and public good is subsumed by individuating motives and "efficiency" models that are inextricably linked to hegemonic forms of social power (4). Consequently, Berlant points out that sexual identity poses no threat to America as long as it aspires to privacy protection within the intimate public sphere—in other words, as long as it aspires to "iconicity or deadness" (62). According to Berlant, the nation is threatened by the perversity of "live sex acts" since these acts refuse to be ahistorical, frozen or contained within the privacy of the heterosexual bedroom (67). In the case of *Boys Don't Cry*, the entry of Brandon Teena's body into the symbolic is literally predicated on the requirements of dead citizenship. It is not without significance that the entry is recited and consolidated by the student reception of the film—a reiteration that takes place in the classroom under the aegis of the university.

The effacement of history that results from the insistence on dead citizenship in the intimate public sphere is articulated most clearly, for instance, in the attempt to end affirmative action that is ironically couched in the rhetoric of "fairness" or "excellence" in education. The idea that fundamental fairness in education is being compromised through affirmative action not only effaces the institutional biases that have historically created inequities in educational systems in the first place, but also constructs a temporal narrative that relegates racial inequities to a historical moment that has already passed. If the dissimulation of history is an essential requirement of dead citizenship within the university, Kenneth Saltman has pointed out how the rhetoric of excellence while ostensibly implying excellent working conditions or the creation of democratic social change only becomes a market metaphor that conflates democracy with private profit: "Excellence refers to an institutionalized notion of teaching deriving from the history of scientific management; a heavy reliance upon standards and a curriculum oblivious to the knowledge of different groups" (15). At the university where I am employed, for instance, narratives of excellence and skillful management were employed by the Physical Plant Division to force all custodial workers (the majority of whom were African American women) to work the night shift, presumably because the effacement of labor would result in greater levels of efficiency (supposedly for students, certainly not for the workers). The above logic is the very eradication from the symbolic that must be performed in *Boys Don't Cry* so that Brandon's body can remain "ontological" or "dead to history;" consequently, it is the very logic that is threatened by what Berlant calls "live sex acts"—represented by the figure of Lila in *Girls, Visions and Everything*, a figure who, as I will
discuss in the next section, refuses to be contained by the national logic of privacy.

While the above material conditions undeniably shape performative engagements within the classroom in crucial ways, at an even more local level, the most obvious development that affected pedagogical practices in the composition classroom was the creation of a new University Writing Program at my university that operated outside the aegis of the English Department. In June 2002, a year before the beginning of the Writing Program, an opinion piece entitled “Speaking Out: Writing Department at UF? It’s already here” appeared in the local newspaper. In a tone of heavy sarcasm, its author, Mel New, remarks, “English Departments have long since discarded the foolish notion that reading good authors helps create good writers. Today, we know better: good writing comes from having students rap in class about subjects interesting to them. Not good books, but films, comic books, TV shows, politics, sex, and all the possibilities of popular culture are the means of helping students translate their thoughts into effective, clear, and precise models of prose statement.” In the same year as the publication of this article, the university administration negotiated a deal with Follett Higher Education Group that handed over the everyday operations of the bookstore on campus to the company in response to what the President of the University of Florida explains as the “increased competition in the volatile nature of the textbook market.” The contract with Follett enabled the university to begin work on a new bookstore, the funds for which were generated through a direct capital investment from Follett in exchange for a lower commission rate; consequently, the university would receive a commission of 10.75 percent for the first 10 million units of merchandise sold at the new bookstore. The negotiations with Follett and the expansion of the bookstore on campus came a year after Business Services Administration initiated the “state-of-the-art” Textbook Adoption Policy whereby faculty were required to submit their textbook selections prior to the commencement of classes, so that students could supposedly learn about these selections in advance. In a memo to department chairs and faculty, the president of the university remarked: “Any bookstore in Gainesville can access the database to see which texts are being adopted. They can use this information to order new texts and to buy used texts to compete fairly for business. Consequently, students have multiple venues at which to shop.”

Significantly, the president couched the need for the new writing program in terms of academic excellence and the concern that students
have been incapable of developing proficient writing skills under the current system. As pointed out earlier, the idea of "excellence" often operates as a rhetorical euphemism for the imposition of a technocratic and managerial pedagogy that serves corporate rather than democratic needs. Furthermore, the rhetoric that "students just cannot write" performs the ahistorical task of effacing the larger social and ideological relations that surround the formation of the writing program. The Textbook Adoption Policy for instance, while ostensibly serving the interests of the students, also guarantees maximum profit to University Bookstores, liberal market assurances of "fair" competition and freedom of choice notwithstanding. The local feminist bookstore, where several graduate students order their textbooks, began facing a dramatic drop in textbook sales with the commencement of the new writing program. Inevitably, new graduate students in the writing program were teaching from standardized composition text books that were available at the new bookstore.

