

## A Queer Eye for the WPA

Harry Denny

Across America beginning in the summer of 2003, hapless hetero men, the women who love them, and a good number of gays tuned into Bravo cable television to watch *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. This series offered up a panel of five comfortable/comforting gay men who performed their identities in ways that would not threaten either their “clients” or the audience of presumed mainstream straight people. Diamonds-in-the-rough could be remade into metrosexuals with gentle tutoring on personal grooming, home design, culture, food & wine, and fashion. Suddenly the everyday schlub could bend it like David Beckham and have an easy style that’s as at home in Yankee Stadium as Pier 1 Imports. Turning to the world of writing program administrators, I suspect the Fab Five could get some work done:

- Mock turtlenecks and patched-elbow jackets traded for smoking jackets and untucked oxfords with sweater vests
- Hard candy for writers thrown out in place of hand-made lozenges from Jacques Torres.
- Chairs & desks from surplus arranged in a circle for writing workshops swapped out for modular furniture with soothing pastels and rolling casters
- Summer reading lists now found with cool iPad apps
- Savannah pub crawls abandoned for yoga for WPAs.

This list of makeovers is endless and fun, and the possibilities are endless.

But embedded in the cultural phenomenon of the Fab Five and *Queer Eye* is a history of transformation and evidence of a shifting set of values and priorities that are instructive, oddly enough, for those of us invested in how we teach writing or those of us who act as administrators of academic units that facilitate writing to learn and learning to write. *Queer Eye* also represented the culmination of change happening throughout the popular culture: Ellen had come out, *Will & Grace* was must-see TV, and *Queer as*

*Folk* had taken Showtime by storm. What we don't remember is that the same summer that *Queer Eye* premiered, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, decriminalizing same-sex sodomy. So it seemed society was shifting along with the culture, beginning to challenge and reinvent what had been taken as hegemonic, conventional, or as the Call for Papers (see Appendix to Karen Kopelson's plenary for the Call) for this year's conference invited us to think about, the notion of the norm or normal. And yet, we were in the midst of the second Bush administration whose War on Terror provided cover for assaults just as meaningful on the home front: The beginning of the Spelling Commission which advanced a whole set of discourses that have naturalized a corporate-assessment-education industrial complex, policies that have further eroded support for higher education and the humanities, and law suits that have made access to education and civil participation more difficult than ever before.

Yet as a mainstream conservatism has steadily owned the terms of debate in our national discussions, the country continues to complicate the very diversity around which we each operate on an everyday basis. To channel Linda Adler-Kassner in the *Activist WPA*, our American jeremiad is always already a paradox of an exceptionalist mission toward homogenization and assimilation that's also constantly under threat of disorder, dysfunction, and diversity. For people who identify with the queer community, the question of what is meant by "normal" has been crucial to identity formation, organizing, activism, and inquiry. As I read the 2013 CWPA conference call for proposals, that frame also seems to serve us well as we think about what it is we do as professionals in writing program administration. To that end, that's where I'd like to focus my comments: Connecting the history and key concepts that gave birth to queer theory to our work as WPAs. Namely, I want to focus on what we mean when we invoke the signs "normal," "performance," and "identity."

For queer people, the question of normal has been a long, critical project. As Michael Warner wrote in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* retrospective last year, sexuality has been a site for the interrogation, not so much to find its genealogical roots or to uncover some great origin story of its beginnings, but more importantly, the exploration of sexuality is about the mechanics and operation of power. While some in the community might be in search of great sexual minorities from yesteryear or they hope to recover a hidden history of queers from the ages, others of us are more interested in how we began to name and inscribe sexual identity with meaning. Foucault taught us that the appearance of the homosexual coincided with the discovery, invention, and proliferation of identities that continues through today. The production of sexuality has accelerated, has

