

## **WPAs Respond to “A Symposium on Diversity and the Intellectual Work of WPAs”**

In our fall / winter 2009 issue, we opened a forum for exploring issues of concern to WPAs across our wide array of administrative contexts. Jonathan Alexander and Paul Matsuda graciously accepted our mid-summer invitation to write to our first query, an issue that arose as a WPA-L thread, only to be further engaged in the context of our CCCC’s annual business meeting in San Francisco and the subsequent blog, likewise hosted by our CCCC organization. We took an administrative turn with the issue of diversity when we asked Alexander and Matsuda: How might the journal more visibly and purposefully engage diversity as an area of intellectual administrative work within our categories of work or beyond them?

Their brief articles inspired the following four responses. Please continue the discussion by inventing, theorizing and imagining new work that responds to theirs. We invite article length manuscripts that continue the WPA conversation on diversity and administrative work. Submit your work to [journal@wpacouncil.org](mailto:journal@wpacouncil.org).

—Your WPA Editors

## **Who Are We? What Do We Want to Become? A Response to Jonathan Alexander**

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Jonathan Alexander’s “Literacy and Diversity: A Provocation,” in asking us to challenge false-inclusion strategies as a sort of “diversity apologia,” asks us to re-conceive the work of composition. To “queer” composition is to push at and even exceed the boundaries of composition, even as that field itself seeks to help students create boundaries around their own texts, to produce the “composed” text, to produce texts that have composure. Alexander appears to argue that we need to begin accounting for how the

“composure” of our field (even materially and rhetorically engaged composure) reifies boundaries—of writing, of identity, of our professional and administrative work.

Our own lack of accounting for those boundaries may be why our field and our colleagues, well-intentioned though they are as “allies,” aren’t paying attention. It may also be why some of us dread the simple “tolerance” of diversity that has become too-common a fallback position in discussions of gender and sexuality in our field. Such tolerance leads to, as Alexander poignantly notes, a view of some Others as acceptable “sacrifices” (165). To fall back on rhetoric, I offer an attention to *kairos* here. Each of us knows what counts as the “exigent circumstances” that compel us to speak out, as well as those that compel us to quiet ourselves, to civilize ourselves, to compose ourselves. How are those *kairotic* moments inflected by sex and impossibility, and to what extent must we shift the ground itself in order to speak? Who are we, and what are we to become? Queer asks composition to change—and to change a lot by becoming a kind of writing studies that would acknowledge positions that are most decidedly not safe, that are challenging, that refuse composition itself. Indeed, Alexander urges us to take up this challenge, to pay attention, to “move beyond including, to understanding,” (168), to “risk substantive discomfort” (qtd. in Alexander 168) by refusing the flattening discourse of our stock responses to diversity and focusing instead on “the rough spots poking us to think through our differences” (167).

One such rough spot appeared in early 2009 on the WPA listserv. What started the discussion was a post about a move to dismiss queer theorists from Georgia State University. The first responses simultaneously expressed outrage and framed the controversy as one of either “academic freedom” (Hochman) or more specifically as a problem we have bridging the divide between academic and public discourses (Climer). In contrast, Barbara L’Eplattenier pointed out that the situation “doesn’t say anything about education; it has everything to do with attacking an ‘easy target’ and scoring some easy political points with your base.” Alexander wrote that he agreed with Hochman: “This is about academic freedom. But it is ALSO about attacking QUEERS. QUEERS are the target, in ways that others are not.” In my own response, I didn’t dispute that the issue had something to do with education/academic freedom, but I, too, pointed out the “historical and cultural specificity” of this particular issue—the different positionality of queerness within and without the academy. I wrote:

Moving too quickly into discussing “academic freedom” erases the anti-gay, anti-lesbian, anti-queer hatred that still passes as acceptable. ...

- \* How many of your universities offer domestic partnership benefits?
- \* How many of your institutions prohibit firing someone on the basis of sexual orientation?
- \* How many of us as writing program administrators have \*actively worked\* to address the real, material concerns of LGBT faculty?
- \* How many of us have pressed our professional organizations (NCTE, CCCC, MLA, even WPA?) to issue statements or resolutions on LGBT rights in general, or domestic partnership benefits in particular? ...

My point in all of this, as a compie and a queer, is that "academic freedom" is an issue that lets us NOT talk about the reality of the comp-studies closet, especially in terms of material working conditions. As WPAs, we're in a position to try to actually do something. I'm challenging members of the list. As Edmund Burke said, "All that's necessary for the triumph of evil is that good [people] do nothing." As my mother says, "shit or get off the pot."

