Flattening Effects: Composition’s Multicultural Imperative and the Problem of Narrative Coherence

This essay argues that multiculturalism-inflected composition classrooms often “flatten” or efface radical alterities with which students—and teachers—should be encouraged to grapple. The authors demonstrate some of the limitations of such pedagogies, offer examples of provocative texts that celebrate difference—not identity—as a powerful critical and compositional tool for exploring subjectivity and justice, and call for a shift toward acknowledging our potential incommensurability and unknowability as a fruitful way to engage issues of social justice.

In a now-classic essay, “Towards a Postmodern Pedagogy,” Henry A. Giroux articulates a significant “double-bind” in the development of critical multicultural pedagogies that rely on narrative to promote awareness and understanding. On one hand, Giroux argues that “Critical pedagogy needs a language that allows for competing solidarities and political vocabularies [and] an ongoing engagement with a variety of narratives and traditions that can be re-read and re-formulated in politically different terms” (691). On the other hand, he maintains that we should offer “students a language that allows them to reconstruct their moral and political energies in the service of creating a more just and equitable social order, one that undermines relations of hierarchy and domination”
In this essay, we argue that any critical multicultural pedagogy must proceed with both a recognition of our common humanity and a strong critical sense of our radical alterity, of the critical differences that exist among different people’s and different groups’ experiences of the world.
both socially and somatically. The queer body, narratively composed, becomes critically flattened in the process. We can find both the flattening effect and the flattening of affect at work in the inclusion of “coming out” narratives in a variety of composition textbooks, readers, and assignments, and we turn our attention to a discussion of these flattenings later in this essay. Ultimately, we want to move beyond, perhaps even leave behind, the multicultural imperative to “include” queerness as another “difference” in the composition curriculum (as well as in the profession) and explore instead how queerness in its excessive modes—the ways queerness can exceed normalizing categories of identity, even lesbian and gay identity—poses a unique and significant challenge to literacy.

**The Multicultural Turn**

In the last twenty years, the social turn in composition studies has prompted experimentation with a variety of cultural studies pedagogies, critical pedagogies, and feminist-inflected composition pedagogies—in all of which issues of identity have become nearly fetishized in the writing classroom. As Sharon
Crowley puts it in *Composition in the University*, “[Identity] differences will inevitably be put on the table, as they might not be in a history or biology class, because liberal composition pedagogy insists that students’ identities are the subject of composition” (227). Composition scholars engaging in such work include established and emerging scholars in our field, such as Harriet Malinowitz (writing on lesbian and gay students), Robert MacRuer (combining disability, queer theory, and crip theory), Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks (considering race and African American literacies), Morris Young (elucidating Asian American literate practice), and numerous feminist compositionists, including Susan Jarratt, Shirley Wilson Logan, Min-Zhan Lu, Nedra Reynolds, Joy Ritchie, and Kate Ronald, among many others. In our professional practice, in our textbooks and curricular materials, and increasingly in our professional organizations, we seek to make spaces for different identities, for different stories to be told. Malea Powell’s 2012 Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair’s Address, composed of different identity-based voices from across the field, is perhaps emblematic of the institutionalization of this turn.

Creating such spaces for different identities and stories forms a significant part of the multicultural project. bell hooks has argued that

> [w]hen we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education. (44)

The desire to create spaces for “free expression,” so that students from diverse backgrounds can communicate to us, to one another, and to themselves their different truths, serves as a core component of multicultural awareness, particularly in the writing classroom, where students can write powerfully from experience. Contemporary composition textbooks and readers reflect such a commitment; in “Composition Readers and the Construction of Identity,” for example, Sandra Jamieson notes the trend in many writing textbooks toward inclusivity as a mode of engaging student interest and gesturing toward social justice:

> Most modern textbook readers, whatever their format, reflect the work of composition and education scholars who emphasize the importance of providing models for students. They also draw on scholarship developed from the work of Paulo Freire, which demonstrates that when students feel they have a stake in the issues they read about, they become more engaged and show more involvement with and effort on writing assignments. Thus the collections feature more readings about
personal identity, a strategy intended to unite both trends. … Many composition teachers find this approach appealing because of our egalitarian tendency to try to compensate for all the omissions of the modern academy in our composition classes, perhaps thus challenging the social hierarchies that cause students to be differently skilled as writers in the first place. (151)

Certainly, the goal of much multicultural pedagogy is to heighten students’ awareness of the diverse subject positions people inhabit as a way of cultivating tolerance for the many varieties of experience that people have in our world. The inculcation or development of such tolerance is, as Giroux would have it, often linked to efforts to connect prejudices based on differences to larger social structures or systems that position groups against one another, such as with institutional racism or the connections between homophobia and sexism. A “critical multiculturalism,” writes Stephen May, allows “both minority and majority students to recognize and explore the complex interconnections, gaps and dissonances that occur between their own and other ethnic and cultural identities, as well as other forms of social identity” (33).

