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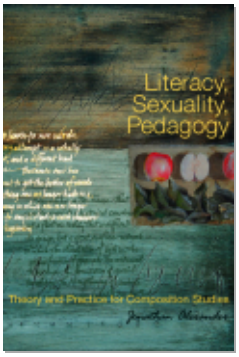
Introduction: Toward Sexual Literacy



Published by

Alexander, Jonathan.
Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies.
1 ed. Utah State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9403.

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INTRODUCTION
Toward Sexual Literacy

Sex and sexuality, and the complex personal and political issues surrounding them, are a powerful part of our daily lives. They form part of the most intimate moments we share with one another. But moreover, far from occupying a purely personal dimension in our lives, they saturate our public conversations and permeate the media. They lie at the core of some of our most pressing sociocultural and political debates, substantively informing how we think of ourselves and our identities, how we understand ourselves to ourselves. A brief scan of CNN.com on any given day at any time of the day will reveal that at least one (and usually two or three) primary news item is explicitly about sex or sexuality. Newsworthy topics include issues of gay marriage, sexual predation, reproductive issues, sex education, gays in the military, and sex among the famous. Debates about marriage, in particular, cut to the core of any number of intersecting issues, such as the meaning of marriage as a personal, social, and political institution. Without a doubt, sex and sexuality are key components of how we conceive of ourselves personally, organize ourselves collectively, and figure ourselves politically.

More significantly for us as writing and literacy specialists, *sexuality*—or the varied ways in which narratives of intimacy, pleasure, the body, gender, and identity become constructed and disseminated personally, socially, and politically—is itself a complex literacy event, evoking narrations of self, connections with others through complex discourses, and political formations mediated through ideological investments. Anthony Giddens, in his highly influential work *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, defines sexuality as "something each of us 'has,' or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. . . . sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms" (1992, 15). That connecting point—between our most personal, deep-seated senses of self and the "social norms" that organize democratic societies—is often story, narrative, and ideological discourse. In basic ways, when we talk about ourselves, when we define ourselves, we almost invariably use gendered

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and sexualized language. We are men or women, gay or straight, married or single. We make and take such declarations at face value, but they always already occur in thick social contexts, rooted in both shared and contested discourses and ways of classifying the world.

Noted theorist David M. Halperin argues in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, much as do Michel Foucault and the queer theorists, that "sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its erogenous zones by an ideological discourse" (1990, 25). Decades of feminist scholarship have demonstrated that the concepts male and female, masculinity and femininity, are much more than biological markers; they are intensely socially inflected constructs that mediate ourselves both to ourselves and to others. Interpolated with gender is a complicated nexus of desires that we attempt to label in order to "mark" us; identifications of gay and straight, for instance, are crucially significant labels in self-understanding, as well as being sites of contentious debate about citizenship and "normalcy." Indeed, the seeming ubiquity of sexuality within our cultural landscape and the multiple tensions surrounding it may be due in part to the close correlation in the contemporary West between sexuality and identity; in many ways, we define ourselves—and are defined by others—in terms of both gender and desire. And how we define ourselves and how we become defined, as men/women, gay/straight, married/single, become important dimensions of our sense of normalcy, of our agency (or not) within our society, and of our experience of justice and citizenship.

Learning how to talk fluently and critically about sex and sexuality composes a significant part of becoming literate in our society. Being able to address sexuality issues intelligently, critically, and even comfortably is vital if we are to participate in some of the most important debates of our time. At the most basic level, then, if our students are to learn how to navigate the wealth of information and media that grapples with issues of sex and sexuality, they need to become comfortable in dealing with such material in a mature, reasonable, and rhetorically savvy fashion. But of all the issues addressed directly and explicitly in college-level composition classrooms, sex and sexuality are probably among the least mentioned, the least discussed, the least analyzed and debated over any extended period of time. Indeed, despite the connection between sexuality and discourse, the complex languages we use to define and construct our experiences, intimacies, and desires, how often do we as compositionists explore with our students the powerful ways in which

sex and sexuality are culturally produced through discursive practices, through specific kinds of literacy practices, through the normalizing stories we tell to sanction some behaviors, proscribe others? Learning how to navigate such questions and explore such discussions should be a crucial component of any literacy education, and yet it is not.

