Reprosexuality, Queer Desire, and Critical Pedagogy: A Response to Hyoejin Yoon

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Hyoejin Yoon offers a provocative analysis of critical pedagogy’s discursive deployment of affect in “Affecting the Transformative Intellectual: Questioning ‘Noble’ Sentiments in Critical Pedagogy and Composition.” Mapping the various trajectories of affect (purging student’s affective investments in racism, chastising teachers not invested in the critical pedagogy project, disciplining “soft” emotions through public shaming of those who fail to identify with the transformative intellectual), Yoon illustrates how affect serves to interpellate “would be transformative intellectuals” into self-styling technologies through which they are expected to manage their emotional investments. Through this management, she demonstrates how the “noble” affective dimensions of critical pedagogy discourse reconstructs a whitely masculinist subject at the center of transformative teaching and learning. Yoon asks us to question our investment in the “noble” emotions deployed in the name of democracy and citizenship and how these tropes occlude the fraught nature of emotions and desires elicited by critical pedagogy discourse, particularly for those who find themselves on the outer edges of this discourse.

What most intrigues me about Yoon’s analysis of critical pedagogy is how the management, or regulation, of emotion and desire operates through a heteronormative frame. The invocation of George Campbell and Aristotle to map the workings of desire and affect provides insight into the powerful rhetorical effects of pathos; I would like to extend Yoon’s discussion into the arena of queer theory. Following Michael Warner, I use the term “queer” because it is “a term defined against ‘normal’ and generated precisely in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence” (16). Indeed, violence is central to Yoon’s analy-
sis—violence enacted in the name of the morality of democracy, citizenship, and freedom.

I would like to suggest the seductive force of affective dimensions of critical pedagogy discourse comes about partly through their hidden nature and partly the heteronormative frame through which they are deployed—a frame that centers on reproduction and generational transmission. "Queer theory," maintain Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis, "asks not that pedagogy become sexed, but that it excavate and interpret the way in which it is explicitly heterosexed" (199). Sexual desire weaves itself through the discourse of critical pedagogy. As Yoon points out, in some significant ways, the work of the transformative intellectual is to arouse "would be transformative intellectuals" through the notion that they, too, can become sexual agents arousing students' consciousness. Within a heteronormative desiring framework, our work as critical pedagogues is made meaningful through "a narrative of generational succession," of passing on our identities, values, and morality to the next generation, thereby reproducing the transformative intellectual. Warner describes this as reprosexuality, or "the interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity. . . . Reprosexuality involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission" (9).

Those who refuse to engage in reprosexuality—that is, those who question the righteousness of the critical pedagogy project, such as Ellsworth or Yoon—are "shamed"; they are rendered "perverse" subjects who have failed to internalize the "euphoria of possibility" (Yoon 724). Queers and other "perverse" subjects have always been constructed through discourses of morality. Not surprisingly, the "proper relation to the self" conveyed by the reprosexuality of critical pedagogy is deployed through a peculiarly (race/gender/sexual) privileged relationship to the morality of Western democracy and citizenship. Critical pedagogy discourse does not diverge from this normalizing invocation of morality; it capitalizes upon its terror-inducing effects. Those who demon-
strate "bad faith" in the ideals of critical pedagogy are rendered "illegitimate" within the kinship relations established through heteropatriarchy—cast out of a tight-knit family of believers in democracy, freedom, and citizenship. The struggles of inauthentic daughters are silenced and suppressed through public shaming and dismissal. We might safely surmise that receiving admiration and approval of the "father figure" are not necessarily sought after by queer offspring of the preeminent critical pedagogues. Nonetheless, public shaming operates within a nexus of power/desire/knowledge that, as Yoon so eloquently points out, disciplines "would be transformative intellectuals." Following a Foucaultian framework, Judith Butler contends, "Knowledge and power are not finally separable but work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking the world" (27). Ursula Kelly demonstrates how desire is also interwoven with "criteria for thinking the world:"

The intersection of desire and power, within the wide-spread frameworks of capitalist economy, compulsory heterosexuality, White supremacy, and male privilege, often produces desire that advantages or maintains those frameworks. The promise of pleasure at the root of such hegemony is the persuasive means by which the Other is sustained by the cultural gaze from without and within. (105)

The "promise of pleasure" intertwined with knowledge and power seductively pulls the "would be transformative intellectual" into a binary logic in which "others" (uncritical students, "bad teachers," inauthentic daughters of the transformative intellectual) are constructed over and against the "nobility" of the transformative intellectual. Far from undermining the violence of normalization, critical pedagogy discourse deploys pleasurable possibilities of reproducing the terror of a whitely, masculinist ethos framed around "hard" inflexible emotions and arrogant righteousness.