But what about those “gaps and dissonances?” Sometimes gaps and dissonances occur between the work of inclusion and the more critical work of understanding and interrogating systems of oppression. Gilyard points out in “Higher Learning: Composition’s Racialized Reflection” that multicultural pedagogy can itself be at odds with the aims of liberatory action:

[T]he rhetoric and aims of [the multicultural] movement are not necessarily coterminous with the rhetoric and aims of, say, anti-racism. While the former often gestures toward a formulaic polycultural curriculum, the latter insists on unflinching criticism of racist domination and its impact on education, including composition curricula. Multiculturalism, then, with its characteristic emphasis on rather low-level sensitivity training, serves to obscure the problematics of racism, which . . . include consideration of class. (47)

Put another way, it is one thing to include diverse identities and stories; it is quite something else to undertake the systemic analyses that complicate our understanding of how people experience the world differently—both rhetorically and materially. LuMing Mao moves toward a similar point in “Re-clustering Traditional Academic Discourse: Alternating the Confucian Discourse,” acknowledging the difficulty of our task as compositionists and literacy educators:

As teachers of English, we feel the pressure to teach our students traditional academic discourse so that they can function adequately once they join the work force. Meanwhile, multiculturalism, and a push for linguistic and cultural diversity
on college campuses nationwide are gaining more momentum than ever. Out of this growing awareness of the need to foster diversity has emerged a conducive environment for other, nondominant voices to be heard and to be validated. It is this kind of tension that has in large measure contributed to the emergence of alternative discourses in our time. (121–22)

At the same time, Mao does not argue that such a move (while welcome) will usher in a multicultural utopia. Indeed, he writes, “[while] the introduction of [nondominant voices] into our writing classroom may not necessarily provide immediate strategic actions for challenging social conditions or ideological assumptions—and it is not meant to—it does seek to foreground the shifting, contingent nature of our discourses” (122). We want to pick up the argument precisely at this point. Making room for “the shifting, contingent nature of our discourses” moves us toward greater inclusivity, surely. Just as surely, however, we can be inclusive while not being critical. Further, the “conducive environment” might feel inclusive while eliding important considerations of difference. For instance, inclusivity can be particularly problematic when multiple differences are at play: witness the difficulties that queers of color have long had in working within civil rights movements to have sexual identities understood as central, not just ancillary (or negligible), components of the experience of race and ethnicity. We would argue, in fact, that multiple differences are always at play—one person does not equal only one marker of identity or only one identity category, and any given person serves as the convergence of a number of seemingly contradictory, even incommensurable identities. Given the complexity of identity even at the individual register, it is no wonder that we teachers—as well as students—stumble as we engage in the work of civil rights.

Playing Queer: The Flattening Effect in Action

The difficulty with creating spaces for difference makes itself known when we invite students to discuss and explore salient differences. Some of the most provocative and revealing assignments for having students consider the limits of understanding one another occur when we ask them to write about the experiences of the self and other. Such exercises bring us face to face with what we do and do not know about one another.

Some of the most provocative and revealing assignments for having students consider the limits of understanding one another occur when we ask them to write about the experiences of the self and other. Such exercises bring us face to face with what
we do and do not know about one another. And it may be that out of such gaps in our knowledge, in the face of our incommensurability and radical alterity, that our most interesting insights about difference, and writing, emerge.

Along such lines, Terri A. Hasseler and John C. Bean, in “Designing Writing Assignments for Exploring Diversity,” offer numerous specific writing prompts to stimulate students’ awareness of diversity, social injustice, and the construction of identities. Acknowledging the need to create a “safe space” in which students can express themselves, Hasseler and Bean assert that “[i]nstructors should aim at affirming students’ experiences through personal writing; at the same time, however, they should help students develop the courage to critique each other” (121). Possible assignments include the following:

Choose and critically analyze a term of identity you use to define yourself or that other people use to define you, such as Asian American, white, girl, boy, queer, jock, and so forth. Your task is to make a claim about how your chosen term has been socially constructed through essays, advertising, and media (including film, news, and television) and about how its social construction has influenced the way you define yourself. (129)

Another prompt asks students to “[t]ake inventory of your personal experiences of oppression along lines of race, gender, class, sex, ethnicity, age, education, physical norm, geographic region, or religion. Which type(s) of discrimination are you most familiar with? In what particular forms? Which have you had least experience with? Why?” (246). Within the context of a cultural studies-inflected curriculum, such a writing prompt may provoke fascinating discussion about the construction of identities through a variety of media. Students have the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and describe their perceptions of how they are treated or understood.

When we ask students to describe the “other,” however, we encounter difficulties in depth of critical understanding. For example, we can find some of the dilemmas of attempting to communicate queer difference at play in one important discussion of an experimental writing exercise. William P. Banks, in “The Values of Queer Jacketing: What Happens When Student Writers Go Gay?,” usefully and laudably details his experiences with having straight students compose narratives in which they imagine being queer. In designing such an assignment, Banks believes that “[i]nasmuch as these students must think more carefully about their texts and their performances of selves, we do them a service by helping to improve their rhetorical skills. Inasmuch as this work
might force our students to seriously engage Others, we do all our students a
service by encouraging a stronger embodiment of democracy” (Banks).