To fill this need, some organizations have called for greater literacy about sexuality. San Francisco State University's National Sexuality Resource Center (NSRC), directed by renowned anthropologist Gilbert Herdt, has recently begun publishing an online magazine, *American Sexuality*, which offers a "unique opportunity to disseminate scholarly research in a widely read, internationally accessible medium aimed at informing academics, the general public and community based advocates on the critical gaps in sexuality research and Policy" (http://www.americansexuality.org/). This effort arises out of a strongly perceived need to close the "gap" between sophisticated scholarly and academic knowledges developed about sex and sexuality and conceptions of sexuality as they circulate in the public sphere, in often very unsophisticated ways. Recent evidence suggests attempts by some politicians and textbook companies to *limit* information about sex and sexuality in the public school system. The following excerpt from a recent online petition protests such limitations, calling attention in particular to a case in Texas: "In November 2004, under pressure from members of the Texas State Board of Education, Glencoe/McGraw-Hill publishers, together with Holt, Rinehart and Winston publishers, changed language in health texts for Texas middle and high school students. The revised texts now stipulate that marriage is a union only between a man and woman, promote an abstinence approach to sex education, and omit information related to contraceptive use" (http://www.petitiononline.com/mh2004sm/petition.html). This case is particularly significant in that Texas comprises a substantial share of the nation's textbook market, so companies that produce textbooks for Texas are likely to market the same books in other states as well, regardless of whether those states limit education and knowledge about sex and sexuality in quite the same way as proposed in Texas.

Such debates suggest not only the contentiousness with which sexuality is discussed but also its centrality to important conceptions of ourselves as individuals and as citizens in a pluralistic democracy. In terms of sexuality and citizenry, Dennis Altman argues persuasively in his recent book, *Global Sex*, that "[s]exuality is an area of human behavior,

emotion, and understanding which is often thought of as 'natural' and 'private,' even though it is simultaneously an arena of constant surveillance and control" (2001, 2). A significant part of that "constant surveillance and control" arises out of sexuality's complex intertwining with culture, politics, and even economics. Altman argues that it is imperative that we examine and understand sexuality "in the context of larger socioeconomic factors which create the conditions within which sexual acts and identities occur." Specifically, he notes the following: "These factors include the *economic*, as growing affluence allows—and forces new ways of organizing 'private' life, and as sexuality is increasingly commodified; the *cultural*, as images of different sexualities are rapidly diffused across the world, often to be confronted by religious and nationalist movements; and the *political*, in that state regulation plays a crucial role in determining the possible forms of sexual expression" (34).

Certainly, in thinking about the preceding example, the crafting of textbooks to promote particular kinds of sexual practices suggests a desire to promote a certain kind of citizen, a particular way of *being*. As a *compositionist*, I see in such examples and in Altman's analysis not only sexuality's connection to economics, culture, and politics, but also its powerful connection to literacy. How we talk about, define, and discuss the private versus the personal; how images and representations of sex and sexuality are constructed, written, and disseminated; how the state, the collective "we," defines sex and sexuality and controls information about it—all of these are *literacy* events that deserve attention and analysis. In terms of education, it is becoming increasingly apparent that how one learns about sex and sexuality in this culture is complexly wrapped up in notions of citizenship; put another way, how one develops a literacy about sexuality is crucial to one's understanding of important public debates, and hence participation in the democratic project.

As this brief foregoing sketch demonstrates, *sexuality and literacy are densely connected in contemporary Anglo-American culture*. At one level, literacy about sexuality as a highly significant personal, social, and political topic is crucial for students to understand some of the more important debates and issues of our time. But at another level, it is not the case just that we need more literacy about sexuality—which we do—but that we also need to recognize how our understanding of literacy itself is intimately bound up with the sexual, with sexuality. Put simply, the stories that we tell about sexuality are part and parcel, even *central* at times, to the stories we tell about ourselves, individually, collectively, and

politically. As such, being literate in our society—that is, being able to work knowledgeably, engagingly, and critically with some of the dominant stories that organize our lives, individually and collectively—must necessarily take into consideration an understanding of the complex ways in which sexuality plays a significant role in our personal and public self-definitions, in the ideologically valenced stories we tell about our lives. I call this particularly kind of literacy *sexual literacy*—the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms.

My writing of this book has emerged out of two interlocking convictions: first, in Anglo-American culture, literacy and sexuality are intimately intertwined, even if that intertwining is not always acknowledged or understood; second, we as compositionists, those charged with forwarding and developing literacy among students in higher education, have done surprisingly little to understand this intertwining of literacy and sexuality, much less articulate and process such a nexus with our students. I believe the time has come when it is imperative both to understand the interrelationship of sexuality and literacy *and* to think more fully and critically about how we as literacy specialists can—and *should*—address this relationship in our composition classes.