As a result of the continuing discussion, a number of us co-sponsored three sense-of-the-house motions at the CCCC Business Meeting on March 14, 2009: (1) to urge CCCC to release a position statement in favor of domestic partnership benefits and non-discrimination statements; (2) to appoint a task force to identify and address queer issues within the organization and the profession; and (3) to revisit the "Scholars for the Dream" scholarship in order to possibly expand eligibility requirements to include LGBTQ scholars. All three motions passed, albeit with some discussion of whether CCCC could take such actions since it was not, as one Executive Committee member noted, "a labor organization."

I believe that these actions sprang from an attention to what Alexander calls the proper subject of composition: the "discourses of othering—that is the discursive and rhetorical strategies through which people are positioned within larger systems of categorization" (166-67). As Alexander points out in his discussion of the "flattening effect" of our usual discussions of diversity, focusing on "common ground" among all of us "others" often elides material differences. "Our humanity may be shared," he writes, "but our positioning within the hierarchies of that humanity is most definitely not shared" (167). Like Alexander, I've been frustrated by the discursive era-

sure of sexuality as a specific locale from which to forge political action in our field. It's been my experience at a number of conferences—including feminist conferences—that there weren't many queers there, or at least not many lesbians. Sometimes, "queer" appeared to be a hot topic, but this delightfully unstable identification took on a false and exclusive stability, depending on the queerness and/or feminist politics of the speakers themselves. A workshop on queer pedagogy at a New York CCCC defined "queer" as virtually synonymous with "gay," and rather than challenging straight ways of teaching/writing/teaching-writing, focused on a charm-bracelet sort of inclusion strategy. I've attended and been part of (to my ongoing unease) similar panels since then. How can we, these earnest panels ask, make our classrooms "safe spaces" with texts that included an occasional "gay perspective"?

These sorts of narrative strategies—the "boundaries, naming practices, dogmas, and constitutive powers"—embody, as Wendy Brown notes, the objects of a Foucauldian "local criticism," and "the objects of local criticism: interrogation, challenge, discernment, and displacement are among [local criticism's] actions" (viii). To interrogate the strategies means to critique "historically specific and local constellations of power" in order to "refigure political possibility against the seeming givenness of the present" (Brown vii). As writing program administrators (past, present, and/or future), we occupy our own liminal spaces, somewhere between and yet transgredient to the categories of "faculty" and "management." Such a space, Foucault reminds us, forms a simultaneously powerful and dangerous position from which to act. Such a space, too, as our own institutional practices too often remind us, lets us turn a blind eye to that power and danger, cloaking real issues of discrimination and bigotry in the discourse of official "tolerance." In examining such spaces, I'm often reminded of Susan Miller's prescient "Writing Theory : : Theory Writing," in which she asks us to look at "the theory we say we have" and "the theory we actually do have" as evidenced in our teaching practice (68). To extrapolate here: what is the "commitment to diversity" our field says it has, and does actual practice point to a different commitment? Certainly, upon reading Alexander's piece, one is tempted to answer "yes" to that second question. This difference—between what we say and what we do—might be the one difference worth challenging into erasure.

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## (Un)Standard Deviations: Observing Diversity / Enabling Divergence

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Perhaps the spiritual bond lies in the non-in-difference of persons toward one another that is also called love, but that does not absorb the difference of strangeness and is possible only on the basis of a spoken word . . . .

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 103

The presence of the Other is a presence that teaches . . . .

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 148

A few years ago in a second-semester freshman composition class, I taught a themed course entitled “What Is Normal?: Exploring the Weird, the Wacky, the Queer and the Quirky.” During their first semester, I had taught this same group of students in a course where we had studied and volunteered for New York City homeless organizations.<sup>1</sup> For the following semester, they had the option to enroll in my course again, and all but a few did. Extending what they had experienced in their explorations of homelessness, I wanted the next course to expand their thinking about the “other” and, more importantly as Jonathan Alexander asserts, to expand their understanding of “discourses of othering” (166). They would need

to learn how discursive and rhetorical strategies are used “to enable identities and communities and to disable talk and understanding across those identities and communities” (167). For example, how had their discursive and rhetorical strategies constructed misinformed definitions and categories of the homeless? Subsequently, how had their volunteer work and their re-composing of the rhetoric of homelessness created not only alternative meaning-making but divergent insight-making about this outsider group? In sum, I wanted us to examine how we could divest ourselves of the processes of othering and the stereotyping that can result.

