Queer Rhetorics and Service-Learning: Reflection as Critical Engagement

Geoffrey W. Bateman, University of Denver

In Queer Rhetorics, an upper-division service-learning writing course taught at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2005, students used queer theory to frame their engagement with local LGBTQ non-profit organizations in Boulder. In their journals, students moved from responding personally to the course material and their volunteer work to generating their own critical inquiries into queer discourse, as well as community-based service projects. This essay argues that self-reflecting on their own sexual citizenship in the context of community engagement fosters students' critical understanding of the public rhetoric of sexuality and gender and the social norms that delimit our sexual worlds.

"To seek out queer culture, to interact with it and learn from it, is a kind of public activity. It is a way of transforming oneself, and at the same time helping to elaborate a commonly accessible world."

> *Michael Warner,* The Trouble with Normal

"The service-learning requirement of this course is clearly designed to immerse students uncritically in a radical worldview and to expose them, again uncritically, to radical organizations and political agendas all under the guise of providing them rhetorical skills.

"This is recruitment, plain and simple."

> *David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin,* One-Party Classroom

As the temperature dropped below freezing on a clear, cold evening, early in December 2005, I sat in the main gathering room at Boulder Pride, the LGBT community center in a college town nestled into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and home to the main campus of the University of Colorado. Not far from the city's well-traveled pedestrian shopping mall, the center occupies a cozy Victorian house, its living room furnished with an oversized couch and comfortable chairs. Talking with one of the staff members, I watched as students from my Queer Rhetorics course laid out a buffet of food they had secured from a few local restaurants and grocery stores as a part of their attempt to use an LGBTQ community space to feed people who were homeless. In a stocking cap and many layers of warm clothing, a man lingered over the offerings, picking his way through the leftovers and donated food toward some semblance of a dinner.

The evening's event represented the culmination of this group's service project for the course they had nearly completed, an upper-division, service-learning writing course that I taught as a third-year Ph.D. student in the English Department for the Program of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The course coupled readings on a variety of LGBTQ issues with service-learning and community engagement to help students develop as writers in personal, academic, and civic contexts. Immersing them in some of the year's most pressing debates about sexuality and gender and inviting them to engage with local publics, a sphere of civic and discursive activity that "comes into being as individuals debate issues that concern them as a group" (Eberly 172), the class asked students to explore the relevance of queer theory and other queer academic discourse for Boulder's LGBTQ community-based organizations. The course culminated in collaborative, student-initiated community service projects, which were paired with final inquiry-based, research papers.

At first glance, the service project at Boulder Pride seemed a failure. In their attempts to bring folks—especially youth—who were homeless or hungry into Boulder's LGBT community center and foster connections between two marginalized groups of people, the students reached three individuals: the man who was homeless who came for the dinner, the staff member who stayed late to host the event, and the board member who stopped by to show his support. As we sat there talking to each other, having a bite to eat, and casting repeated glances at the door, we all confronted a growing sense of disappointment. The students kept making comments about how much food would be left over, and the staff member shrugged her shoulders, as if to say these kinds of events don't always go as planned. I, too, felt like we had failed to engage effectively with these local publics, even though I knew from my own experiences that organizing such community-based events didn't always produce quantifiable results.

As we packed up the remaining food to take to the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, we found some small comfort in blaming the sudden cold front that had made the evening so inhospitable. I drove home that night wondering how I might have mentored the students' good intentions more effectively into a productive engagement with Boulder Pride and the local homeless population. Should I have redirected them earlier in their planning process when I could see the potential for this kind of failure? Would they and the community have been better served by a less complicated project? Or did I do well by them by encouraging their ambition to think beyond the clearly defined markers of Boulder's LGBTQ communities?

Reflecting on this experience four years later, I see this event less as a failure and more generously as the starting point for a new kind of community engagement. Even though my students did not mobilize a substantial number of LGBTQ people to feed the homeless, we did forge a moment of possible connection across differences, however tentative and imperfectly executed, that drew on resources publically

identified with the LGBTQ community center of Boulder to assist another dispossessed group of people. Serving the homeless within this space opened up the unexpected and complicated possibility that an LGBT community center, university students, and people experiencing homelessness might find common purpose in sharing a meal together, undermining our unspoken assumption that service-learning necessarily manifests itself as a form of charity, but can instead lead to a more mutually enriching interaction among civic agents. As well, the process the students went through to propose this project to Boulder Pride's staff and board of directors represented its own effective rhetorical engagement with a community-based organization. This alone was worth acknowledging as a collaborative success.