It is time to develop a critical *sexual literacy*.

If we are invested in working with students to develop a critical understanding of their places—and their possibilities—in the world, then we must consider issues of sexuality as central to the development of contemporary literacy. With race, gender, and religion, sexuality must be acknowledged as crucial in forming contemporary Western senses of literacy. Therefore, I believe it is time for us as literacy experts and pedagogues to take up this intertwining, as a significant subject for both scholarly and pedagogical exploration. In the remainder of this introduction, I would like to consider how recent trends in composition studies have created a space in which to begin thinking critically about how we can address the connection between literacy and sexuality. Given this connection, I will then forward the notion of *sexual literacy*, which I believe should be a central concern in the teaching of writing. Then I will briefly outline how the remaining chapters of this book (1) develop theoretical approaches to understanding the connection between sexuality and literacy; and (2) situate those approaches in classroom-based

pedagogies that demonstrate the development and efficacy of a powerful and critical sexual literacy.

COMPOSITION'S SOCIAL—BUT NOT QUITE SEXUAL—TURN

Despite the potential significance of issues of sexuality in the development of literacy and literacy skills, very little research in our discipline exists on the intersections between the two. And while some attention has been paid in the last decade to composing practices and issues of lesbian and gay students, no study analyzes how students, regardless of sexual orientation, grapple with sexuality issues or what such a critical engagement says about the development of their literacy skills and practices. Put another way, composition has, for lack of a better term, "flirted" with the connection between sexuality and literacy, even as it has often eschewed a more thorough investigation of it. Reviewing some of the major themes of scholarship about socially minded composition pedagogies will demonstrate how sex and sexuality are often overlooked, as well as showing the movements within composition that gesture powerfully toward how they might be examined productively by both teachers and students. Indeed, I believe that work in critical pedagogies and feminist pedagogies, as well as the emerging work of queer compositionists, have opened up spaces for us to begin considering sexuality and sexual literacy as significant components of a socially conscious, critical pedagogy in composition studies. I will spend some time with this background because I see my own project in this book as arising out of and extending this work.

The "social turn" in composition studies has, without a doubt, significantly transformed how many of us understand, theorize, and practice writing instruction. We know now that language, discourse, and literacy are always already political, and that language use is complexly tied to possibilities for—or constraints on—personal and political agency within our culture. James Berlin was among the first of cultural studies compositionists to take the political dimensions of language use seriously as a way to reconceive composition curricula. In the introduction to the edited collection *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom*, Berlin and coeditor Michael J. Vivion posit: "Cultural studies . . . deals with the production, distribution, and reception of signifying practices within the myriad historical formations that are shaping subjectivities. These range from the family, the school, the work place, and the peer group to the more familiar activities associated with the cultural sphere, such as the

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arts and the media and their modes of production and consumption. In other words, wherever signifying practices are shaping consciousness in daily life, cultural studies has work to do" (1992, ix).

The connection of such work to "English studies" and the teaching of writing lies in the conviction that "all texts are involved in politics and power: all tacitly endorse certain platforms of action. Language . . . is always a program for performance." As such, "English classrooms [can] provide methods for revealing the semiotic codes enacted in both the production and interpretation of a wide range of textual practices, practices including but not restricted to the medium of print" (Berlin and Vivion, 1992, xi).

Borrowing from such insights, other movements in the field of composition—including critical pedagogies, feminist pedagogies, and multicultural pedagogies—have offered us a rich sense of the connections among class, race, and gender differences and how people see themselves as *literate*, as being able to participate actively in a complex society by telling their own stories about their lives, or by having that participation hampered by controlling and sometimes silencing gestures of classism, racism, and sexism. Such work clearly envisions writing and literacy skills development as a cultural and political intervention. These pedagogies invite students both to see the sociopolitical dimensions of writing and to view their own writing as potentially interventional in sociopolitical processes and debates. Indeed, in a much-reprinted essay from 1988, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," James Berlin discusses his idea of a "social-epistemic rhetoric" that attempts to highlight for students the deep connections between politics and literacy. Citing a number of fellow "spokespersons," including Kenneth Burke, Richard Ohman, Kenneth Bruffee, Lester Faigley, David Bartholomae, and Patricia Bizzell, Berlin says that social-epistemic rhetoric forwards a "notion of rhetoric as a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation" (1997, 692) and that "social-epistemic rhetoric attempts to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing" (697). More pointedly, Berlin argues in "Composition and Cultural Studies" that "[t]he intention of forwarding this method is frankly political, an effort to prepare students for critical citizenship in democracy. . . . We are thus committed to teaching writing as an inescapably political act, the working out of contested cultural codes that affect every feature of our experience" (1991, 51).