When we all arrived the next semester, I distributed my course description for “What Is Normal?” which stated:

People often seem torn between the desire to conform and be part of a community and, on the other hand, to stand out as an individual. Most often when people struggle with issues of conformity and individuality, they must make decisions about the normality of their personal identity and how much they want to invest in it. If someone invests completely in “the normal,” how does this limit their creativity, their pleasure, or their achievements? After all, some of our most prominent artists, scientists, and even world leaders haven’t been what one could call “normal.” If someone completely denies “the normal,” how does this strain their relationships to family, community, or society? (Many who have shirked normalcy have been rubber-roomed.) In some cases, societies or governments enforce normalcy and that puts into question a citizen’s right to free expression, pursuits of happiness, and civil rights. Do we have the right to be weird?

After reading this description, I prompted them to freewrite, asking them, “How are you queer?” Knowing my in-class instructional routines, the students had been poised to write, pencils and pens at the ready. After I posed this question, however, students’ writing implements went down and hands went up.

“But Mark, what if you’re not gay?”

“I didn’t ask you anything about your sexual orientation. I asked you how you are queer.”<sup>2</sup>

For a moment this prompt felt unsettling for my students. They balked. However, the ensuing conversation about the term queer revealed what they knew about its denotation, how its connotations disrupted their sense of security, and how their personal connection to it could possibly redefine them. Their initial resistance to the word queer demonstrated how words

do things to us; if my presumably straight students refer to themselves as queer, does that affiliate them with a community of sexual others? Why did this guilt by word association feel so risky to them?

This provocative prompt also initiated their first piece of writing in the course where they analyzed the structures of normalcy, acknowledged their positions to traditional thought/conventional wisdom, and discerned their performances of conforming to and rebelling against the normal. These queer self-portraits challenged them to consider their own subjective positions of non-normativity, their own insider-outsider roles and, eventually, their collective discourse of othering. With this writing assignment, students explored a wide variety of self-identified queerness: episodes of linguistic differences, tensions between religious beliefs and sexual desires, contested family circumstances, the sense of self within a community, and faltering confidence at college. After some alternative thinking about queerness, they all came up with a scenario when they felt at odds with normative standards of performance and belief—what could also be called their previously unrealized subjective positions as the Other. My students soon realized that as humans if we shared anything, we shared the “substantive discomfort” of feeling outside the norm.<sup>3</sup> Now we just had to figure out what to do with this discomfort, how to make it productive and transformative instead of self-victimizing and incapacitating.

Their essays circumscribed usual categories and definitions of diversity—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation; they certainly didn’t ignore these significant aspects of their identities but delved into the very nuanced complexities that the intersectionalities of these identities create when experienced in real life. Within this very ethnically, racially, linguistically, sexually mixed classroom of urban students, diverseness in fact was the common denominator. This difference as commonality didn’t flatten our responses to each other but re-inflated them, even sometimes re-ignited them. Strangely in these classroom sessions, the most heated arguments occurred between people who on the surface came from the same backgrounds or communities. They realized deviations in their own community’s standards, and this intra-diversity became clear (and sometimes contentious) as our thick descriptions evolved. Once we described our individual differences in very specific phenomenological terms, our experiences became acutely unique and, simultaneously, compare-and-contrastable to each other’s worldviews—no matter the similarities or disparities. Our surface features—skin color, gendered mannerisms, accents, personal styles—both over-determined and re-contextualized what we thought we knew about our diversity; our close investigations of our divergent experi-

ences exposed a rich abundance of “alternative lifestyles” and yet strikingly analogous approaches to living.

In her CCCC blog on diversity, Malea Powell writes, “For me, diversity isn’t a ‘topic’ at all. The behaviors that our discipline frequently categorizes as ‘attention to diversity’ are part of every classroom already, are part of every scholarly audience already, are part of every university and every community we enter already.”