Turning our attention more specifically to literacy, Connie Monson and Jacqueline Rhodes examine the workings of subjectivity and desire in the composition classroom and argue that
"liberation as an educational goal is at odds with the occulted workings of first-year composition" (79). Outlining conflicts between the regulatory mechanisms of "literacy" and composition studies' invocations of liberatory pedagogies, they maintain that student-writers as well as teachers are caught between and among contending desires—institutionalized desires to shape behavior and character and student desires "for knowledge and status, but always already susceptible (complicit, resistant) to the demands of the institution" (84). These contending desires are set within a Foucaultian notion of desire as central to any pedagogical project where desire is transformed into discourse and self-knowledge. Similarly, Yoon helps us begin unraveling contending desires that converge on "would be transformative intellectuals"—the desire of "would be transformative intellectuals" to know, the desire to engage and cultivate students' desires, and the institutionalized desire of critical pedagogy discourse to shape character and behavior. Perhaps most significant in her analysis of affect and desire are the institutionalized "self-styling techniques" that are intended to shape the proper ethos and pathos of "would be transformative intellectuals"—a disciplining technique that leaves little room in the discourse of critical pedagogy for a conflictual relationship to desire. The temptation, perhaps, is to focus on these "self-styling techniques" and attempt to purge desire from discourse (which is impossible). However, I do not believe Yoon is calling for such a simplified understanding of desire and affect. Instead, I believe she is asking us to interrupt the normalizing effects of critical pedagogy that operate within binaries of "proper" and "perverse" desires and to construct imaginative and flexible responses that work within contending desires. Indeed, Monson and Rhodes contend that

We cannot even "liberate" ourselves from multiplicitous desire running through the site of composition studies—nor should we put our energy into such a project. However, if we, as somewhat complicitous, somewhat radical, always desirous, always lacking "literacy workers" (teachers/scholars/tutors/students) seek ourselves to articulate positionality, we
move toward an understanding of a performative, queer pedagogy. . . . The multiple locations of the conflicts should be—need to be, will be in such a pedagogy—exploded, inhabited, written into, written about. (88)

Such a relationship to desire might “queer” those morally-laden invocations to Western democracy and citizenship deployed in the construction of “bad” teachers and “transformative” teachers that Yoon interrogates. Eve Sedgwick proposes, then, that “‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). Non-normative subjects who “trouble” these ideals at the heart of critical pedagogy discourse are often perceived as threats that must be silenced and shamed. I would like to suggest, in concert with Yoon, however, that such conflicts can be “inhabited, written into, written about” differently.

Yoon provides an entry point through her analysis of the affective dimensions of “model minority” discourse and how identification, discipline, and exclusion operate in parallel ways with critical pedagogy discourse. Such an example reveals how moral imperatives invoking Western democratic ideals intertwine with the project of nation-building—a project that must be interrogated for the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are mapped onto notions of “good citizenship.” Yoon’s example also illustrates the kinds of “disidenfications” minoritarian subjects engage through engaging ambivalent and contradictory affects and desires:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (Muñoz 31)
Disidentification problematizes identity/identification and requires a contradictory stance toward critical pedagogy—leading to neither easy “consumption” nor rejection but instead to a field of force that is productive. Such a stance requires that we interrogate how citizenship, democracy, and nation-building have been encoded around cultural norms of race, sexuality, and gender. Queer analytical frameworks make radical shifts away from identifying good and bad teachers/scholars/students, a process of normalization that presumes a stable, coherent, “authentic” identity outside of discourse and relies on the same kind of bifurcation that feeds heteronormativity.

It is imperative to imagine the desires of critical pedagogues outside the bounds of “reprosexuality.” Queer theory offers models of desire that disarticulate the link between sexuality and some telos—a greater cause, freedom, reproduction, a social identity—that reduces bodies, sexuality, and desire into unity, singularity, and stability, foreclosing the creative and generative potentialities of our lived experiences as scholars and teachers. Elizabeth Grosz offers one such model of desire through her theory of “becomings,” taking desire beyond mere feeling and affect and into the realm of doing and making:

Becomings then are not a broad general trajectory of development, but always the concrete and specific, becoming-something, something momentary, provisional, something inherently unstable and changing. It is not a question of being . . . of attaining a definite status as a thing, a permanent fixture, not of clinging to, having an identity, but of moving, changing, being swept beyond one singular position into a multiplicity of flows. (184)