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become ever more complex, and gradually has embedded itself into nearly every aspect of contemporary ways of thinking about human activity. Specifically, it wasn't enough, for example, to invent a personage that we came to name as the homosexual; social science had to imbue the figure with meaning and a sort of pedagogy that in some ways we continue to use. In the production of meaning, the figure had to speak, as Foucault argues, but the significance and truth of that talking and performing was granted from beyond, from the psychologist or later a teacher. But the meaning was never intrinsic to the homosexual's words or body; it arose from a sort of translation dynamic. As more and more began to be known about the homosexual, this figure gave meaning to its opposed/unmarked companion: The heterosexual. Put differently, gay and straight began this never ending Fred-and-Ginger sort of dance with one another. And the tango represented a sort of dynamic that has structured so much of who we are and how we do society. The Other is made legible and possible by The Same. Marked bodies enable the Unmarked. These binaries are everywhere and powerful.

For a young gay man growing up in Iowa during the early days of what would come to be called AIDS, I ate up this scholarship coming out of cultural studies and contemporary continental philosophy. My world was rocked because all these theories began to help make sense of what was happening around the community. All the talk and writing about homosexuals being abnormal that began to appear in the nineteenth century and accelerated in the twentieth never went away once we had been invented and served our purpose. In our naming and the dissemination of that knowledge, people began to learn they weren't alone, they began to find each other, they began to carve out networks of support and communities of relative safety. Eventually, they organized and began to fight against oppression and challenged that label of abnormal and its negative ideological and material consequences. But when HIV hit the community, our enemies thought they had the right ammunition to re-inscribe us not just as abnormal, but also as a health menace that required suppression, if not eradication. AIDS was used to signify a moral lesson and justify governmental inaction early on. And I think we could argue that whenever an object of normalcy is juxtaposed to the abnormal, almost always the lesson is that normal is better, that the abnormal is to be avoided and resisted.

Of course, it never quite works out so easily because some of us embrace the abnormal and begin to question our positioning. In the case of AIDS, the queer community organized and coalesced with other communities, often communities of color, and challenged the notion that sex was bad, that gay sex was toxic, that people of color were somehow different sexual creatures than white people, that injecting drug users could clean their

works and not transmit HIV. In other words, those stigmatized, those othered, those who were supposed to be silent took action and challenged the dominant, the institutional, the governmental.

When we turn to our own programs, I would like us to think about how the normal/abnormal doublet plays out in our own everyday interactions and how we might begin to think and do our work differently. The example that comes to mind most immediately is the role that norming plays in what we do, whether we're aiming for reliability in our grading practices or we're working toward consensus about what we value in our programs. Embedded in that notion of the norm is that which is not. Or to flip it, we depend on the outliers to give texture to the middle, the adequate. But in those conversations, we are marking a same and other that has real consequences for the people who are the objects of those discourses.

In the world of writing centers, I see this same/other, normal/abnormal play out powerfully. Here I'm talking about the face of the writing center as well as its voice. At St. John's, we are proud to be situated in one of the most linguistically and ethnically diverse places in the country, if not the world. We started thinking about the politics of face and began to realize we had internalized practices of homogenization that were reproducing sameness and creating an environment where people were Othered in the midst of this great diversity. Just a couple of examples. Table 1 presents a comparison of students who come into the writing center to the larger population at the university, and they look relatively similar.

Table 1. Ethnic Diversity, Fall 2011

Ethnicity	UWC Clients	University Wide	UWC Staff
Two or More Races	3.2%	2%	0.0%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1%	0%	3.6%
Asian	23.8%	15%	10.7%
Black/African American	21.2%	13%	13.1%
Hispanic/Latino	15.9%	14%	7.1%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.3%	0%	0.0%
Unknown	4.5%	4%	0.0%
White	31.1%	44%	70.2%

Note: The university-wide data comes from the St. John's University's Office of Institutional Research. Client and staff racial coding comes from information pulled from the university information system.