My own professional situation also shaped the outcomes of the course. I was an openly gay male graduate student teaching in a writing program outside his home department in the first few years of his graduate education. Despite the course's unique focus, its institutional context is all too familiar in service-learning lore and scholarship: I was an enthusiastic yet inadequately trained instructor jumping feet-first into teaching a service-learning course. Aware of the potential pitfalls, but inexperienced in how to navigate them, I improvised and adapted as problems arose. But out of such improvisation came unexpected and often rewarding results that didn't necessarily fit neatly into the evaluative criteria of a university writing curriculum, especially those results that reflected the students' evolved sense of themselves as sexual and gendered citizens.

As I reflect on my experience teaching this course, I find myself grappling with Shari J. Stenberg and Darby Arant Whealy's observation that "the value of service-learning exceeds outcomes and predetermined ends" (704). Their insistence that we pay attention to the impact of what we can't measure resonates powerfully with what my students and I achieved both within our classroom and off campus where staff, volunteers, and clients of three Boulder LGBTQ non-profits publically

manifest the "world-making activit[ies] of queer life" (Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* 147). For us, these "scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate" were housed within Boulder Pride, the Boulder County AIDS Project, and the Boulder chapter of PFLAG (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 57). Fostering my students' engagement with these organizations meant dedicating myself to the unpredictable joy that comes from the fundamental unsettling that constitutes queerness. Part of what makes queer culture so vibrant is its urgent inventiveness, or our ability to forge relationships out of differences and create publics that sustain our defiance, compliance, and revision of the norms that structure our desires. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*" that refers, in part, 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" (*Tendencies*, xii, 8). Even as I'm sure the course would have benefited from an instructor with greater experience, this course centered this intimate improv, and our collective efforts to engage with these local manifestations of queerness forced us to embrace the contingent nature of the institutional and community contexts that we worked within and the rhetorical situations they presented.

It might go without saying that the situated messiness of such learning plays a central role in our service-learning pedagogies, but in this course's attempt to render public the intimate discourses of gender and sexuality, I found myself embracing queerness's unpredictable possibilities to an even greater extent, using them as sources for student inquiry and action. Grounding us amidst this contingency was a sustained critical self-reflection of how we experienced and made sense of the course. Cultivating this kind of reflective practice allowed me to respond flexibly to students' questions and encouraged all of us to be more open to each other's expertise and insights. We

learned to embrace our shared ignorance and together inhabited the position of novice in ways that expanded the locus of authority beyond my professorial role and into a more collaborative acknowledgment of how the students and our community partners all shaped the knowledge we created through our reflective practice. In this way, I taught "with a critically reflective stance," which in Chris M. Anson's words, "model[ed] for students the kind of discursive explorations they should take in their journals and reflection logs," shifting "from providing knowledge to participating in the creation and exploration of knowledge *with* our students" (177). As important as the more formal writing assignments were for my students, the intellectual interactions that journaling provided us not only fostered a critical awareness of the rhetorical worlds we were exploring, but helped us all better see our role within them.

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I taught Queer Rhetorics in a year that saw a flurry of statewide political activity in Colorado in relation to LGBTQ issues and in the midst of local campus controversies that coalesced around Ward Churchill, academic freedom, and the teaching of ethnic, gender, and queer studies. In the semester that preceded the course, national politics soured in ways that LGBTQ Coloradans found particularly disconcerting. On January 24, Colorado Senator Wayne Allard reintroduced a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, and Representative Marilyn Musgrave from Colorado's 4th Congressional District announced her intent to take similar action in the House (Soraghan). Even though the "Marriage Protection Act" ultimately fizzled, it coincided with the beginning of a successful campaign sponsored by groups like Focus on the Family to amend Colorado's state constitution to ban same-sex marriage, which Colorado voters approved in the 2006 election.