Before the writing program was a fait accompli, several graduate students in the department who were concerned about the program's implications on our own pedagogical practices attempted to articulate our concerns to the administration through the English Department. This essay's focus on the pedagogy of failure perhaps becomes most apposite in this context. Those of us who were thinking of ways to articulate some form of opposition to what we perceived as a blatant homogenization of pedagogy were ultimately unable to move beyond ontogenic questions pertaining to the origins of the program—for instance, the above mentioned corporate-academic nexus, the privatization and consequent standardization of space of the university, the de-radicalization of the writing classroom, and the nebulous "students can't write" theory.

In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," Sedgwick recounts her conversation with activist scholar Cindy Patton regarding the origins and natural history of HIV. Sedgwick wonders, for instance, about the validity of various forms of speculation regarding the virus' spread—whether it was deliberately engineered as a national conspiracy, whether it has its origins in a gay-genocidal nexus or perhaps a strategic military plan. Sedgwick quotes Patton's response to her concerns: "Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things—what would we know then that we don't already know?" (124) What is enabling about Patton's response to Sedgwick is ultimately the question that this paper has attempted to grapple with: how do the material constraints that subtend the moment of
pedagogy under the aegis of the university in turn shape performative interventions in the classroom? And more importantly, do these "failures" result in performative effects that could be directed reparatively?

**Recursive Roads to Reparative Failure**

Although I am invested in thinking about the reparative potential of pedagogic failure, I should qualify the almost inevitable slippage into a paranoid mode of "unveiling" or "exposure" that this analysis has needed to take. A performative understanding of failure that "articulates" or "draws attention" to the exclusions on which pedagogical foreclosures are predicated, potentially lapses back into the very hermeneutics of exposure against which Sedgwick warns. There can be, however, no "great paradigm shift," to borrow Sedgwick's own term, between paranoid and reparative hermeneutic practices (Epistemology 44). Sedgwick herself has pointed out that reparative readings need not and perhaps cannot replace paranoid methodologies—instead, the idea is to draw attention to the ways in which reparative practices have always already existed at the margins of paranoid readings. It is in this light that Judith Butler's performative theory of subject formation might be useful since in many ways it is inadvertently preoccupied with a performative notion of failure (in its concern with those bodies that are rendered abject or fail to matter) and also represents, in Sedgwick's critique, an illustration of a paranoid reading that is characterized by its faith in the project of exposure.

While much of Butler's work has attempted to critique epistemological certainties that are constructed by a metaphysics of substance, Sedgwick points to the ways in which Butler's insistence on demystification and exposure inadvertently lapses back into the very categories of epistemological certainty that Butler sets out to critique. I would argue, however, that Butler could be read in a way that need not render deconstructive and reparative frameworks as incommensurable. For Butler, the bodies that fail to matter constitute the "necessary outside" or "the domain of abjected bodies" that calls for a radical resignification of symbolic norms (16). The symbolic constitutes itself through a process of foreclosure and abjection—that is, by creating a domain of unintelligible bodies, "of excluded and delegitimated 'sex'" (16). Thus, the possibilities of reparative practices lie in the challenge that the excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that could potentially result in a radical resignification of the symbolic domain.
It is this potential for radical resignification, I wish to argue, that *Girls, Visions and Everything* performs through its attention to the material and historical contexts on which performativity relies. And, ultimately, it is not in spite of, but precisely because of the fact that students fail to “enjoy” the novel, that it creates the pedagogic conditions to articulate a more reparative notion of sexual citizenship that moves beyond the logic of toleration. In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Lila embodies a character who is threatening since she is able to enter the symbolic on her own terms. This symbolic entrance is not made through “radical and inclusive representability” but through a necessary refiguration of the symbolic itself (16). In the Preface to the novel, Schulman remarks,

> I have tried to assert that a lesbian can be the emblematic American, the character through whom American life is measured and evaluated. In other words I have always believed and continue to believe that lesbian life can be seen as an organic part of American Literature. By writing *Girls, Visions and Everything* in response to Jack Kerouac, I was insisting on the experience of community in the trajectory of popular American heroism and therefore asserting that fiction with primary lesbian content should be recognized as an integral part of American literature. If I could stretch to universalize to Jack Kerouac, then the dominant culture reader must be able to reciprocate by universalizing to me. (viii)