Piggybacking on Powell’s statement, I’d like to suggest that focusing simplistically on “diversity” might distract us from discovering our students’ divergent ways of knowing. I work in a university where diversity (in terms of multiculturalism) confronts you visually when you enter the classroom, and then rhetorically (and more interestingly) when students further diversify themselves through listening, reading, discussing, interpreting, and writing. I imagine in a more homogenous environment—where people look the same and share like backgrounds—their inter-rhetorical classroom encounters uncover similar divergences. Their (un)standard deviations may not be obvious at first glance, but they exist just beneath the discursive surface. We could put Powell’s idea another way, “We’re here. We’re diverse. Get used to it,” and then inscribe it, because linguistically composing the self exposes the collective identities of communities as well as the individual’s non-conformist deviations from them.

Our classrooms and our university settings constantly remind us of diversity’s omnipresence and conundrums. In her article, “Liberalism and Multiculturalism: The Politics of Indifference,” Chandran Kukathas describes this conflict:

The problem that arises for a liberal society, however, is that there quickly emerges a conflict between two demands; on one hand, that the dignity of the individual be recognized (by respecting certain fundamental rights); on the other hand, that the claims of the groups or cultural communities to which individuals belong be recognized. (686-87)

In terms of classrooms, we want to celebrate the historic cultural markers of particular communities, while we don’t want to impose any of these customary markers on unwilling members of that community.<sup>4</sup> At the administrative level of institutions, we want to recognize and record the diversity of our university settings through affirmative action forms, yet we don’t want to tokenize students who self-identify by checking simplifying categories. This multicultural balance between the diversity of groups and the divergence of individuals needs to be respected while simultaneously scrutinized.

In their invited responses, Jonathan Alexander and Paul Matsuda point to multiple ways that issues of diversity intersect with writing program administration and how we might reexamine them. Alexander challenges us to consider how we are "professionally or intellectually implicated" and encourages curricula building with more expansive critical discourses and rhetorics (168); Matsuda suggests a "sustained engagement with diversity" in our scholarly endeavors (171). Neither turns his back on diversity, but instead confronts it with the discomfort and risk taking that it induces and deserves.

I would further suggest that we check the balances of our administrative policy-making to ensure that they do not undermine the justifiable intentions of inclusion nor exclude the individuality of divergent voices. If our policies purport "to encourage scholarship by historically underrepresented groups"(see "CCCC Scholars"), we need to consider if there are historically underrepresented groups not included in that policy as well as give those already-potential recipients the explicit permission to address issues which have not yet said their names (enough). Just to name a non-exhaustive few: sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, first-generation status, linguistic privilege. For example, while the CCCC Scholars for the Dream Travel Award judiciously includes certain underrepresented groups, it may exclude others not listed or inadvertently delimit the opportunities for voices already called to participate. If we refuse to revisit this policy (or similar institutional policies anywhere) in the context of current institutional and national politics, we may be underestimating "what discourses of difference, choice, and visibility mean" and refusing to engage "the subject of difference as a disruption, as the outside to normalcy" (Britzman 152). As an organization, we need to pause and review whose underrepresented voices aren't enabled through our policy making and administrative decisions. Our re-thinking of diversity must occur at all levels of our educational endeavors: instructional, scholarly, and administrative. A re-envisioning and revision of all of our supportive endeavors may permit heretofore unacknowledged voices to articulate new ideas, illuminate blind spots, and further develop the breadth and depth of our field.

## NOTES

1. In this course, we examined the narratives of the homeless, read public policy and, for course credit, students volunteered fifteen hours at a New York City homeless service. Often iconoclastically for them, they learned that "the homeless" aren't any one kind of person. People end up without shelter for a variety of reasons that go far beyond drug abuse and mental illness. The people they met in their overnight stays in shelters de-mystified and debunked many of their

pre-conceptions. Their fears and prejudices against this group turned to insight and concern. While previously they had had contact with the homeless everyday of their commuting lives in NYC, this course helped them re-define what they knew and how they talked about this sadly ubiquitous, urban “other.”

2. Like Jonathan Alexander, I believe in the power of provocation and, if used thoughtfully, it can work as a useful pedagogical tool. After all, I don't want my students' contact zones of proximal development to be too safe.

3. Besides “substantive discomfort,” I think that feeling outside the norm can also allow you to feel liberatory relief.

4. When I explained to acquaintances about my master's thesis on “Gaylect” – the language of Gay men in Manhattan, they often indignantly responded that they didn't speak that way. While these men wanted affiliation with the broader Gay community, they did not want to be associated with some of the sociolinguistic markers that I had identified in my research. (See my article “The Queen's English: A Queery in Contrastive Rhetoric” in *Contrastive Rhetoric Theory Revised and Redefined*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001: 105-22.)