Yet when we begin looking at the students who staff the center, the numbers are very different. The staff at the point this data was collected was far whiter than the larger student population and clients that came into the center. As a WPA and a white person, that surprised me, but it's pretty typical for white people to overstate or over-represent diversity; we often see a greater range of bodies than actually exists. Digging further into that profile, we began to realize that while we see writers from across the campus in numbers and variety that mean we are ostensibly a WAC Writing Center (as opposed to an English-centric/serving Writing Center), yet the staff at the time were by and large coming from the ranks of our English department, with all the biases about writing out in the other disciplines that could be imagined.

Beyond the ethnic, racial, and disciplinary diversity of our writing center, we also wanted to "queer" the linguistic face of our writing center, to challenge what's normative and privileged. Again, on the Queens campus with its urban geography of linguistic and cultural diversity, the writing center, we have been oddly monolingual. We realized the situation wasn't quite as bad as initially imagined it, but what we discovered was nevertheless troubling. We learned that we had actually hired a number of writing consultants who were, in fact, multilingual but didn't think they could "come out" as that or even conduct sessions in languages other than English. One consultant even asked, "Are we an English-only writing center?" Nancy Grimm pushes us to think about these sorts of situations and examine how our everyday practices can cultivate ways of doing, beliefs, and values that lead people to reify a monolingual view of the world. She advocates that we perform in our centers and programs ways that foster a multilingual culture that better equips our students (and our consultants, I'd add) for the reality of the world they're entering.

To raise awareness and begin to challenge the face we're creating as a writing center, however we understand it, the staff St. John's and I go forth into it through our recruiting, hiring and on-going education practices. Our charge to one another is to think about what sort of a community we want to create, what and who we are normalizing and to what effect (who are we privileging, who are we marginalizing, who is marked, what's left uninterrogated?). We're also informing our conversations with this field's scholarship because the staff values practitioner inquiry, so we're reading Vershawn Young ("Should Writers Use Their Own Language" & *Your Average Nigga*) and Suresh Canagarajah's writings on code-switching and meshing and beginning a dialogue about what sorts of Englishes, vernaculars, genres, conventions, and literacies we support, privilege and marginalize. I'd like to say we have all our problems fixed and utopia has arrived on

campus. It hasn't, but at least we're talking and doubting and believing and trying to make progress.

Embedded in what I'm saying here is a subtle sleight of hand that gets at the next element of queer theory that I want us to think about. That move from the normal to normalizing is about action and performance. Over the years, I've always been aware of just how lucky and privileged I've been to come of age and be a gay person in spaces more or less welcoming to who I am, to all the identities that I claim as well as those of which I'm less aware. Because I'm out in professional life, I've always figured that my sexuality was a non-issue, and I have come to assume that spaces are safe because I somehow magically decide to occupy them. My colleague Anne Geller once teased me about this rhetoric of "safe spaces;" the notion is a non-starter because spaces are only ever more or less safe. But the idea that writing centers or writing classrooms are safe harbors, as Anne points out, is tricky because they must be made more or less safe, they can't just exist in such a state. If you were to walk into the Stonewall Inn back in the Village, there's nothing intrinsic to the brick, mortar, bar, stools, and lingering scent of spilled beer and cocktails. Instead, Stonewall has its significance in gay liberation history that is socially constructed and struggled over; the people have inhabited the space and made use of it and contested its meaning. Spaces in that sense, safe, not-so-safe, and even scary, need to be enacted or performed by the people within them, a mash-up of individual and collective action. Spaces and people both become performative—we can't just signify in some static or ahistorical way, our signifying has to involve a kind of action of doing, reading and expressing.