Like drag queens, who according to Schulman, “are the barometer of gay time,” Lila becomes a measuring gauge for political change—a kind of social barometer of lesbian existence (108). In the above quotation, Schulman sounds almost Butlerian in her awareness of the contingency of what is constructed as universal, and her refusal to acquiesce to that universal. Through Lila’s status as sexual and social outsider, she becomes an embodiment of the abject or the relative outside that is simultaneously internal to the system, but her inclusion within that system serves as the very platform for its disruption. In many ways, Lila is the system’s “nonthematizable necessity” that becomes “a threat to its own systemacity” (39). This is perhaps best embodied through Lila’s identification with Jack Kerouac. For Lila, “the trick was to identify with Jack Kerouac instead of the women he fucks along the way” (17). At the beginning of the novel, Jack is the embodiment of limitless possibility and the ability to act—“Everyone else just sits around, but Jack does it! No grass grows under his feet” (17). However, Lila simultaneously becomes aware of the narrative of selfish and masculine individualism that informs Jack’s “all-too-American dream of unfettered freedom” (Emery 150).
Thus, it is precisely through her identification with Kerouac that Lila is able to perform a lesbian disidentification with Jack and the larger nation. To use Butler’s terminology, Lila is not Jack’s “poor copy;” instead, her performative mimesis ultimately enables her to “displace that origin as origin” (45). Similarly, Schulman’s assertion that Lila must be seen as the emblematic American calls attention to the ways in which “Americaness” is predicated on a heteronormative logic of citizenship. Thinking of Lila as the emblematic American thus draws attention to the ways in which Lila is “inside” America only “as its necessary outside,” calling into question America’s “systematic closure and its pretension to be self-grounding” (45).

However, Lila’s disidentification with the nation and Jack Kerouac as well as her embodiment as the relative outside are not ends in themselves. At one point in the novel, Lila points out that “in the U.S. people are allowed to be political as long as they don’t actually have an effect on anything” (81). Lila does not offer any quick-fix solutions to the everyday problems of lesbian existence—instead, she recognizes the performative dimensions of social change, the fact that performative intervention is not an instant remedy, but a knowable process. Unlike Jack Kerouac or even Lila’s lover Muriel, who leaves for Madrid instead of performing at the Worst Performance Festival, Lila is “committed to here” (50). Thus, while Lila shares Jack Kerouac’s lust for life and women, she recognizes that there “were still questions that Jack never touched on. Like, what do you do once you get to know them? He never stayed around long enough for that” (137). Lila’s question regarding the performative effects of “knowing” is similar to Sedgwick’s concern—“What does knowledge do? . . . How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?” (124).

Since Lila is “committed to here,” and yet is the relative outside to “here,” she has a vantage point to move among causes and effects through what Cary Wolfe has called the “pragmatics of the outside” (57). As Schulman writes, “Sometimes Lila just let herself look at a lot of ordinary things in a magnificent way” (51). In his analysis of systems theory and the “pragmatics of the outside,” Cary Wolfe uses second-order cybernetics to point to the principle of circular causality that is characterized by what he terms a paradoxical “recursivity”—“A causes B or B causes A; thus it is always possible to observe otherwise” (57). According to systems theory, there can be no absolute to the process of observation since such an absolute is predicated on a clear distinction “between inside and outside, system and environment, mind and nature” (57). Instead,
systems theory proposes that observation is possible only through the principle of recursivity that is characterized by the "'strange loop' of paradoxical distinction" (59). Wolfe employs the image of the Mobius strip to illustrate the recursive nature of these loops that are continuous and dissolve into one another. The principle of recursivity with its insistence on the looping of categories, thus enables a move away from the linearity and "dogged, defensive narrative stiffness" (Sedgwick 147) of paranoid thinking (A always and inevitable leads to B) to make way for the more mutable and less unidirectional practice of reparation.