Banks documents in detail the shifts in writing and attitude of one par-
ticular straight male student, Chris, who writes movingly about reconsidering
what it must be like to be queer in a homophobic society. Chris reflects on a
former friend who came out as gay to him, as well as the rifts that coming out
and Chris's negative response to it tore in their friendship. Ultimately, Chris
builds sympathy for his friend, imagining what his life must be like; he writes:

Everyone who was there that night [at a football game] was a heterosexual, so
we all thought. One of the stars on the team is a homosexual. He is cool with all
the guys and loved by all the girls. He has it all, but he still feels incomplete. He's
putting up a front to everyone around him, but he cannot fool himself. He knows
the only thing that can satisfy him is to let everyone know he is a homosexual and
stop living in fear. He wants a boyfriend like heterosexual girls want a boyfriend. He
wants to be able to show public affection to his man the same way heterosexuals
show public affection to one another. (Banks)

Banks acknowledges that he asked students in this assignment to take some
risks, particularly the risk of being uncomfortable in attempting to perform a
subject position not their own. In many ways, such empathy-building exercises
are both provocative and powerful, and we want to support Banks's analysis of
this student's writing and his original assignment: “I’ve become convinced that
we have to give students the chance to engage these issues in writing and speak-
ing—in language—because it is in these spaces of performance and reflection
that we and our students can better understand each other and the complexities
of the issues, people, and cultures in which we live and work” (Banks).

We appreciate Banks's grounding of his carefully constructed assignment
in both rhetorical and ethical attempts to engage students to consider the
"other"; such work comprises a vital component of multicultural pedagogies.
At the same time, Cynthia Ryan identifies the problem in narratives like Chris's
in her "Rhetoric(s) of Becoming: Possibilities for Composing Intersectional
Identities of Difference": "In such narratives, the unaware or misinformed
storyteller speaking from a position of dominance experiences an epiphany of
sorts, and ‘finally enlightened,’ offers a revised understanding of a formerly po-
larized Other” (687). This “liberal narrative of awareness,” as William DeGenaro
puts it, can at times lead to “cliché, linear and reductive” meaning making
(136). Chris's narrative reduces his friend into easy categories, most notably
the heteronormative binary of male/female. The statement “He is cool with
all the guys and loved by all the girls” attempts to “normalize” Chris’s friend as sufficiently masculine to have male friends and female admirers. Soon after, Chris “feminizes” his friend, writing that he “wants a boyfriend like heterosexual girls want a boyfriend.” What is important here is the rhetorical work of flattening difference, of retaining gender binaries, of reinscribing polarization. Chris’s statement—indeed, his entire narrative, compelling as it might be—still reduces and flattens difference into easy, normative legibility.

We argue that this flattening effect arises out of the unexamined assumption that “understanding” and then “tolerance” or even “respect” are predicated on “identity.” By identity, we mean not just the acknowledgment that other identities exist, but that those identities are, in essence, somehow identical to (or identifiable with) your own.

We argue that this flattening effect arises out of the unexamined assumption that “understanding” and then “tolerance” or even “respect” are predicated on “identity.” By identity, we mean not just the acknowledgment that other identities exist, but that those identities are, in essence, somehow identical to (or identifiable with) your own. For instance, as Chris imagines, “He [the imagined gay man] wants a boyfriend like heterosexual girls want a boyfriend. He wants to be able to show public affection to his man the same way heterosexuals show public affection to one another.” According to the underlying view that enables such a comment, whether you’re black, queer, Chicana, disabled, or not, you are still fundamentally human, concerned with similar core issues and very likely sharing core values, if not specific beliefs. Attaining “respect,” then, means that many of us have our differences erased by an overriding narrative of shared humanity. Naturally, we are delighted to be acknowledged as human, particularly since many queers throughout history have been denied such acknowledgment. However, if we may push forward personal narrative in the service of this argument, our difference in our humanity is key, particularly in addressing some systemic violence against queers. If Jonathan and Jackie are in danger of being assaulted, it is because they are not straight. He is a queer man; she, a lesbian. At the same time, we do not claim that all queer people share a common sense of identity and common understanding of the world. Far from it, since we cannot even claim commonality as queers co-authoring this essay. We do claim, however, that queerness positions one as categorically different from the majority of straight people, particularly since, as queer people, we have experienced discrimination within our families, on the job, and in the public sphere because of our particular excesses of body, sex, and desire that challenge heteronormativity.
Certainly, the creation of such queer narratives may perform good initial local work, from person to person, in identifying commonalities and areas of potential sympathy, but they are problematic in at least three ways. First, in flattening narratives to elide specific differences to accentuate common human experiences, feelings, or attributes, the specific experiences of personal discrimination or violence that emanate from systemic oppressions are left unexplored. Second, and along the same lines, the narratives elide potential understanding or exploration of the richness of difference in its own right. Foucault’s work tells us that acknowledging other identities and other stories not only produces possibilities for resisting normative narratives but also produces new disciplinary discourses, new disciplining narratives. In this case, the narrative of a rather bland shared humanity often disciplines difference into silence, and in the process keeps some questions and domains of knowledge from being articulated. And finally, following this Foucauldian vein, the narratives give us a strong sense of the human as knowable, as reducible to a set of desired traits. In the process, difference is disparaged—if not directly, then obliquely, but nonetheless damagingly.