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## Engaging with Assessment Technologies: Responding to Valuing Diversity as a WPA

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I agree with both Jonathan Alexander's and Paul Kei Matsuda's suggestions for engaging “diversity” in WPA work and research. As a WPA and aca-

dem of color who works in an historically Hispanic Serving University, where only about 40% of our students are white, most are working class, and about 15% may be classified as Gen. 1.5 or ELL, I find both of Alexander’s and Matsuda’s suggestions accurate articulations of my own efforts as a Co-Director of our FYW program and as its assessment coordinator; however, there is one issue not yet explicitly mentioned, “diversity’s” role in writing assessment efforts, either program or classroom.

Regardless of the curriculum, course goals, teachers, or students in our courses, we all have one duty in common: to assess student writing in some fashion. We all do it, or have to do it. When I say “assess,” I mean all reading activities, open responses, evaluations that articulate judgments, holistic assessments of work done or not, placement decisions, and grading. Essentially, any time we read and judge, or ask our students to read and judge, which produces articulations of judgments about texts, then we are engaged in processes of assessment, or as I prefer to call them, assessment technologies. In another place, using scholars such as George Madaus, Brian Huot, and Peggy O’Neill, I theorize writing assessment as technology in order to address issues of racial formations and racism in assessments. I define a writing assessment technology as “[a]n historically situated, hegemonic environment in which power is made, used, and, transformed, that consists of sets of artifacts and technical codes, manipulated by institutionally-sanctioned agents, constructed for particular purposes that have relations to abstract ideas and concepts, and whose effects or outcomes shape, and are shaped by, racial, class-based, gender, and other socio-political arrangements” (108-09). In effect, an “assessment technology” points to the entire environment, including agents and processes that create an assessment, its decisions, and outcomes.

Perhaps one of the most overtly critical pedagogies one could have in a classroom or program is one that centers on—pays close attention to—the technologies of assessment that the classroom itself uses or develops, that is, the ways we read, judge, and articulate those judgments to each other. So Alexander’s proposal that we as WPAs promote pedagogies and curricula that “analyz[e] how dominant discourses contribute to the construction of particular privileged—and under-privileged—identities” (167) is asking us to do more than just rethink the rhetorics of the classroom that we read or write. He’s also asking us—in my view—to engage reflexively and self-consciously with the “discourses of othering,” which Alexander defines as “the discursive and rhetorical strategies through which people are positioned within larger systems of categorization” (166-67). Discourses of othering are used and (re)produced in writing assessment technologies, and are often the most present discourses of othering to our students in the classroom.

Additionally, I argue, assessment technologies are actually the real centers of writing classrooms anyway, not just because our students want, need, and yearn for evaluations and grades (for a host of reasons), but because assessment technologies always drive the writing and revision of students, the discussions of that work, and the valuing of writing (the making of meaning, as we so often say), even when teachers or WPAs do not pay much attention to their assessment technologies.

Interestingly, Matsuda's call, which focuses more on research and scholarship, intersects with Alexander's in an important way. Matsuda sees a lack of attention to the diverse ways in which our students, particularly ELL and Gen. 1.5 students, practice Englishes. For instance, Matsuda may be thinking primarily of international students from India, Japan, China, Mexico, etc., or Gen 1.5 students, such as many of the Hmong students at my school (California State University, Fresno) who speak and write English as their native language yet do so in ways that pose challenges to teachers and curricula because of the multiple languages spoken in their homes and past schools. Or perhaps Matsuda is thinking of African American or Latino/a students who come speaking and writing Englishes that are distanced from the dominant academic English in different ways, yet all of these Englishes are functional languages, practiced by arguably most of the surrounding communities in Fresno, to use my own context as an example.

So how are WPAs and teachers addressing in informed ways linguistic diversity in their programs and classroom practices? Often, we notice linguistic diversity when the decisions made from writing assessments (both classroom and programmatic) show us that some students are habitually harmed by those decisions (perhaps unfairly), which also assumes that we're looking for these effects, which I think Matsuda is not completely convinced occurs universally. I wonder though: Do we see the failures produced by linguistic diversity, by the judgments we place on other Englishes, as problems created by the assessment technologies that produce such decisions, and only those kinds of decisions? Do we see these failures as problems that students primarily face, or as student deficit? Or do we see these problems as curricular problems that demand more courses in order to teach to these issues? The intersection of Matsuda's and Alexander's calls, I hope, is clear: language diversity is one grounds for discourses of othering, such as those we promote unreflectively as teachers and WPAs in the rhetoric of assessments we provide as teachers, in the outcomes and rubrics we use to judge writing, or in the ways we teach revision.