Several other scholar-teachers throughout the field have taken up this call. Following the lead of Paolo Freire, the Brazilian critical pedagogue, Ira Shor's *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* extends Freire's work to argue for an "[e]mpowering education . . . [which] is a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change. It is a student-centered program for multicultural democracy in school and society. It approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other. Human beings do not invent themselves in a vacuum, and society cannot be made unless people create it together. The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change" (1992, 15).

The multicultural sensitivity that Shor advocates in this passage has resonated with many in the field of English studies who want to help elaborate and interrogate the multiple ways in which literacy itself is a product of culture. Indeed, our differences—often systemically defined and constructed along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class—impact our ability to speak for ourselves, tell our own truths, and make common cause with others. Some literate acts, just as some social positions, are more valued than others, and many of us outside of the normative mainstream have been compelled, through racism, sexism, and classism, to remain silent about who we are and what we hold to be true and valuable. A critical *multicultural* pedagogy seeks to make a space in which *different* truths cannot only be articulated but can assume *critical* efficacy—a space in which differences become the lenses through which to examine the structures that keep us separate, isolated, and often powerless. bell hooks has argued compellingly: "Multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared in the classroom. It forces us all to recognize our complicity in accepting and perpetuating biases of any kind. . . . When 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" (1994, 44).

Along such lines, compositionists have experimented broadly with curricula and pedagogies that attempt to highlight for students the multiple connections among culture, literacy, and participation in the

democratic project. In particular, composition scholars invested in understanding connections among racial and ethnic experiences and literate practices have produced powerful work that shows us how racial and ethnic differences shape literate practices and often support rich literacy traditions that, while not shared by the mainstream, are nonetheless critical and insightful. In fact, their "outsider" relation to the mainstream, to "standard" or "marketplace" English usage, accounts for some of their critical power in that they can highlight how the experiences of those outside the dominant culture bear witness to systemic oppressions based on race and ethnicity. While I cannot recap all of this work in such a short space, I can point to the work of scholar-teachers such as Keith Gilyard, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Scott Lyons, Adam Banks, and Morris Young as emblematic of the kind of critical work paying attention to race and ethnicity as important shapers of literacy and the experience of literacy. For instance, Young's recent award-winning book, *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship,* examines "the ways literacy and race intersect in American culture, in particular, the ways the perception of a person's citizenship is overdetermined because of competing ideological constructions about literacy and race. The processes of reading and writing literacy narratives is one means for people of color to develop and articulate their negotiation of citizenship" (2004, 7). Young draws important connections between being able to tell one's story, articulate one's truth about racial experiences in our culture, and experiencing a sense of agency within that culture.

In a similar vein, the rich work of feminist compositionists speaks challengingly to the ways in which *gendered* experience is just as important in understanding literacy. Over the last three decades, many feminist scholar-teachers have undertaken an examination of how gender is a multivalent construct whose identity- and community-shaping power needs interrogation in our classrooms, our teacherly performances, and our students' writing.[1] In "Feminism in Composition: Inclusion, Metonymy, and Disruption," Joy S. Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman take a long, historical view of feminism in composition, noting: "The explicit recognition of composition's lack of attention to women's material lives has led women in anger, frustration, and recognition to tell the stories of their coming to awareness" (2003, 17). In so many ways, telling the *story* of women's experience has been at the heart of many feminist projects in composition. A significant number of early feminist compositionists

worked in this vein, asking if men and women *fundamentally* write the stories of their lives in differently gendered ways. Elizabeth A. Flynn's landmark essay, "Composing as a Woman," originally published in *CCC* in 1988, asked a seemingly straightforward question: "Do males and females compose differently?" (2003, 245). Seeking to extend and complicate this discussion, Patricia A. Sullivan addressed a number of related issues in her 1992 essay, "Feminism and Methodology in Composition Studies," such as "considering the influence of gender on the composing process" (2003, 125), "tak[ing] issue with the assumption that discourse is gender neutral" (126), "seek[ing] to generate new knowledge about the relationships between gender and composing that can help us counteract the androcentrism that leaves women's modes of thinking and expression suppressed and undervalued" (132). Sullivan's work thus questioned the simplicity, even naiveté of wondering if men and women write differently at a fundamental level; rather, she argued that gender is a multivalent force that impacts composing in both subtle and profound ways, and she maintained that we should turn our attention to an examination of that impact.