The challenge in teaching a robust multiculturalism lies in balancing a need for acknowledging and working through identity categories while also problematizing them, keeping alive a sense of how they lead to elision of important differences. Recently, in “Avoiding the Difference Fixation: Identity Categories, Markers of Difference, and the Teaching of Writing,” Stephanie L. Kerschbaum seems to agree with our basic critique: “Perspectives on difference that focus on categories as a means for identifying and unpacking difference exhibit an impulse toward fixity that can constrain their usefulness for negotiating the shifting terrain of difference in writing classrooms” (619). To counter such tendencies to fixity, Kerschbaum uses Bakhtin to argue that markers of difference (e.g., ability or race) are “shaped through interaction,” only coming into awareness when “taken up in a communicative encounter” (628). As she succinctly argues: “[M]arkers of difference are so deeply rhetorical: they require involvement between a speaker/writer and an audience, and they must be located in their rhetorical context” (628). For instance, when we introduce our same-sex spouses in a social setting, or when we, as a man and a woman, refer respectively to a husband and wife, we mark our difference as...
gay and lesbian in a communicative interaction. So, on one hand, we agree with Kerschbaum's assertions about the rhetoricality of markers of difference. In this particular example, we actually use the common category of marital relations to underscore a difference within the category—a difference made rhetorically. Or, as Kerschbaum might put it, in this case

markers of difference enable reflexivity between familiar categories that are already part of conscious identifications and the everyday interactions in which these categories take on greater complexity, resonance, and nuance. Thus, markers of difference are a resource for coming to know others. (639)

In putting together our identities as married (in California) and also gay and lesbian, we create a communicative bridge while also showing the difference (detour?) within it; ideally, the common identity category (married) allows our interlocutors to recognize our difference (sexual orientation identity) without dismissing us.

At the same time, however, as Kerschbaum notes, a “focus on categories” can “exhibit an impulse toward fixity” (619). To use the marriage example, the category of commonality (marriage) can easily trump recognition of the significant differences about our being married as lesbian and gay. Because of the changing legal landscape of the last decade (a landscape that has included Gavin Newsom’s San Francisco wed-in and a California state annulment, among other events), Jackie has effectively married her wife three times; how do these multiple, even excessive, marriages to the same person complicate the “category” of marriage itself? Further, many of our interlocutors assume that how we structure our intimate lives is comparable, when in fact it is not. If Jonathan talks about his open marriage, then some interlocutors will hit a roadblock in what had been our shared, mutual understanding of marriage in this communicative exchange. Suddenly, his difference as a gay man who is married seems perverse, if not even unaccountable, unrecognizable. We have reached a point of incommensurability in which the categories collapse, the bridging category “married man” unable to sustain the weight of a queerness whose difference cannot be accounted for—or fixed—within another category.

From Flattening Effects to Flattening Affects
The flattening effects we describe above seem particularly, though not exclusively, produced in response to narrations about sex, sexuality, and sexual identities. Sex itself demands a recognition that what sex might mean—
the individuals involved, to the social and cultural matrices in which bodies engage each other sexually—always exceeds what is immediately graspable. Hélène Cixous and Gloria Anzaldúa, in different ways, point to the problem of language for sexuality and self, namely, that the sexual self cannot ever be purely discursive. There is the limbic system, there is that which makes us hard, or wet, or both, there is all of this sexual desire that communicates but, again, does not communicate anything always articulable. Even as discursive systems and structures of normative desire discipline us into “appropriate” sexual behavior, even temporarily, the body wants what it wants. What we want. It is in the locus of shame that we become intimately aware of the body’s persuasive ability. Shame, where official sexual dogma meets the autonomic nervous system, is a magnificently energizing force. How shame, how the body makes us feel, how the body makes us do—that cannot always be controlled by discourse, for there is always the simultaneous experience of “I shouldn’t feel this way” and “I do feel this way.”

Herein lies the dilemma—the impossibility?—of talking and writing about sex, of composing sex. For how can we compose sex and pleasure? Composition as a transformative field, which takes as its raison d’être the fitting of young writers to service (like horses to carts, or feet to shoes), demands an acknowledgment of the importance of being composed. Even our present (and past-present) interest in the idea of social constructionism serves as a way to talk about composing the self (selves); the mutuality of writing-into-being and being-written-into-being is seductive, a pas de deux that reassures us of our place in the culture whose languages we share. And yet, this sense of composition leaves out the keen sense of what it means to be composed, that is, not the written-into-beingness but the marshaling of one’s inner resources in order to control the inappropriate response.

Clearly, this sense of “composing oneself” depends on a subjugation of the flesh to the will, a potential flattening of both effects and affects; it depends on fitting one’s emotional presentation to what is considered neutral, nonjudgmental, serene, accepting. Taken together, these descriptors—accepting, nonjudgmental, neutral—form the very essence of what “multiculturalism” is supposed to be. Multiculturalism, then, becomes a composed response to difference. But it also serves as a response—or, more precisely, a failure of response—to the flesh, which is regarded as inappropriate as a subject of composition. In the process, the body as a mode of thought, as a site of agency, as a way of both being and critically knowing, becomes, as we have argued previously, an “impossible subject” for composition (179).
In an early interview, Foucault remarked that the “experience of the self is not a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self but an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one’s available freedom” (276). The experience of self as attempt—as an always-longing move with equal parts success and failure written into it—often comes upon us suddenly, physically, without deliberation. Its attempt takes as its very material for work the body, the psyche, the soul, the ghost in the machine and the machine itself, essaying a work in progress, a composing and recomposing of one’s story, a forming and re-forming of one’s body, a yogic stretching of possibilities. Currently, the place of such selves, the place of such bodies, seems rather limited. If we examine the “coming out” narratives or essays by LGBT writers frequently included in composition readers, for instance, we have difficulty finding portrayals of queer bodies as agents, as sites of critical and somatic thought.