Now I knew this lesson—that spaces don't do or signify in and of themselves—so Anne's insight was a kind of bonk upside the head. In the early years of HIV education, we knew that the notion of "safe sex" was a false moniker; no form of sex was intrinsically safe, but different activities led to more or less risk. What we tried to teach the community was that sex wasn't bad or unsafe; it wasn't an either/or situation, but a both/and dynamic where partners could negotiate what they do in ways that reduced risk. People could reclaim sex through how they performed it and how they embedded meaning into what and how that sex signified. There's a lesson here for us as WPAs: Our spaces are not domains that we can claim or pronounce meaning on for a collective of colleagues, students, or some combination. These people and the spaces they move in or occupy are not problems to be fixed. Instead, we need to think about how our spaces make possible tactics that we either intend or that people using them find on their own and through which become empowered. From our leadership and abilities to make things possible, we can create spaces where people

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feel encouraged to challenge, to research, and to engage in inquiry-based practice. Right now in back in my writing center, two graduate students are deep into an amazing interview study to go forth into the question of the environment for multilingual consultants. What they're finding is the situation around multilingual values in the center isn't simply reduced down to easy binaries, but instead is revealing quite a bit of complexity about larger institutional and social values.

One of the graduate students' insights is that multilingualism isn't easily legible on the bodies of people, or to flip it a bit, because bodies don't always signal their multilingualism it's assumed not present. Some nebulous form of "academic" or "standard" English becomes de facto, not because there's a cabal of administrators, faculty or WPAs out to squash diversity. Instead, in our everyday practice, we don't take time to question what's invisible, what's not heard or seen, especially in relation to what's always legible and already perceived. In these ordinary practices, we reinscribe the dominant, the hegemonic, and by not intentionally pausing and questioning, we enable it all to build up a sort of inertia that's really hard to challenge or resist. It's the classic vacuum where the exercise of power is orchestrated by those who benefit the most and have the least the lose. That's the trouble with normal—as much as it depends on difference, it paradoxically crowds out any expression of diversity.

I was giving a talk a couple of months ago about the politics of diversity and challenging the participants to go beyond representational notions—just counting bodies as doing diversity—but to think about how diversity becomes meaningful and tangible to our students. At some point, I began to speak about my partner to use the pronoun "he" in reference to Courtney. A faculty member in the audience later said, "I thought you were just another WASP taking advantage of students of color to advance your career, but now I know you're not just speaking from a position of privilege, you understand what these students really experience." My takeaway in that moment wasn't that WASPs or men or people with privilege can't speak, or that people of color, sexual minorities, working-class people or other marginalized people must now displace those historically at the center. Instead, we need to have on-going conversations, talks that are inclusive as well as cognizant of the material reality of those occasions. Or, beyond speaking and representation, as Victor Villanueva pointed out so well, we need to think deeply about the distinctions between listening and hearing, or whether and to what degree we internalize the messages that challenge domination and oppression.

That exchange in the talk is important to reflect on because we're all constantly performing our identities, coming out, and eliding who we are

(or what some might name as passing). That calling me out (albeit incorrectly) as a WASP, represented a reading of my identities on so many levels, some of which were spot on, others not so much. My “coming out” moment was a critical juncture, a performance that queer studies asks us to attend to. By invoking my same-sex partner, I was using talk to put a sexual identity into discourse that might otherwise be misread or rendered transparent. Just as I was doing or enacting my identity through discourse, that colleague represented the flip-side of performance, a hearing and responding. That professor’s initial misreading and re-reading of my identities alludes to a whole other set of possible performances of identity that we don’t usually talk about, a whole range of bodies and identities that in our culture are rarely interrogated, what Donna Haraway once named as unmarked bodies, namely white bodies, male bodies, heterosexual bodies, middle-class bodies, American bodies, all bodies that possess ideological, material, political, social, cultural, and economic privilege. And so, in that moment, a third possible performance becomes available, one that I can in many ways continue to do in front of you all tonight: I can pass, because I have the bodily and cultural privilege to do so. That means I can defer the power and presumption of normativity and refuse to embody and signify the codes of dominance and domination, or I can pass as the unexamined mainstream. I press this point to draw attention to the reality that many cannot pick and choose their privilege: Some queers can’t pass, some working-class folks can’t, many women can’t, and most people of color can’t. Their identities are read, combined, and judged in an instant, in ways that just don’t have the same consequences as those of us with the presumption of privilege. This insight has really been brought home to me as I’ve followed the conversations and debates about Gabriella Muhs’ *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutierrez y Muhs).