Other feminist scholarship in composition has picked up on this theme and examined a variety of pedagogical strategies for understanding and interrogating with students the ways in which gender functions in our lives, both personally and politically. In the opening pages of "Genders of Writing," for instance, David Bleich discusses homophobic responses among students, and he links such responses to the privilege that men in general have in our society: "All authoritative social roles are held by men—in politics, medicine, law, religion, science, art, and, of course, the academy. It should come as no surprise that the style of thought developed by these men in the name of all people should correspond with the structure of social relations that sustains their social privileges." At the same time, Bleich counters such privilege with the assertion that "[neither] I nor anyone else can actually advocate some fixed taxonomy of gender. What I and many others do think, however, is that the flexibility and permeability of gender boundaries must be recognized and accepted by all" (1989, 13). For Bleich, recognizing the potential "permeability of gender boundaries" might help weaken the connection between a perceived sense of unassailable maleness and corresponding "social privileges."

To critique the patriarchal "social privileges" reinforced by static notions of gender, some writers discuss pedagogies attempting to

multiply the voices in the classroom that can question such linkages between gender and power. Susan Romano's "On Becoming a Woman: Pedagogies of the Self" is a rich essay in which Romano looks at a number of pedagogical practices, including pseudonymous online discussion. For Romano, the goal in using such practices is clear; she's invested both "in expanding the range of students' discursive options, and in producing equitable discursive environments" (2003, 453). In a similar vein, Gail Hawisher summarizes even more broadly what she sees as the common goals of much feminist-inspired composition pedagogy: "[E]ven as we disagree as to the forms a feminist pedagogy might take, the goals of that pedagogy remain remarkably similar. They seek to elicit in students a critical awareness of that which was once invisible—to provoke in students through reading, thinking, writing, and talk a sense of agency, a sense of possibility. They aim to forward, through teaching, a feminist agenda that probes the dominant discourses of sexism, gender preference, and . . . racism and classism" (2003, xvii). The emphasis here is on creating spaces in writing classrooms for women's stories to be told and their voices to be heard, considered, and appreciated—with the ultimate goal, perhaps, of both (1) engaging a "critical awareness" of the relationship between gender and the sociopolitical matrix; and (2) promoting agency among those who wish to undertake such an analysis.

As I survey this work, I find many important places in which considerations of sex and sexuality may begin to play an important part in understanding how we come to be literate. When Berlin and Vivion describe the necessity, for instance, of examining with students the richly rhetorical and ideological dense constructs of "family, the school, the work place, and the peer group," I cannot help but think about how sexuality touches on each of those domains; we learn about sex and sexuality from family, through peer interactions, in sex education classes, and workplaces are often hotbeds (pardon the pun) of sex talk, of sharing sexual stories, even of sexual encounters. Throughout these domains, sexuality is an important, if often vexed and vexing, dimension of human relation, interaction, and knowledge. Moreover, as many feminist compositionists maintain, if gender is a powerful construct through which people's lives are conditioned and possibilities for freedom are constrained and then potentially resisted, then all the more so is sexuality such a construct, since it is through sexual desire that gender identity is most often articulated: we are straight and gay because of whom we

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desire, but we are also straight and gay because of whom we identify with as gendered people. Indeed, "straightness" is characterized by identification with one gender and desire for another, which is why homosexuality often troubles the hetero-normative in its confusion of identification and desire. Put another way, the queer troubles the dominant story of how we are to identify, how we are to desire. And it is at just this juncture that we can broach the small "sexual turn" in composition studies, through the work of queer compositionists, who bring us the closest so far to understanding the potential importance of sexual literacy.