Currently, the place of such selves, the place of such bodies, seems rather limited. If we examine the “coming out” narratives or essays by LGBT writers frequently included in composition readers, for instance, we have difficulty finding portrayals of queer bodies as agents, as sites of critical and somatic thought. In “Cruising Composition Texts: Negotiating Sexual Difference in First-Year Readers,” Martha Marinara, Jonathan Alexander, William P. Banks, and Samantha Blackmon note that

[t]oo often, even when queer authors are included, the presence of queerness itself is sometimes difficult to detect. The Writer’s Presence: A Pool of Readings has essays by Bernard Cooper, Gore Vidal, and David Sedaris, all three gay writers, but the essays included do not concern queer issues. A similar pattern can be seen in Ways of Reading, one of the most popular readers. A notoriously challenging text for students, the reader includes essays by Gloria Anzaldúa, James Baldwin, Michel Foucault, Richard Rodriguez, and Adrienne Rich—but these authors’ sexuality and its significance to their writing is never discussed. (276)

What becomes narrated in such pieces is a common humanity, in which the queerness has been flattened or even erased, and in which queer bodies—and their intimacies, their excesses, their possibilities—are never engaged. Why are textbooks important in this context? As the “marketed” arm of our profession, they respond to and indicate dominant trends in the field. Moreover, in “Taming Multiculturalism: The Will to Literacy in Composition Studies” Peter Vandenberg writes that “by exploring composition textbooks and composition’s professional discourse, [we find] that the transformative potential of multiculturalism is often ironically subordinated to the task of reducing
‘cultural distance,’ and that acquiring what we’ve come to call ‘multicultural literacy’ may demand a long, deep, and compliant congruity with dominant-culture literacy education” (537). Vandenberg goes on to write that “[w]hat justifies the presence of authors in these books is their ability to conceptualize their cultural experiences—or the editors’ ability to shape them—in a way that implies a thoroughly assimilated standard-English speaker as audience. Implicit, at least, for students is the message that other forms of knowledge creation are not worthy of notice” (548).

And, of course, critical pedagogues and proponents of multicultural literacies do not figure their practices as simply “inclusion.” However, much of composition’s approach to multiculturalism has relied—naturally—on the narration of difference to promote what is hoped to be a critical approach to prejudice, subjectivity, and power. We use the term naturally since the study and production of narrative has been an important “way in” for many writing teachers: a way to help students generate text about topics with which they are familiar, but also, one hopes, a way of working on issues of style, technique, and personal and political awareness—a tall order indeed! Students (and teachers and scholars) must come to realize, however, that we do not all experience the world in the same way. Collapsing distinctions in our experiences of equality and justice in order to narrate the story of our common humanity runs roughshod over the very critical stories that show us systems of inequity and injustice at work.

**Students (and teachers and scholars) must come to realize, however, that we do not all experience the world in the same way. Collapsing distinctions in our experiences of equality and justice in order to narrate the story of our common humanity runs roughshod over the very critical stories that show us systems of inequity and injustice at work.**

**Against Narrative Coherence**

Theorists from Emmanuel Levinas to Judith Butler have grappled with issues of narration, representation, and ethics, particularly the ways in which the stories we tell about ourselves and one another often do violence—at least semiotic violence—to our understanding of difference. At the same time, these theorists hold out possibilities for encountering the other ethically through narration—
provided that our approach to narration is grounded in an acknowledgment of radical alterity.

For Levinas, our “knowledge” of the other (our attempts to know, to categorize, to order the other) violates the uniqueness of the other, whose experience cannot be so colonized. He argues that a “person cannot be represented or given to knowledge in his or her uniqueness, because there is no science but of generality” (114). As Michael B. Smith puts it in his introduction to Levinas’s essays in Outside the Subject, “[k]nowledge is held by Levinas to be a kind of violence, when deployed against human beings. It comprehends, engulfs and assimilates the other into the (self)same” (xxiv). Along these lines, Suzanne Holland, writing in JAC about “Levinas and Otherwise-than-Being (Tolerant): Homosexuality and the Discourse of Tolerance,” argues that ethical approaches must be grounded in the unknowable face of the “other,” lest we risk doing violence to one another:

[E]thics is only possible when we begin “outside the subject”; in other words, we must start from the encounter with the other; we cannot start with the sovereignty of the self. Such a beginning—a bracketing of oneself, so-to-speak—is the only way not to do violence to the other, for every taking in of the other by way of the self, every reduction of alterity to same is a thematization. To thematize another is to put the other into a category, to assume a kind of knowledge or truth-claim about the other that forecloses difference and thereby to do violence; it is, according to Levinas, to totalize the other. (167–68)

In our ordering of the real, most often expressed in our determining of the normative, we tell stories about one another that reduce our experiences to bland commonalities. Rather, Levinas asks that the other be encountered “in dialogue” (xxiv). As he argues, “the uniqueness and irreducibility of human persons are respected and concretely affirmed by the diminishing of the violence to which they are exposed in the order, or disorder, of the determinism of the real” (121).