I am suggesting that perhaps more often than we'd like to think, issues of linguistic diversity, just like issues of discursive othering, are mostly structural issues, ones designed into the technologies of assessment that we

use to do our work, be it classroom or program assessment. For Alexander, these structural issues amount to a programmatic valuing of a discourse that others certain students, that positions them (and their writing) in a hierarchy of value always already—the problem is structural, not one about individual prejudice or bad teachers. So when we do not see the structural problem in our assessment technologies, then teachers allow themselves to stand aloof from the consequences of their judgments on writing and students. Our concerns are always “just about the writing,” or standards, or about “preparing students for academia.” We lose sight of the fact that these concerns allow us to deny (or forget) that students’ writing, teachers’ standards, and preparation for academia are processes that have been designed to judge students—but they do not have to be so all the time.

For Matsuda, one way to approach issues of diversity is through our research, for instance, writing program assessment research that investigates racial formations or the impact of a program’s outcomes on the linguistic diversity found in that program. Teacher and TA training could be added to Matsuda’s call. In my own experience, I see a need for more teacher training in the ways race, as a social construction that affects all of our lived experiences and the learning in the classroom, and as a set of social and other dispositions that tend to occur in particular groups, is actualized in writing assessment technologies. Simply put: If race is an aspect shaping lived experience, and teachers use their experiences to help make judgments, then racial formations help create our dispositions and ways of judging student writing. And of course, there is the convincing argument that academic discourses are primarily White, middle-class discourses (likely for the reason I just stated, at least in part). Now, do not misunderstand me. The concept of “race,” or any particular racial formation, is not biological in nature. These two concepts (race and racial formations) are complex, social, and biological intersections that teachers, as racialized judges of student writing themselves, must be aware of, and should see as constructing their own reading and judging dispositions. Ultimately, I argue that, as most of us probably already believe, who we are affects how we judge writing. This is why addressing diversity in productive ways is so difficult in the classroom. We often have an easy time “celebrating diversity,” which typically does not require judgments, but we certainly do not usually “value diversity” in writing, which always requires judgments.

Finally, what would valuing diversity mean for a WPA or writing classroom? I think it starts with interrogating the ways valuing is structured into the writing assessment technologies deployed in programs and classrooms. Sure, there are institutional pressures, course goals, program outcomes, but isn’t some resistance to institutional and disciplinary pressures,

such as interrogating the discourses of othering, similar to the “critical” practices we already value and promote? Ultimately, I believe that engaging with “diversity,” engaging with the racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed bodies in our classrooms in ethical ways, means that we develop writing assessment technologies as critical processes that speak directly to the diverse subjectivities and linguistic diversity in our classrooms. I am not talking about “preparing students” for something in the future, or finding different ways to get them to “meet standards”—surely important endeavors, but ones we all already undertake. I am talking about changing writing programs and their relations to the Englishes already being used successfully in the world by many people. Perhaps it is our writing programs and their discourses that need to be prepared for the future.

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## The Woman Question in WPA Work

Melissa Nicolas, Drew University

I fumble in my purse for my cell phone, tap my mom’s number, and start sobbing. I can’t believe that I have been reduced to this sniveling mess. The culprit? A gastroenterologist. I am not a basket case because I have just received a fatal diagnosis. Rather, I am out here in the medical building parking lot, not able to stop the tears, because I have just been summarily dismissed. Without performing one test, without doing any kind of examination, this doctor has declared that “I look healthy.” (I guess some doctors can judge the health of your internal organs by a glance at your profile.) Reluctantly, he does schedule a test for a few weeks out, but not the extensive test my primary care doctor ordered “because,” he says, “I know what I will find. This is common for women. Why waste money performing the more expensive procedure when this is surely nothing?”

A few weeks pass, and I return for the test. I wonder whether the doctor has already written up his findings before he has performed the procedure. Not at all surprisingly, as he is conducting the test, he smugly declares, "nothing wrong here." Before I can get dressed, he begins what is surely a canned speech: "Melissa, there is nothing physically wrong with you. You just have to learn to handle stress better. And you may be a little depressed which can make you think you are ill. Just take it easy; you'll be fine." Even though he is a gastroenterologist, he has told me that my problems—problems that express themselves in very real physical symptoms—are all in my head. He is visibly annoyed when I pass him in the hallway and start to ask him a question. Walking away from me, he tells me, "The nurse will answer your questions on your way out." Dismissed again.