Following Grosz, Patricia MacCormack suggests that becoming “is not a metaphor of being or thinking differently, it is not a linear activity whereby one simply turns into an identifiable something else. . . . Becoming is harnessing the instability of the body, so whatever causes instability could be a useful moment of entry into becoming. Desire causes instability” (31–33). As Yoon elucidates,
many people (particularly those who have not stood in race- and gender-privileged relationships to Western democracy and citizenship) have complex and complicated relationships to critical pedagogy, and it behooves us all to examine the costs of the affective dimensions of discourse, particularly the costs that induce terror through normalization. Reflection and inquiry about and by "inauthentic" subjects offers new places to stand, momentarily, in the instability of a variety emotional struggles and conflictual desires interwoven in teaching and learning. A fraught relationship to desire, affect, and the moral and historical discourses of Western democracy provides an entry point for establishing different kinds of desirous connections with others, who may or may not claim a transformative intellectual identity. Reframing desire around "becomings" shifts our attention to the ineffable and calls us to act with a degree of humility, even as we insist on the creative capacity of our imaginations to enact change and live, what Butler names a "livable life." This becomes a question of ethics when we ask not just "what makes my own life bearable . . . but when we ask, from a position of power . . . what makes, or ought to make, the lives of others bearable?" (17). I quote her at length because she speaks to the intersection of humility, the unknown, collective responsibility, contestation, democracy, and desire:

There will always be disagreement about what [a livable life] means, and those who claim that a single political direction is necessitated by virtue of this commitment will be mistaken. But this is only because to live is to live a life politically, in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future. To assume responsibility for a future, however, is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future of others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness; it implies becoming part of a process the outcome of which no one subject can surely predict. It also implies that a certain agonism and contestation over the course of direction will and must be in play. Contestation must be in play for politics to become democratic. Democracy does not speak in unison; its tunes are dissonant, and necessarily so. It is not a
Butler insists that a nonviolent response requires us to surrender to the ineffable, requires us to interrupt taken-for-granted assumptions without feeling threatened by those who trouble settled knowledge nor believing that we must somehow cease from struggling to realize a better world. Such a stance requires us to recognize the contingency of our existence and the necessity of contestation.

The question of a “livable life,” one forged collectively and generatively with a sense of accountability to one another and responsibility for a better world, is not new; women of color have been articulating similar ideas for decades. “Difference must,” Audre Lorde urged us over twenty-five years ago, “be seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependence become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency . . . can the power to seek new ways to actively ‘be’ in the world generate, as well as the courage and the sustenance to act where there are no charters” (99). However, the intellectual work of marginalized peoples, particularly women of color, are often trivialized as “minority issues,” characterized as divisive, and dismissed as “under-theorized.” Chela Sandoval, in particular, argues that we turn to the “methodology of the oppressed,” which

is formulated and taught out of the shock of displacement, trauma, violence, and resistance . . . we see the practitioners of the methodology of the oppressed recognizing their places and bodies as narrativized by and through the social body, and who are thus self-consciously committed to unprecedented forms of language, to remaking their own kinds of social position utilizing all media at their disposal—whether it is narrative as a weapon, riot as speech, looting as revolution. (77)

Sandoval’s articulation of “oppositional consciousness,” rather than critical consciousness, does not claim authority in one ideol-
ogy or one set of tactics and strategies. It moves between and among ideological positionings and aims to decolonize our imagination from binary logics that seek stability, coherence, and authenticity. "The consciousness it requires," writes Sandoval, "reads the variables of meaning, apprehending and caressing their differences; it shuffles their (continual) rearrangement, while its own parameters queerly shift according to necessity, ethical positioning, and power" (131). We have much to learn from those who cannot live in the easy binaries between right and wrong, between pleasure and pain, but who negotiate, live, and create in the interstitial. Yoon calls us into this space that productively reads the valence of meanings around affect and desire in critical pedagogy discourse. As we assume collective responsibility for nonviolent modes of discourse, she insists that we remain desirous of change even as we surrender ourselves to the unknowable. It is our task to respond, imaginatively and compassionately.

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**Theories of Affect and the Call for Practicality: A Response to Jenny Edbauer**

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Before you are “called” to write as a reaction or act of participation, you are “culled” by writing into the (bodily) sensation of involvement. You are first involved in the writing, which allows for the “call” to get heard in the first place.

—Jenny Edbauer

How did Jenny Edbauer's recent essay in *JAC* “involve” me? What was its “call” for me to write this response? To ask these two questions gets at the heart of Edbauer's concern: she addresses