Turning our attention to writing and composing, Butler, in Giving an Account of Oneself, offers cogent analyses of how we “author” ourselves, of how we tell the stories of our lives and, in the process, open up spaces for understanding how our life narratives are imbricated in larger social forces and norms. As she puts it, “The subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in ways that not only (a) reveal self-constitution to be a kind of poiesis but (b) establish self-making as part of the broader operation of critique” (17). In terms of our discussion about narration and ethics, reflecting critically on self-narration offers an opportunity to encounter how “narrative
Teaching the Gray Areas

What kinds of writing might emerge out of this redirection from “understanding” difference to acknowledging radical alterity? We find ourselves returning to the conclusion of Elizabeth Ellsworth’s potent essay, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” and asking with her, “What would it mean to recognize not only that a multiplicity of knowledges are present in the classroom as a result of the way difference has been used to structure social relations inside and outside the classroom, but that these knowledges are contradictory, partial, and irreducible?” (321). Ellsworth advocates for a “pedagogy of the unknowable” (318), even as she refrains from showing us what such might actually be. So, in a practical turn, we pose here the questions: What kinds of writing assignments might emerge out of acknowledging contradiction and irreducibility, in both discourse and in lived, embodied, material realities? How do we engage, in and through writing, the “partial,” the senses of difference that are not reducible to simplistic understanding? In short, how do we teach in the gray areas between polarized understandings of difference?

A simple way to begin might be by having students not write about what they believe they “know” about one another, but what they suspect they do not know. Working with the earlier example from Hasseler and Bean, we might prompt our students thusly:

Choose a term of identity you use to define others, such as Asian American, white, girl, boy, queer, jock, and so forth. Now try to inhabit that discursive space. As you do so, pay attention to the process of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. What is unfamiliar? What do you not know? How are your words, your friends, your desires, your body different? What does it mean to be you? Your task is to explore how you have constructed your chosen term, balancing what you’ve taken in from essays, advertising, and media and what you put out into the public sphere yourself. A note: Do not make a claim. Do not argue. Do not conclude. Explore, meditate, engage in self-reflection.

Note that such a prompt not only encourages uncertainty—even discomposure—in the face of difference, it also, in its final sentences, takes on the prob-
lem of “narrative coherence.” That is, we can take a clue from Butler and point students in the direction of analyzing how the drive to narrative coherence forecloses on some possibilities for acknowledging radical differences—differences that are crucial to acknowledge when facing the other, when challenging totalizing visions of the world, and when learning to live a bit more generously with one another.

In the service of this project, we would argue, it makes sense to have students respond to difficult texts that directly challenge an audience’s ability to make radical alterity coherent and tame, texts that enact the impossibility of unknowable difference we discussed earlier. One notable (and frequently anthologized) example is Anzaldúa’s *La Frontera/Borderlands*, written partly in Spanish and describing through a variety of genres the author’s experiences of being between cultures, between different totalizing realities. The use of different languages in Anzaldúa’s text is designed to both include and alienate, to honor Anzaldúa’s multiple heritages and challenge a reader’s expectations that a text will easily make sense, or that a text is only worth knowing if it is accessible. Such a rhetorical move gestures also to Anzaldúa’s unknowability as a *mestiza* in a white dominant culture. As Anzaldúa herself writes, reflecting on her simultaneous visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, “I am visible—see this Indian face—but I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They’d like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven’t, we haven’t. The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance” (108).

There are many other notably difficult, unknowable texts that challenge the flattening effect of narrative coherence—that challenge the blind spots of dominant culture. One such text is the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, in which a trans* musician from East Berlin narrates her life story as she embarks on a U.S. tour. What we find useful in this context is the film’s foregrounding of incommensurability: Hedwig/Hansel is always already (n)either man (n)or woman. It is a difficult concept alluding to a radical difference in experience that the film does not resolve, despite the move to find one’s “other half,” à la Aristophanes. At the same time that the movie works within a multicultural paradigm that builds understanding on sympathy, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* articulates very queer, very dangerous emotions, inviting us to laugh, to cry, and to squirm in our seats. Hedwig sings “My sex change operation got botched; my guardian angel fell asleep on the watch; now all I got is a Barbie doll crotch; I’ve got an angry inch!” Hedwig’s “angry inch,” the “little bishop in a turtleneck,”
forces an embodied grappling with difference—a move to understand one queer experience, inasmuch as that is possible. The film suggests that only an experience of the body—and a potentially traumatic one at that—might usher in the kind of sympathy that is productive of understanding and change.