But the news wasn't all negative. In May 2005, the Colorado State House of Representatives passed bills that barred discrimination against LGBT individuals and included LGBT people within Colorado's existing hate crimes legislation (Frates). Ultimately, Colorado's governor at the time, Bill Owens, vetoed the first bill but grudgingly approved the second, prompting many of us in the LGBTQ community to joke caustically that even though it was okay for employers to fire us in our state, at least they couldn't kill us for being queer.

These headlines prompted frequent debate in one of the state's largest newspapers, the *Denver Post*. In one guest commentary, Ann Zimmerman, a maintenance electrician at the Coors Brewery in Golden, Colorado, a smaller city just twenty miles south of Boulder, challenged President Bush's support of a federal ban on gay marriage at the same time that I began to reach out to potential community partners to develop the service-learning component of the course. Writing about her partner and the children they raised together, she acknowledges the need for greater legal protections for families like hers, but even more important for her is the politics of recognition, a need that was palpable within Boulder's LGBTQ community-based organizations. "One day," she writes, "I would simply like to introduce the woman I love not as my partner, or friend, or co-parent, but as my spouse. By that title, people would recognize the true meaning of our relationship and the depth of our love." Appealing to love's universality was and is certainly not unique to Colorado, but Zimmerman's attempt to render her relationship visible and respectable represented a common strategy within arguments made by Colorado LGBTQ writers as they countered anti-gay sentiment represented by some of our elected officials. The risk involved in such public visibility also prompted straight-identified, but gay-friendly *Denver Post* columnist, Cindy Rodriquez, to write, "No wonder many gays and lesbians in this state feel a need to conceal their sexual identity. Listening to the anti-gay rhetoric here … it's like you stepped back in time." Describing why her gay friends hesitate to display their affection for same-sex partners openly, she argues,

"People don't do it here because it's too risky. It's easier to hide than deal with bigoted people."

As these brief examples illustrate, the state of Colorado and its major cities were grappling publically with the political, legal, and cultural roles of LGBTQ people, their relationships, and their families. As I prepared the syllabus for Queer Rhetorics, I drew on these regional debates about marriage equality, LGBT visibility, and legal protections from discrimination to shape both the course reading and the assignments that would prepare students to engage ethically and in pedagogically sound ways with the community-based LGBTQ organizations in Boulder. In the first half of the semester, we read texts by scholars like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, John D'Emilio, and Lisa Duggan to generate a rich theoretical and historical context that I hoped would provide students with a rhetorical framework for their later work with these organizations.

To facilitate the students' progress from these readings and the initial interactions with our community partners to their final research and community projects in the second half of the semester, I designed a sequence of reflective journal assignments that prompted students to think critically about the course reading, our guest speakers, their service-learning experiences, and the rhetorical contexts within which we pursued our community-based work. Even though I had yet to read Thomas Deans' work on service-learning and composition, it's clear now that I had constructed a course "designed to write *about* the community," asking "students to do community service and then reflect on their community-based experiences in writing" (85). Even though I now tend to design courses in which writing serves as the means of community engagement, looking back, I am reminded of what students gain from such a regular and sustained reflection on their own learning, for it speaks to their very real need to forge connections with, process through, and respond to the material they study. Anticipating that my students would come to Queer Rhetorics with a range of knowledge

and ignorance about LGBTQ people, their histories, cultures, and use of language, I used journaling to "help students in processing the powerful affective and frequently disquieting experiences they undergo when doing outreach work in the contexts far from their comfort zones" (Deans 103). As important as preserving this kind of personal response space was, I also recognized intuitively, as Bruce Herzberg has argued, that although "[w]riting personal responses to community service is an important part of processing the experience," "it is not sufficient to raise critical or cultural consciousness" (309).

But as Deans describes, it can be an important first step, and in Queer Rhetorics, I used "personal writing as a bridge to analytical writing" (Deans 103), encouraging students to move from responding as private individuals to conducting more sustained research and generating public action on the issues they and our community partners felt were important. As the course unfolded, I used my responses to their journal writing to help students identify their interests and cultivate questions that could guide their final research assignment and develop meaningful community service projects for the LGBTQ organizations. Pairing these service projects with research papers, I intended for students to become critically aware of the issues they would address, hoping they would develop their own scholarly expertise in an issue that interested them from the first half of the semester.