This discursive reading of performance—of thinking about the encoding and decoding, of becoming aware of how we signify and of how signs are read—is especially relevant to writing centers, where we need to coach and mentor consultants or tutors on how to negotiate that very terrain in sessions. The *Everyday Writing Center* (Geller et al.) is now a classic text that helps us explore those very negotiations whether it’s the consultant who finds themselves morphing in persona, improvising from moment to moment and client to client, or reflecting on ways that systems of domination and oppression seep into ordinary interactions. Questioning performance is an important socio-cultural set of tactics or form of capital for writers to acquire and be encouraged to develop—whether in the writing center or in our writing classrooms. These very practices of critical self-reflection as well as supporting and challenging conversations, whether



in writing, cross-talk, and whatever venue, about assumptions and values, seem to me to be at the heart of the “high-impact” practices that more and more of us are talking about on our campuses at the prompting of the American Association of Colleges and Universities.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of all these thoughts about identity and performance, I wanted to close with two final sets of thoughts of where we are right now. The election in 2008 and the re-election of Barak Obama as President set off debates about whether the US has somehow finally gotten past race and any other number of flash points around identity politics in the country. Yet, as I speak, we’re witnessing the end of the Trayvon Martin trial, where the stereotyped threats of an unarmed black teen were warrants for the use of a “stand-your-ground” law to justify murder. In New York City, “Stop and Frisk” harassment of young people of color is cited as a primary cause of the decline of crime, with little attention to the shifting economics and demographics of the urban area, as more and more people are simply priced out of the five boroughs and poverty and the consequences of it are hidden from the eyes of masses of tourists, the hordes of gentrification, and the flood of suburban commuters. Throughout the country, women and their healthcare providers find their bodies subject to ever greater state-sanctioned scrutiny and invasion by virtue of geography and politics. In Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio, the rights of workers to collectively organize and challenge management are the most restricted that they have been in almost one hundred years. And, of course, in thirteen states in our country, same-sex marriages now have greater equity with their opposite-sex analogs, but in the rest of the country, queer folks still have to worry in a thousand large and small ways whether their relationships will be acknowledged, respected, or whether they’ll be the targets of increased suspicion and harassment. Our landscape couldn’t be more foreboding and promising at the same time. New sorts of role models keep popping up that inspire and make us pause at the same time, maybe even making the YouTube “It gets better” sensation more and more plausible for our young people. In the last few months, the “coming out” performances of professional boxer Orlando Cruz, WNBA player Brittney Griner, Major League Soccer player Robbie Roberts, and the NBA’s Jason Collins have spurred huge conversations about pop culture and sport and the politics of identity. When I consider their narratives and plights, I wonder whether we can get past identity and what it might mean in our writing centers and writing classrooms to presume to ever be past or beyond identity in our country, to elide it.

These athletes—gay athletes, and gay athletes of color—underscore the themes that I’ve tried to draw out. That is, for each of them, aspects of who they are are legible while others have to be put into discourse and negoti-

ated with a range of audiences for innumerable ends. Each of these people are also celebrities and have immense economic and cultural privilege in ways that sports figures in our country have always had. But we all have students in our writing centers and writing classrooms and colleagues in our units or departments whose identities play out on any number of registers, who embody norms, who pass, who are oppositional, all of whom need space, opportunity and occasion to challenge and question in productive ways. The Supreme Court last month handed down a series of decisions that force us all to think about the landscape of our campuses in the years to come. In *United States v. Windsor*, the federal government must recognize the same-sex marriages sanctioned in thirteen states, but left the status of sexual minorities in other states still precarious and vulnerable to the whims of the majority. The Voting Rights Act is gutted as a result of *Shelby v. Holder* and is already having an immediate impact in states that are moving forward with voter ID laws that are intended to restrict ballot access for people of color and college students in particular. Gerrymandering of congressional districts, now no longer subject to judicial scrutiny, will further dilute the voting power of significant blocks of people. And the decision *Fisher v. The University of Texas at Austin* left affirmative action hanging by a thread.