We might also point to Cherríe Moraga’s *The Last Generation*, a multilingual, multigenre collection of essays that offers multiple, often competing, perspectives that do not yield easily to comfortable resolution. The essays tell of negotiating lesbianism within a larger homophobic society and the specific homophobias of some Chicana/o communities, as well as negotiating Moraga’s Chicana identity and her identity as a woman in a racist and a sexist society—a sexism finding uneasy parallels both within and without Chicana/o communities. This is dense stuff. And negotiation is the wrong word to describe the multiple and vexing confrontations that Moraga makes as she moves through different social, communal, political, and personal spaces. They are confrontations playing across her body. Moraga’s essays both invite and confront. They simultaneously offer a gesture of understanding and insist on the necessity of confronting failed understanding—a failure that cannot be elided or left unacknowledged. For in failing to acknowledge our separateness, our different raced and sexed personal and political experiences, we totally miss the point. Moraga writes:

I hold a vision requiring a radical transformation of consciousness in this country, that as the people-of-color population increases, we will not be just another brown faceless mass hungrily awaiting integration into white Amerika, but that we will emerge as a mass movement of people to redefine what an “American” is. Our entire concept of this nation’s identity must change, possibly be obliterated. (61)

This passage signals qualities of experience potentially unknown and unknowable. It asks the reader to change, to imagine changing with her. Understanding is itself insufficient, perhaps even impossible. Only substantive change can create imaginable spaces for coexistence.

Finally, in the interests of challenging another narrative coherence—that of the oft-anthologized “coming out” story—we might find other stories of queer experience, ones that rely for their critical impact neither on narrative closure or easily recognized “just like us” queers. In any composition course focused on argument, for example, we might “teach the conflicts” about sexual liberation and the body within different queer communities in the late 1990s—the “Sex Panic!” wars. Neither side is necessarily more sympathetic than the other, but the conflict points to key differences between queers themselves, working
against the easy assimilationist bent of many multicultural pedagogies. In one notable exchange, queer activist Eric Rofes chastises seemingly puritanical AIDS activists for policing sexual behavior:

Those of us standing up for sexual freedom are neither lost in a romanticized version of the golden age of the 1970s nor dick-hungry men who are selfishly seeking more power and more privilege. We have been condescendingly characterized as immature children who haven't grown up and need to get with the times, put our pricks back in our pants, and apply our energies to the real challenges facing our communities, like gays-in-the-military or gay marriage. Yet we believe that even a cursory look at the histories of our movement will show that sexual liberation has been inextricably bound together with gay liberation, the women's movement, and the emancipation of youth. Among the most effective ways of oppressing a people is through the colonization of their bodies, the stigmatizing of their desires, and the repression of their erotic energies. We believe continuing work on sexual liberation is crucial to social justice efforts. (Rofes)

Rofes's argument calls into question the ways in which civil rights advocacy for open lesbian and gay military service and marriage equality actually obscures attention to the sexual bodies of queer people. If anything, such advocacy tames queer bodies by aligning them with cultural norms: first you can openly die for your country; then you can marry within it. But not all queer desires fit into military uniforms or monogamous dyad relationships. Confronting such realities in the classroom will test the bounds of understanding of radical alterity.

Along such lines, we might include narratives of queers who have already come out. For example, Maggie Jochild's “Chasing the Second Wave in San Fran” offers us a polygamous, gun-carrying lesbian separatist who moves to San Francisco in the 1970s in part because she and her friends had “read somewhere (Lesbian Connection, maybe) that a group of wimmin, presumably dykes, were kidnapping and castrating repeat rapists, then dumping them on the steps of S.F. General. We hoped to plug into that activity. We each had deeply personal reasons for doing so” (Jochild). Jochild's story is funny, aggressive, incommensurable—how do her different political stances reconcile? What sense might we make of her peaceful politics and her snub-nosed .32?

How can inclusion strategies possibly account for such rich, combative diversity? Writing classrooms that assume a “melting pot” approach to difference enact the dominant culture's blind spot, as Anzaldúa might put it, leading to lethal ignorances. Writing classrooms that encourage irresolution in the face of difficult texts, that celebrate the ongoing questioning that should be at the
heart of critical pedagogy—such classrooms challenge what Anzaldúa calls the “killing” ignorance of dominant white culture. As such, these classrooms would not assign Anzaldúa, *Hedwig*, Moraga, or Jochlold only as challenging texts to read. Instead, with all the genre richness that a good writing classroom can provide, such texts would themselves be offered as ways to represent and contend with difference, multiplicity, unknowability. And as we have argued before, queerness itself offers us some purchase on not just what can be written, but how it might be written: “If queerness means more than just one more static representation of ‘diversity,’ containable in its knowability, then it must move in multiple directions at once, embracing multi-modality, multi-genre texts, and even, when available or perhaps necessary, multi-media” (183). What might our students learn from writing with Anzaldúa—in an act of simultaneity, not co-optation, instead of writing about or against her?

**Conclusions**

In “Reading and Writing Differences: The Problematic of Experience,” Min-Zhan Lu asserts that we need to find pedagogical and writing spaces within which to “care about another’s differences” as a way to “disrupt the material conditions that have given rise to” our different experiences of the world (239). We must foster such care through the work we do with writing and writing instruction—but how? More specifically, how might we foster a more critically productive relationship between story and subjectivity, narration and difference? What kinds of stories can we tell, and invite our students to tell, that will generate better understanding—not only of one another but of the dynamics of difference through which we differentially experience the world?