Over the course of the term, students responded to six formal prompts that I provided them, but as they completed their final research and community service projects, they continued to reflect on their work more informally. In the more directive prompts, I asked students to describe their experiences with our community-based organizations and reflect on what they found significant in each of these situations. Then, I pushed them to think critically about the connections, tensions, or even contradictions between our course reading and the insight they had gained from our engagement with our partners. For example, in the first journal entry, I directed students "to reflect on today's guest

speakers and describe the most significant thing that you learned about with regard to the Boulder County AIDS Project and living with HIV/AIDS." Allowing them to respond on a more personal level, I then encouraged them to put their observations in dialogue with a passage from Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*: "[W]rite down one quotation from Warner's second chapter, "What's Wrong with Normal?" and reflect on what it has to say about HIV/AIDS and the issues discussed by our guest speakers (or how what they talked about enriches Warner's argument)."

In their two- to three-page responses to this kind of prompt, students frequently dialogued in sophisticated ways with the reading, the guest speakers who came to our class early in the semester, and our volunteer work at our community partners, developing a critical awareness of the complexities of perspective and experience within Boulder's LGBTQ communities. For example, many students responded quite passionately to Warner's assertion that "[i]t does not seem possible to think of oneself as normal without thinking that some other kind of person is pathological" (*The Trouble with Normal* 60). Some of the more radical students—gay or straight—celebrated Warner's critique of normativity and the generative possibilities of defying sexual and gender norms. Other students saw in both the speakers and themselves compelling normative impulses toward integrating LGBTQ experiences within mainstream culture, especially those who identified with what Steven Seidman describes as the "ethnic/minority sociopolitical agenda" of gay and lesbian politics (110). Understandably a number of the LGBTQ-identified students felt a very visceral need to normalize their sexualities and genders and found comfort in imagining themselves as part of a group that was slowly gaining access to middle-class respectability. In their initial reflections, many students seemed to be caught between these two choices, (1) enthusiastically embracing both queerness's flaunting of difference and (2) a more assimilationist, and in their minds, commonsensical approach to LGBTQ minority models of identity and community. But as I grew more familiar with their

thinking about these issues, I saw that the terms of Warner's debate struck them as a false binary, perhaps even an antiquated one, and they seemed much more comfortable inhabiting this space of contradiction than I would have expected. They appreciated the power of the norm without succumbing to it as the moral yardstick by which to measure the value of existing in the world as sexual and gendered human beings. Ultimately, we used their responses to tease out the affordances and limitations of each political orientation, fostering a greater appreciation of the many choices available to them as writers engaged with a vast repertoire of queer rhetorical strategies.

As our engagement with *The Trouble with Normal* suggests, I focused our inquiry more purposefully within national LGBTQ debates, and less on the disputes between pro-gay and anti-gay forces in the mainstream media. Given the statewide context, we certainly discussed these kinds of rhetorical exchanges, but I felt that it was important for students to see the richness of deliberation among LGBTQ writers and to situate queerness as central to our discussions rather than marginalize it as something in need of defense. For example, our discussions of same-sex marriage focused more on the tension between queer and feminist critiques of marriage as a normative institution and more mainstream gay and lesbian writers' affirmations of marriage equality as a way to secure full citizenship. In this way, I invited students to grapple with the diversity of perspectives within LGBTQ publics, but emphasized a more sustained engagement with queer theorists like Warner because of his more capaciousness inclusiveness and resistance to the norms that have evolved within parts of our communities, or what Lisa Duggan has described as "the new homonormativity" (50). As Warner writes, "When you begin interacting with people in queer culture. . . You learn that . . . the statistical norm has no moral value. . .You learn that the people who look most different from you can be, by virtue of that fact, the very people from whom you have the most to learn" (*The Trouble with Normal* 70). Warner's deconstruction of the moral foundation of the norm helped us take a rhetorical inventory of

queer discourse, highlighting the situations and strategies that make possible a "commonly accessible world" (Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* 71). Together we reflected on the epistemological and material conditions that allow LGBTQ people to elaborate the kind of public space in which queer identities, desires, bodies, styles, sex, friendships, families—all of the activities that trouble the norm—become a legitimate part of our social worlds.