In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Lila's recognition that the "road is the only image of freedom that an American can understand" and finally that maybe "it didn't require a road at all" suggests a pragmatic rejection of "narrative stiffness" and an attempt to map more recursive roads toward reparative possibilities (164, 137). For instance, the novel enables reparative thinking in the manner in which it allows for a more recursive understanding of the dialectic between pleasure and violence and its effects on constructions of sexual citizenship. The novel provides a useful illustration of thinking about the "looping" of these categories, of theorizing "pleasure" and "violence" through the strange loops of the Mobius strip. Thus, the recursivity in the case of Schulman's novel is not strictly causal (in the sense that pleasure causes violence or vice versa)—instead, the edges of these distinctions, as Wolfe points out, "dissolve because the forms themselves are continuous—they reenter and loop around themselves" (58). Through this looping, Schulman is able to assert sexual freedom in a reparative sense and thus force a radical rethinking of the very separability between "pleasure" and "violence"—instead, these categories dissolve into one another through the "paradoxicality of distinction." The scenes of love-making and passionate intimacy between Lila and Emily for instance, are always haunted by threats or memories of violence:

"Don't do that," Emily would say, recoiling. "I don't mean anything against you, but please don't lick my face. When I was raped the first time he spit on my face. It's just not romantic for me, I'm sorry." It was through making love with Lila that Emily showed more and more of her scars. (124)

If in the above instance, Schulman foregrounds the ways in which the present, including the sexual and social possibilities it offers, is always threatened by the lurking presence of violence, she also draws attention
to the ways in which the history of the past inevitable structures the materiality of the present. It is through Lila’s reparative and practically political understandings of performative intervention as a historical and knowable process that these limits to agency operate as a “potentially productive crisis” through which Lila maps alternative roads to personal pleasure and political responsibility (10). For example, *Girls, Visions and Everything* offers a more reparative model to think of the ways in which the denial of pleasure can be seen as a form of trauma, and where the reparative motive of seeking pleasure itself can be understood as social affect or need. With this framework, it might be possible to complicate the violence-pleasure dichotomy (that is, Brandon has a right not to be killed but not the right to pursue pleasure) that informs the pedagogical response to *Boys Don’t Cry* by thinking of Brandon’s killing in the film as the perlocutionary effect of his right to sexual pleasure. In *Boys Don’t Cry*, Brandon’s tragedy is that in trying to “use” pleasure as a means of resisting sexual normalization, he is destroyed by the symbolic that must foreclose any possibility of resignification. *Girls, Visions and Everything*, on the other hand, through the figure of Lila draws attention to “the body which fails to submit to the law or occupies that law in a mode contrary to its dictate” (Butler 139). In other words, the various abuses and the violations against the body cannot be interrogated as separate from the demands for sexual pleasure, but need to be seen as an index of those very demands. Thus, while the critical engagement of *Boys Don’t Cry* is predicated on certain foreclosures, *Girls, Visions and Everything* complicates the possibility of such foreclosures, resulting in the ambivalent responses to the text.

At the very outset of the novel, Schulman establishes Lila as a sexual outlaw—a promiscuous dyke who “perfected that combination of softness and electricity that let her pick out the women she wanted to sleep with and then enabled her to do so” (3). Interestingly, while Lila’s sexual promiscuity is met with apprehension by several students, what is seen as even more circumspect is Lila’s complication of the very understanding of the category “lesbian” when she sleeps with her male friend, Sal Paradise. Perhaps preempting this response, Lila asserts, “What the fuck. People want to sleep with each other at different times for different reasons. It’s no secret. It doesn’t have to poison everything” (9). Unlike *Boys Don’t Cry* where identity is ultimately contained into an epistemological grounding of certainty, the figure of Lila resists the need to resort to the fixity of identity for the construction of alternative cultures and ways of thinking. Ironically, however, Lila’s resistance to dominant
culture often gets co-opted in a classroom context into the rhetoric of dynamic individualism—Lila’s damning attitude, her antagonistic attitude to the mundane banalities of work and, paradoxically, even her sexual encounters with Muriel and Emily enable textual identifications that ultimately subsume Lila’s nonconformity into the very blithe-rebel-without-a-cause mantra that Schulman in fact sets out to complicate. Lila might be a rebel, but certainly not without a cause and even if at the beginning of the novel she wants to be free but “couldn’t decide what that meant,” the rest of the novel pays careful attention to the personal and political processes through which Lila must work in order to understand what freedom means (3). There exists, then, a seemingly self-contradictory response to the novel where on the one hand Lila’s promiscuous escapades are the occasion for carping morality, and yet, on the other hand, her nonconformity gets abstracted from its specific material circumstances so that universalist identifications can be made. Such a moment of pedagogic failure, however, need not be a failure in the traditional sense of the term. Instead, such a moment of pedagogic failure marks what Butler would call the limits and enabling conditions of agency. In other words, what Girls, Visions and Everything fails to “do” in the classroom might simultaneously mark what it enables.