As compositionists, we do not want to relinquish the power and possibility of story. At the same time, we believe that our field must understand story and narrative (particularly narratives of difference) a bit . . . differently. Taking a cue from Lu, we believe that the answer may lie in the phrase “care about another’s differences.” How can we care for another’s differences, especially without reducing them through and to the bland, uncritical stories that replicate the experience of the “human”? Such care must proceed from a space of acknowledged not-knowing. Put another way, what may be most productive in
listening to and caring for each other’s stories is an acknowledgment of radical alterity—an acknowledgment, for instance, that if you are straight, you cannot know the queer—at least never completely. There will always be dimensions of the queer experience that are irreducible to tropes of shared humanity; and they should be irreducible, because they tell us much about how people are positioned socially through their differences—not only for queerness, certainly, but also for race, ethnicity, ability, and gender.

Such “knowing,” we believe, should not be a prerequisite for extending respect—particularly the respect of acknowledging that our experiences of the world are in fact different. Indeed, we are called to respect one another precisely because we do not know one another. Such a position may require that we re-examine some of the basic kinds of writing assignments that many of us have used to help students explore issues of difference. It may also require that we re-think how we present in class those narrations of the “other” and of difference. We must make our storytelling, that narration of difference, a much richer and more complex experience. Our sense is that some answers to the question of what kinds of queer texts to embrace may lie outside of our field, in visual arts and computer animations, in immersive technologies that demand full and embodied participation from writers and readers. Even there, however, we can only hope to surround the body’s argument—not communicate it. At the same time, this very surrounding, or immersion, might give us a clearer sense of our available freedoms, with the hope of adding to that number.

Granted, the readings we describe above may be polarizing for some students, even somewhat threatening. However, we’ve become increasingly convinced that part of our work as compositionists is to work with students on writing that is threatening, that fundamentally questions what we believe or hold to be true. Some compositionists, such as Dale Jacobs and Laura R. Micciche, are paying critical attention to emotion in the writing classroom. Micciche’s book Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching, for example, argues that emotion has been largely ignored as a crucial component of argument, and that any serious attention to how we position ourselves as rhetors in the world must take into consideration the persuasive force of emotion and affect. She argues that “we can help sharpen students’ reading, writing, and thinking skills by enacting emotion in the classroom through creative practices,” primarily
since “emotions perform and embody meanings we take for granted or entirely fail to acknowledge, and that becoming aware of emotion as a legitimate rhetoric promises to revitalize theory and practice in composition studies” (9, 17).

But writing is often unsettling. And as we work with students on developing an appreciation for and understanding of how writing moves in the world, we should not eschew difficult, challenging texts in favor of texts that replicate “safe” norms or tolerable differences. Doing so robs students of developing a strong critical sense of the power of writing to confront, to unsettle, to change us. In their interview with Butler, “Changing the Subject: Judith Butler’s Politics of Radical Resignification,” Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham conclude by noting that

Taking for granted one’s own linguistic horizon as the ultimate linguistic horizon leads to an enormous parochialism and keeps us from being open to radical difference and from undergoing the discomfort and the anxiety of realizing that the scheme of intelligibility on which we rely fundamentally is not adequate, is not common, and closes us off from the possibility of understanding others and ourselves in a more fundamentally capacious way. (765)

We have come to believe that our honoring of diversity and difference often fails in practice to move beyond simply acknowledging difference in favor of reasserting shared values, common visions, and comparable dreams. What narratives, and what writing assignments, work to uncover these dimensions—the dimensions of profound difference that complicate and problematize rather flattened narratives of a common humanity and that ignore the experiences of the body, the truths of the flesh? To create opportunities to understand one another in a “more fundamentally capacious way” may require that we risk substantive discomfort. Such discomfort itself may be the proper subject of student compositions as they grapple with the other. Certainly, some will argue that it is perhaps impossible to construct writing assignments based on what is impossible to know—on incommensurability, or unknowability. We maintain, however, that unknowability is the proper subject of writing itself.

Acknowledgments
We would like to thank our CCC reviewers, Helen Fox, Martha Marinara, and Brad Peters, for their detailed, thorough, and challenging readings of our essay throughout the editorial process. Many thanks as well to Kathi Yancey for her thoughtful guidance and unflagging good nature.

This essay substantially revises and expands Jonathan’s September 4, 2008, post on the CCCC blog at http://cccc-blog.blogspot.com/. Our thanks to NCTE for
permission to use the post in this context and to Joyce Middleton for providing the initial opportunity to explore "flattening effects."

**Note**

1. We use the term *voice* deliberately here, for Powell’s presentation included a variety of narratives read aloud. At the same time, we recognize the problem of the “voice” trope in our own work (and in the field at large), since not everyone has a voice, and not everyone hears, and voice as a metaphor therefore excludes a number of our colleagues. Attempting to avoid the use of the trope ourselves, we only use the term *voice* when directly quoting from our sources. We have attempted to pay similar attention to tropes of vision and seeing.

**Works Cited**


Jonathan Alexander
Jonathan Alexander is professor of English, campus writing coordinator, and director of the Center for Excellence in Writing and Communication at the University of California, Irvine. He has authored or edited eight books, including Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies, and has co-authored Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies. In 2011, he received the Charles Moran Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Field of Computers and Composition.

Jacqueline Rhodes
Jacqueline Rhodes is professor of English at California State University, San Bernardino. Her scholarly work focuses on intersections of rhetoric, materiality, and technology and has been published in a variety of venues, including College Composition and Communication, JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory, Computers and Composition, Enculturation, and Rhetoric Review. Her book Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modern was published in 2005 by the State University of New York Press.