The very demographics of colleges and access to higher education will continue to depend on the “critical mass” rule of affirmative action law. Embedded in that very notion is a set of values about representation in and access to higher education, and we need sustained dialogue about their importance and implications for our institution and the politics of teaching and learning. What’s a “critical mass” and what impact does it have in a variety of contexts, and what happens when we lack it? My gut response is that we will revert to bias of the proximal, the assumption that what or who conforms to our frame of reference, must necessarily extend everywhere. In our writing centers or our writing classrooms, if only context or geography drives our ability to have critical conversations or difficult dialogs about diversity, what happens when we no longer have “critical masses” or when “critical masses” exist in isolated spaces? That reality of homogenous campuses exists in many places already, so our curricula must begin to take on the challenge of teaching diversity as a set of intellectual practices that can serve a variety of academic purposes. As we debate and underscore the meaning of a “critical mass” and the virtue of diversity in education, we must also be aware that our institutional missions face a crossroads: One direction continues a facile practice of tolerance where institutions and mainstream society grudgingly includes those who have been historically marginalized, and another direction represents a commitment to education

as generative of critical citizenship that is performed through a pedagogy that challenges social space and naturalized discourses and hegemonic performances of dominant values.

To finish, I have to echo the thoughts of Melissa Harris-Perry, who gave a commentary on her MSNBC show the morning after George Zimmerman trial acquitted him in the murder of Trayvon Martin. She captured so well what the decision means to so many and to me and her commentary has lessons that ought to linger throughout our conversations at this conference and everyday work beyond it:

In his turn of the century treatise, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote,

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. How does it feel to be a problem?

Everyone has problems. It is the human condition. No amount of wealth. No racial privilege. No righteousness of purpose and action leads to a life without problems. Everyone has them.

But Du Bois was pointing to something different. Not just having problems, but being a problem. How does it feel to be a problem? To have your very body and the bodies of your children to be assume to be criminal, violent, malignant.

How does it feel to be trapped on the roof of your home as the flood waters rise and be called a refugee?

How does it feel to wear the symbol of your faith and be assumed to be a terrorist threat to your own nation?

How does it feel to have the president who looks like you demanded to produce proof of his citizenship?

How does it feel to know that when you speak the language of your parents, you will be assumed to be illegal?

How does it feel to know that if you marry the person you love, some will say you are destroying the very fabric of the nation?

How does it feel to fear sending your son to the 7-Eleven for a bag of Skittles on a rainy night?

Du Bois wrote of black men,

He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in

his face. This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.

This is the dream that will guide us as we continue the struggle.

(Melissa Harris-Perry Show)

Harris-Perry holds the threads of identity politics together and underscores how any occasion for oppression and domination is an affront to anyone, anywhere. And just as important, she asks us to consider what it must be like, what it must feel like, to be a problem, the object of consternation, of speculation, of resolution. We must ask ourselves, how often do we reproduce this very rhetoric, this ideology, those practices, that position people as wistful problems, if only, if only, if only? In our moments when we manufacture and reify our identity politics as a politics of problems, we need to ask what and who are we normalizing, how do we naturalize and pathologize sets of performances, and what are the identities we foreground and elide? What might it mean to queer our impulses around the problem student, the troubled teacher, the flawed program? What's it mean to flip, or to queer the moment, and think about the possibilities we find ourselves lucky to engage like no other on campus? We have access and opportunity and resources, to channel Du Bois and Harris-Perry, to engage the struggles of our moment because we can, we must, and we will.

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#### NOTES

1. See, for example, the AACU's website on Liberal Education and America's Promise (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm>).

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