



Jonathan Alexander at the 2017 Mid-Atlantic Conference on College Composition and Communication

# WRITING CAN TRANSFORM HUMANITY



Listening to a speaker introduce you to a large audience is always a little awkward, and Jonathan Alexander, whose keynote speech for the 2017 Mid-Atlantic Conference on College Composition and Communication at Virginia Commonwealth University was titled “Queering What We Know in Composition Studies,” probably felt slightly self-conscious after hearing himself lauded as a curator, creator, animator, and speaker whose keynote would change us all, the whole audience, for the better. But I hope he didn’t fret. His keynote lived up to its introduction.

Jonathan began with a question: “What does queerness mean in the context of writing studies?” Answering his first question with a second, Jonathan queried the audience: “How many of you have

participated in norming writing?” Hands rose. Shoulders hunched. Groans escaped. “And how many of you have been the person who needs further norming?” he probed, amidst laughter all around the room.

In contrast to grading calibration sessions intended to standardize a process, Jonathan explained, queering in writing is about “going against the norm, asking hard questions, constantly interrogating and critiquing what we do, asking why do we do what we do.”

Offering an example, Jonathan queered a common buzz phrase: *Frameworks for Success*. “What toxic ideologies,” he asked, “might be unknowingly supported by the drive to succeed? What notions about failure and shame might be useful?”

Despite the current political climate, Jonathan explained that he’s been thinking a lot about utopia.

He wants his students to learn that writing can transform humanity: “When we write, we go through frustration and anger because we are trying to make a more just world,” he said. (And like Jonathan, I want my students to learn that good writing can inspire change, not just because writing itself is powerful—although it is—but because writing develops our critical thinking in ways that foster reconsideration and transformation, ultimately helping us to improve the world.)

Wrapping up his keynote, Jonathan concluded: “Writing opens you up to ways of thinking that you didn’t know you could do . . . to ways of experiencing people that you didn’t know were possible. . . . The most important lesson we can give our students is that we use words to open up, to open up each other and ourselves to ways of thinking, feeling, and being that we can’t even imagine. . . . It’s that queer perversity that I invite you to be sensitive to for the rest of the day.”

#### Jonathan’s recommendations for further reading:

- *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* by José Esteban Muñoz, NYU Press, 2009.
- *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015.



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## WHAT IS THE NATIONAL DAY ON WRITING?



Every October 20, NCTE celebrates the importance, joy, and evolution of writing through a tweetup, using the hashtag #WhyIWrite, and events hosted by thousands of educators across the country.

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