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I share this story not because it is a shocking, novel experience but precisely for the opposite reasons: I have been dismissed, discredited, or simply ignored countless times because my problems are "all in my head." Indeed, it is this acute awareness of the way my gendered self is perceived and acted upon in the world that brought me, some fifteen years ago, to the study of the ways that the institutionalization of gender (for example the "feminization" of composition studies) affects the status and material circumstances of both WPAs and writing instructors. Two decades ago, there was some exciting work going on in terms of how women, feminist theory, and feminization impacted and shaped rhetoric and composition studies. More recently, however, I have noticed that not only has that interest seemed to dissipate, but also I have a growing sense that it is no longer en vogue to ask questions about how women and women's issues impact, influence, and affect WPAs and the work they do.

At the WPA conference this past summer in Minneapolis, for example, I attended a session on the marginalization of WPA work. It was a smart presentation, engaging the audience in important questions about race, gender, sexual identity, class politics, and WPA work. During the question and answer period, the conversation turned to the idea of a WPA as a "nurturer." An audience member (a white, gay male) noted that he liked that WPAs were sometimes seen as "nurturers" because it allowed him to escape "from the macho, tough-guy image males are supposed to have." Responding to this interesting observation, I noted that while I could see the nurturer identity opening up a positive space for a gay man who felt stifled by macho images, I cautioned that the nurturer image could still be problematic for some people—particularly young, female WPAs—to embrace because such a term was loaded with sex role identifications and expecta-

tions that could seriously threaten a female WPA's power. Another audience member (a white female) then countered that "composition is post-feminist, and as a field, we are past that conversation."

No matter the narrative we create for ourselves as a field, however, my experience in the academy, in the doctor's office, in American society, tells me that while "we" may be past talking about women and women's issues, those issues have not gone away. The dialogue, the critique, the consciousness-raising, and the outrage may have gone underground or largely disappeared, but the discrimination, the attitudes, the behaviors that mark women as "other" as "lesser" as "weaker" are still there.

Reading Jonathan Alexander's "Literacy and Diversity: A Provocation" made me acutely aware of how problematic this dismissal of, or at least disregard for, gender issues can be in the work we do. While Alexander is primarily concerned with queer identity, his articulation of the ways his personal life informs his professional life as a WPA and scholar resonated with me:

I am always thinking about my own body, about where my queer [female] body is in the words that I write, in the lectures I offer, in the classes I teach, in the committee meetings I attend, in the program that I lead. I am waiting to be called out, to be dismissed because I'm queer [female], to have my ideas disregarded because, frankly, my rights are sometimes disregarded in the larger polis. A dense, dark connection between my treatment in the public sphere, my status as a queer man [woman], and my perception of myself as I perform my duties surely informs my performance and my perception of those duties. (165)

Substituting the words "female" and "woman" for Alexander's "queer" makes his description of the ways in which the personal, the professional, and the political coalesce to form his identity just as apt for me as a heterosexual white woman. As a WPA, I cannot help but bring my experiences as a woman in what is still a patriarchal society to bear on the work I do.

We do a grave disservice to ourselves and the field by failing to publicly and openly acknowledge that the "woman question" is far from resolved. Just recently, in the Fall/Winter 2009 issue of this journal, Jonikka Charlton and Shirley K Rose reported that the total number of female WPAs has increased since the 1980s (119) but that the total number of professors has decreased with the greatest growth in WPA positions being concentrated in the non-tenure-track and yet-to-be-tenured ranks (123). It seems to me that these statistics alone indicate that "we" are not past the gender question

in composition studies. Rather, we appear to have a front-row seat to the ways in which composition studies is still subject to larger social forces that devalue what is perceived as women’s work. As a field, we need to do more work, not less, on the feminization of composition studies and WPA work.

I would be thrilled to be proven wrong about all of this. No one would be happier than I to learn that, indeed, being a woman no longer means that I will be treated any differently than my male counterparts. But, unlike the male doctor who could just look at me and pronounce that “nothing is wrong,” and that my troubles are “all in my head,” I will wait until the empirical results are in to make a judgment.

#### WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Jonathan. “Literacy and Diversity: A Provocation.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 33. 1-2. (Fall/Winter 2009): 164-68. Print.
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