By foregrounding the epistemological possibilities of difference, I hoped students would be better prepared to interact with our community partners and the local LGBTQ publics in Boulder on their own terms. This immersion required all of us to attend to the privilege of our academic epistemologies; it also made us reflect critically on the relationship between the insights our reading of queer theory and other scholarly discourse gave us and their relevance to the communities with which we engaged. To help students begin to see the complex relationships between our academic context and those of our community partners, I reserved four class sessions in the first five weeks of the course to host guest speakers who could talk about a range of issues of importance for local LGBTQ folks and prompted students to reflect critically in their journals on their evolving understanding of these issues. These speakers included staff and clients from the Boulder County AIDS Project and Boulder Pride, a local queer Latina writer and performance artist, and a panel of LGBTQ folks who shared their experiences living in Boulder.

Students' initial engagement with Boulder's LGBTQ publics thus put them in the position of an audience: I invited them to witness these staff members and activists' stories and learn from their perspectives and experiences. First and foremost, they listened to these guest speakers, which served as an apprenticeship for their later, more active engagement. To pre-empt the very real possibility that students would approach their service at our community sites as cultural tourists, the presence of these speakers within our classroom served as a more

controlled space in which students could articulate awkward or even ignorant questions to staff members or community activists who were prepared and willing to educate them, but through our ongoing dialogues, would also move them beyond their voyeuristic impulses. This format functioned to establish our guests as experts, in effect cultivating a sense of humility in my students as they began to see the multiple ways through which our culture creates and circulates knowledge about sexuality. Perhaps as important, it also equalized authority within the class, especially the authority of student experience in relation to LGBTQ issues. Listening together to these LGBTQ voices, the students—regardless of their own sexual orientations or gender identities—had to think about the central issues of our course through the words of these local experts and not just through the experiences of the most vocal LGBTQ students in the class. The diverse identities and experiences of our guests fostered for all of us a more complex understanding of LGBTQ issues in Boulder without forcing any individual to embody the entire community. As students reflected each week on these speakers—both in terms of their common experiences and the differences between them and the contexts within which they worked—they learned about the multiple ways LGBTQ people experience Boulder and understand themselves as public agents shaping the local political and social environment.

This dynamic was fostered in part by subsequent journal assignments that continued to ask students to reflect on what they found significant about each speaker and to explore how these organizations represented themselves to their clients and supporters. They continued to tease out relationships between these speakers and our course reading, but as important were the questions they posed as they began to wrestle with these issues and deepen their expertise. In this way, journaling allowed me to re-affirm their positions as novices, as students who could be confused and ask about local LGTBQ issues without fear of offending our community partners. Despite the truism that there are

no dumb questions, I did encourage students to be thoughtful in their ignorance: we collaborated as a class to take responsibility for what we didn't know and generated ways to ask questions that engendered respectful dialogue with each other and our community partners later in the quarter.

Scripting this kind of reflective exchange was especially important considering the diversity of students and their sexual identities within the class and their reasons for taking the course. About a third of the eighteen students who enrolled in the course identified as LGBTQ, and they had to varying degrees gained familiarity with LGBTQ sexualities and genders through their own coming out process. Many of these students brought very personal desires to the course material, wanting to understand the communities they were entering into and legitimize their places within them. Their individual needs to engage with queerness in both public and intimate ways were ever present, and conditioned our discussions, our writing, and our community interactions. By asking my students to engage with local queer publics as a way to facilitate an awareness of the situations in which they write, could write, and should write about sexuality and gender, I obliged myself to attend to the constraints of their personal histories with regard to writing and sexuality.