Once again, what might such a performative understanding of pedagogic failure mean in the context of teaching practice? I would argue that the paradoxical response to Girls, Visions and Everything renders any pedagogical strategy to make students more receptive to Lila’s character seem futile and perhaps even counterproductive. The more crucial question for consideration, however, is how the text’s refusal of “inclusive representability” and the ambivalent student responses to this refusal operate pedagogically so that the text exists as more than merely a “sad necessity of signification” (53). In other words, the question at hand should be how the text comes to matter not despite but precisely because of its rejection of inclusivity. In Bodies that Matter, Butler proposes to redefine construction as a process of materialization that is more attentive to the contingencies of temporality. It is not, as Butler points out, an act that “happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed” (9). The theoretical shift that Butler enables in relation to the materiality of sex or the body is equally apposite in thinking through the pragmatics of the classroom and the teaching of Girls, Visions and Everything.

Butler’s critique of the understanding of construction as an imprinting or an imposition can be thought of pedagogically, not merely as a Freirian critique of the banking concept of education, but also as an
attempt to rethink pedagogy as a process rather than as a singular act—a pedagogy that, as Lila might have it, is not a magical solution for agency, but a knowable process. Just as in Butler’s framework where the social does not act unilaterally on the natural, the insistence on a monolithic knowledge transmission in the classroom where meaning is “imprinted” onto students only results in an erasure of history and materiality of the pedagogical process. The attempt to account for historicity, then, would require a shift in pedagogy from merely thinking of ways to make students identify or empathize with queer characters to a more self-reflexive inquiry into the conditions and terms on which such identifications are made. As Susanne Luhman points out, such an approach, “rather than assuming the student as ignorant or lacking knowledge, inquires into, for example, how textual positions are being taken up by the reading or learning subject” (149). Thus, thinking through performative theory’s insistence on the temporality of construction, in turn allows for a rethinking of pedagogy as a process instead of a magical formula for the construction of queer-or feminist-friendly allies.

In the context of the classroom, the insistence on pedagogy as process could possibly enable the productive crisis where moments of resistance to certain forms of knowledge could be viewed as moments of pedagogic failure that enable inquiries into the limits of intelligibility both in and out of the classroom. This is partly a call for a self-reflexive pedagogy—that is, a pedagogy that is informed by the limits of pedagogy or one that draws attention to the nexus between the corporatization of the university and a negative understanding of sexual citizenship. While such knowledge production is undoubtedly rooted in a paranoid impulse of exposure, it simultaneously enables a pedagogic context where, for instance, the “enjoyment” of certain queer representations (and the rejection of others) is not seen as separate from or secondary to the very material relations students inhabit or the various physical, intellectual, and cultural encounters that condition their lives. It is such a pedagogic context of knowledge production that enables a more recursive relation between material conditions outside the classroom and the critical rethinking of these conditions that takes place within the classroom.

A notion of pedagogic failure, thus, does not only think of how the material conditions that are required for what Austin calls the “smooth” of ‘happy’ functioning of a performative” fail to be met or satisfied—even while this is a crucial pedagogical task that must inform any teaching practice that is invested in the process of critical engagement (14). Equally important, however, is an investment in the performativity of
knowledge produced in the classroom on the social environments that subtend pedagogical practice. Thus, if the pedagogic reception of Lila in Girls, Visions and Everything is mediated and constrained by the privatized logic that informs the “intimate public sphere,” it is precisely within these constraints that lie “the potentially productive crisis” (10) that is performed by the moment of pedagogical failure—what would it mean to call Lila the “emblematic American”? If Lila can “stretch” to identify to Jack Kerouac, why aren’t we able to universalize to Lila? If Lila inhabited the same material contexts that we did, what would she say about them? What would she do about them? What would Lila, for instance, say about the John’s Committee (a 1950s organization responsible for the persecution of gay and lesbian students and professors across Florida Universities)? What would Lila do about the decision by the university administration that particular semester to force all custodial workers (predominantly African-American women) to work a night shift in order to appear less “visible” and more “efficient” to the campus community?—these are some of the questions that I engage my class with in trying to perform pedagogic failure in more reparative directions. Thus, if the moment in the classroom where knowledge meets its limits inaugurates the self-reflexive inquiry into terms of (un)intelligibility, it is precisely such a moment that marks the reparative potential of pedagogic failure.

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Works Cited