These issues may have manifested themselves more immediately and visibly for the LGBTQ students, but the many straight students who took the course were also drawn to it for equally important and compelling reasons. Some chose the course because they had family members—brothers, uncles, even best friends—who were LGBTQ; others, because they saw this course as helping them professionalize. As aspiring high school teachers, a handful of students were vaguely aware that LGBTQ youth faced distinct and harrowing challenges as students in hostile school environments and hoped to sharpen their own expertise to better prepare themselves for the classroom. Perhaps most surprising to me, though, were the students who weren't

aware that "queer" signified anything meaningful about sexuality, identity, or culture. A few quirky students were drawn, and not entirely inaccurately, to the strangeness they thought queerness represented. One self-identified anarchist student was curious about the relationship between queer identities and politics, but he was drawn to queer theory for its non-normative impulses and deconstructive tendencies and its proximity to his own anarchist philosophy.

Attending to this diversity of student knowledge and experience, I used their critical reflections and our class discussions to generate a common language to frame the rest of the semester. After the guest speakers' visits, we began to travel off campus to gain familiarity with the material spaces of Boulder's LGBTQ non-profit communities. In weeks four through six, we made three trips off campus as a class to attend meetings and volunteer at these organizations, setting aside our Friday afternoon class meetings to insure that everyone would be able to join in our collective endeavor for at least an hour. In this phase of the course, I believed it was important to volunteer as a class to build our own community and that my participation as their instructor was essential, for it signaled to them not only the centrality of such work to our course, but also that I valued it as their professor and as a gay man. Equally important was the message it sent to our community partners: I wasn't just shipping my students off to them for a few hours of obligatory service; rather, they saw that a faculty member—even if just a graduate instructor—was committed to building relationships with them. Working with my students on whatever task was at hand fostered a more collaborative, democratic sense within the class, as well as between the university and our community partners—a pedagogical strategy that I continue to prioritize in my service-learning courses.

For our first off-campus event, we attended a meeting of our local PFLAG chapter. The topic of the evening was health issues within the LGBTQ community. The guest speaker, a queer-identified staff member with the Boulder County Health Department, presented information

about HIV infection rates in LGBTQ populations, queer teenage suicide statistics, the high incidence of smoking within our communities, and breast cancer risks for queer women. Some of my students were aware of this information while others found it shocking, even morally outrageous. In their journals, I asked them to "describe what it was like … to attend the PFLAG meeting" and to think about what it meant to venture off-campus for the first time: "How was it different than if we had guest speakers from PFLAG come to our class? Second, reflect on the presentation about LGBTIQ health issues. What did you learn? Find a quote from any of our reading thus far, write it down, and explore its relation to your experience Thursday evening." Looking back at this prompt, I am struck by how open-ended I left it, and I wonder if I shouldn't have directed earlier in the course to "search beyond the person for a systemic explanation" (Herzberg 309).

But granting students the chance to forge their own personal connections to the course material didn't inhibit critical thinking. Especially for LGBTQ students, journaling provided an empowering opportunity to analyze sexual and gender identities in relation to local public discussions about LGBTQ community health. One queer student used our visit to PFLAG and his subsequent reflection to forge a more intimate understanding with his family about the public costs of discrimination and invited one of his parents to attend the meeting with him. When they arrived, they both manifested a quiet sense of apprehension. As we sat down, I couldn't help but feel a tender appreciation for the moment's awkwardness and its significance for both of them. In his reflection and later conversations in office hours, the student confirmed that it was one of the most challenging moments in his life, but he testified to the impact that the public nature of this meeting had on his parent. Their relationship shifted in a way that wouldn't have occurred in private, for the presence of other people provided his parent a new context in which to understand the son's evolving sexual identity as a gay man. It also provided my student with resources to use to understand his own health and well-being, and his

ability to self-reflect in his journal and in our class discussions allowed him to articulate these new discoveries.

This example may seem to remove us too far from what the priorities of a writing course should be and where our expertise as writing instructors lies. Who was I to play amateur counselor or community organizer to these students and invite them to engage in community work in such a way as to surface some of their most intimate desires? My response to this legitimate concern is quite frankly, how can we not? Especially in light of the still staggering youth suicide rate that continues to plague our communities—just two years ago, a gay male student killed himself at the university I currently teach at—we need to find ways to fashion what Rosa Eberly describes as the "protopublic spaces" of our classrooms into hospitable places in which "students can practice public discourse … by writing and thinking about and for different publics in different *ethe* ("From Writers" 172). In courses like Queer Rhetorics, this means we should recognize the public potential within our classrooms and see our class time as a gathering of readers and writers in which we can make sexuality visible.

I recognize the risks inherent in such praxis when we invite students to write about sex, sexuality, gender, and desire in relation to both public discourse and their intimate experiences. Class discussions create discomfort; conversations get complicated, and sometimes seem inappropriate. Peer review can be a difficult exchange when students narrate, analyze, or craft arguments about sex. Knowing how to respond appropriately to student writing and class discussion was a constant question, and I found myself drawing on skills I had developed from my previous work experiences at a non-profit, AIDS-service organization. I had received little training as a graduate student in how to facilitate learning about such intimate issues. Cultivating a sincere and respectful curiosity for my students' sexualities, listening to their stories, experiences and analyses carefully, reflecting back to them what I heard, and asking questions (rather than providing

answers) to promote further discussion—all powerful techniques I had learned as a facilitator of discussion groups for gay and bisexual men—proved useful in the moments of greatest challenge. They also modeled for students the ways in which I hoped they would reflect critically on these issues in their own writing. As personal as these conversations were, they didn't remain so as students began to expand their consciousness beyond their immediate experiences.

From discussions about public sex environments on campus to students talking and writing about their first sexual experiences, difficult conversations abounded in our class. But in the protopublic space of our classroom, we didn't isolate these issues solely, or even primarily, as private concerns of individuals, but rather as illustrative examples of sexuality's normative and very public systems and structures. Witnessing students' enthusiastic embrace of these challenges as they immersed themselves intentionally into these situations, I confronted an obvious reality, but one academic culture likes to ignore: our students have bodies and desires. To draw upon the lessons of queer theory in a writing classroom, especially one that attempts to connect with queer publics distinct from our college campuses, means that we should engage our students in how these private experiences manifest publically and structure our lived experience. If, as Warner suggests, "being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized space of the academy, exude some rut, re-imagine the publics from and from which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform" ("Introduction" xxvi), then mapping out the connections and tensions between queer theory and local LGBTQ publics means we should expect, and even look forward to, more mess when we invite our students to deliberate and take action on these issues. When we handle them with a sensitive awareness of the multiple positions our students inhabit in relation to their bodies and their desires, the risks translate into meaningful encounters with writing, agency, and sexuality. In some small way, it fosters the kinds of spaces many of us as LGBTQ people would like to see more of in our communities—spaces in which people

can engage in authentic, respectful, and civil conversations about some of the most intimate aspects our lives.

As we approached the second half of the course, I encouraged students to aspire to this kind of personally engaged scholarship, and they drew upon the reflective writing in their journals to generate a topic that they could research for their final essay and that would serve as the basis for their community service project. These projects coincided so that students would gain academic expertise in the issue they selected as they took public action on it. In consultation with me, the class organized itself into interest groups and developed ideas for their projects in collaboration with our community partners. The issues they focused on included the local impact of the ban on gays and lesbians in the military, LGBTQ parenting, homeless queer youth, LGBTQ teenage suicide, and safe schools for queer students. Ultimately, students generated resource materials for these issues and organized educational panels, calls to action, and the event at Boulder Pride.

In the end, though, I ask myself, what purpose did these projects serve? To what extent did they succeed in the collaborative give-and-take of working with and serving Boulder's LGBTQ communities? I still find this success somewhat difficult to measure. I do know that students engaged enthusiastically with their projects, even if the work overwhelmed them at times, and their reflections testified to how much they learned as writers, as students of queerness, and even as organizers. But even with our conscious efforts in the first half of the course to connect with three of Boulder's most visible community-based LGBTQ organizations, many of the students struggled in their attempts to create projects that responded appropriately to the needs of these organizations and their constituents. As the story that opened this essay suggests, the visions of students don't translate seamlessly into public successes, but that doesn't mean that important relationships and learning aren't fostered in the midst of such failure.

The group focusing on LGBTQ parenting similarly faltered. The two students working together on this issue created materials to publicize the resources in Boulder and the Denver metropolitan area for LGBTQ parents, but ultimately, they struggled to deliver these materials in meaningful ways to parents they envisioned might find them helpful. Even though they had been working with a volunteer-based political organization that advocated for queer families, the students and the volunteers found it difficult to connect and communicate effectively in large part because the organization wasn't equipped to coordinate student volunteers and the students weren't familiar enough with the contours of this community.

The most successful student project decided to treat the university campus as its own public. Wanting to share some of the insights they had gained from the course with their peers across campus, a group of five students organized a panel that featured an undergraduate lesbian student who had been discharged from the university's ROTC program when she came out, a gay man and a lesbian who were co-parenting two children together, and a queer professor who was an expert on the university's LGBTQ history. On the evening of the event, the room full of curious faces confirmed that this particular project appealed to the campus, forging a moment of common interest among students, faculty, and staff who attended the event. As the two children played in the corner of the classroom while their parents spoke about creating their own intentional queer family, the room came together in a deliberative act, using the spaces of a public university, or the "commonest of common places" (Eberly, "Quantum Publics"), to foster a greater collective understanding about the issues that my students believed would benefit their peers and enhance the campus.

Regardless of what students achieved in these projects, their final journal reflections attested to the richness of their experience, for they described forging important connections with our community partners that transformed their understanding of LGBTQ issues. Even

though collaborating with some of the organizations may have proven frustrating for some groups, students valued learning about publics they either didn't know existed or were unfamiliar with prior to taking the course. The course thus fostered spaces in which students grappled with the complexities of queer rhetorical situations and provided them a chance to reflect critically on their evolution as writers invested in the public nature of LGBTQ issues. Writing within these situations, they confronted a unique learning environment that allowed them to explore issues intellectually that weren't (and still aren't) typically available at many universities and in ways that were powerfully attuned to their individual needs as sexual citizens.

Considering the richness of our collaborative experience, you can imagine my chagrin, when, as I drafted this article, I discovered that Queer Rhetorics had made it onto one of David Horowitz's infamous lists of politically reprehensible college courses. Sensationalizing the controversy that erupted when Ward Churchill publically criticized the United States after 9/11, Horowitz and Jacob Laksin devote an entire chapter of *One-Party Classroom* to the University of Colorado, arguing that this "case signaled the radicalism infecting the university in Boulder." Having scoured online syllabi that they viewed as suspect, they conclude that "the university liberal arts faculty offers a disturbing number of courses that are neither academic nor scholarly, but blatantly ideological" (37). I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that Queer Rhetorics serves as fodder for Horowitz and Laksin's polemic. Perhaps I should even feel flattered. But it does unnerve me to see them so blatantly misrepresent the course and the valuable lessons that we learned together. It may seem odd to fret over the criticism of someone who critiques a course after selectively reading a few of the books on the syllabus without ever having stepped foot into the classroom. But I do worry, because Horowitz and Laksin equate any sympathetic engagement with queer publics as tantamount to indoctrination, and they fail to see how the focus of Queer Rhetorics was fundamentally rhetorical in very traditional ways. For all its interest in the non-

normative impulses of queerness, the course allied itself with principles of persuasive discourse that have for centuries formed the theoretical foundations of democratic possibilities rather than their foreclosure.

Such vehement accusations to the contrary only reinforce my sense of how much we need to nurture queer perspectives within our universities and between our academic institutions and the LGBTQ publics neighboring our campuses. Our students deserve to learn how to access the worlds that are in the process of being created, especially those that by their very existence presume some form of critical distance from the assumptions about sexuality and gender that structure our social order. Rather than dictate a political program for my students, Queer Rhetorics cultivated an attitude toward politics that eschewed normalizing any discourse about what the public sphere should be, which may be exactly what Horowitz and Laksin fear. If the course exposed them to anything, it gave students the opportunity to grapple with issues of personal relevance and write about them within community-based, public situations, prompting them to reflect regularly and meaningfully on their actions as rhetors and civic agents. What the course's detractors call "recruitment" is, for many of us, better known as an invitation to education, a publicly oriented curiosity that seeks to understand and expand the world, not limit it.

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