THE QUEER TURN: TOWARD SEXUAL LITERACY

In a forthcoming article, David Wallace and I explore what we call the "queer turn" in composition scholarship, or the small but growing body of work that attempts to bring the insights of queer experience in general and queer theory in particular to bear on the teaching of writing (Alexander and Wallace forthcoming). Such work consists of Harriet Malinowitz's groundbreaking study, *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities* (1995), Zan Meyer Goncalves's *Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos in the Writing Classroom* (2005), and a scattering of essays, some collected in special journal issues, such as a "special cluster" on queer theory that I coedited with Michelle Gibson for *JAC*, a special issue of *Computers and Composition* I coedited with William P. Banks (2004), and an issue of *Computers and Composition Online*, edited by Jacqueline Rhodes. Much of this work, like early articles by Allison Berg et al. (1994), Allison Regan (1992), and Scott Lloyd DeWitt (1997), argues for the importance of challenging homophobic responses in student writing and creating safe spaces in which queer students (in class, in their writing, and in online forums) can articulate their truths, tell their stories, and explore the development of literate practices that describe what their sexuality means to them. Increasingly, attention paid to the needs of queer students as well as growing tolerance for nonnormative sexualities (at least in some parts of the country) have made composition classes a much "safer" place for queer students.

Pushing this envelope, other scholar-teachers attempt to use insights from the experiences of LGBT people in ways that are rhetorically capacious by recognizing how stories of sexual identity are political and not just personal narrations. I would characterize both Malinowitz's and Goncalves's books as part of this movement, and their texts offer

rich examples of how being attentive to and honoring the experiences of lesbian and gay people can enliven the composition classroom. In particular, Malinowitz's illuminating study connects her interest in critical pedagogy with an analysis of writing classes she taught focused on lesbian and gay topics and issues. In her rich case studies, she describes the particular insights that queer students bring to the classroom—and to their writing—about their experience of heteronormative social structures and ideological forces. Malinowitz argues powerfully for the value of paying attention to lesbian and gay students and the stories they tell about their lives for the critical energy that such stories bring us in questioning and querying dominant narrations of heteronormativity. Extrapolating from this experience to the field of composition as a whole, Malinowitz writes, "The sort of pedagogy I am proposing would entail thinking about the ways margins produce not only abject outsiderhood but also profoundly unique ways of self-defining, knowing, and acting; and about how, though people usually want to leave the margins, they *do* want to be able to bring with them the sharp vision that comes from living with friction and contradiction" (1995, 252). This "sharp vision," Malinowitz maintains, can help all students see their world differently and more critically. Along similar lines, Zan Meyer Goncalves's *Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos in the Writing Classroom* "challenges writing teachers to consider ethos as a series of identity performances shaped by the often-inequitable social contexts of their classrooms and communities. Using the rhetorical experiences of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, she proposes a new way of thinking about ethos that addresses the challenges of social justice, identity, and transfer issues in the classroom" (http://www.siu.edu/~siupress/GoncalvesSexualityandthePoliticsofEthosintheWritingClassroom.html). Using an LGBT "Speakers Bureau," in which queer individuals share stories about their lives, Goncalves shows specifically how we can bring some of the "sharp vision" of queerness to question dominant narrations of normalcy that feed systems of inequity. For instance, paying attention to the romantic narrations of gay couples queries the "story" of marriage as the union of a man and a woman, and underscores how some are excluded from participation in social structures because their particular stories don't match those of the hetero norm.

Malinowitz's and Goncalves's work, though vitally important, focuses primarily on issues of gay and lesbian identity, drawing energy from the narrations of lesbian and gay students. Although the advantages of their

pedagogical approaches for queer students are clear, it is important to keep in mind that they are not the only ones who can benefit from grappling with sexual orientation in particular and sexuality in general. William Spurlin, in his introduction to *Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Teaching of English*, notes that his contributors all "theorize, to varying degrees, queer difference as a lens through which to read, interpret, and produce texts, or as a way of reading the classroom and indeed the world." At the same time, Spurlin notes that including queer voices and texts is "in itself . . . not sufficient to move us toward a more critical pedagogy" (2000, xix). Likewise, I believe it is also time to start thinking *beyond* inclusion and begin grappling with a wide variety of ways in which sexuality and literacy intersect.

To engage this kind of critical pedagogical enterprise, some of us have turned to the insights of queer theory, which we will explore in the first chapter much more fully. In general, queer theory is designed to provoke consideration of the construction of *all* sexualities in our culture as sites of identity, knowledge, and power. In exploring these connections, I have been fortunate to work with a number of colleagues on two special issues of major journals in our field—*JAC* and *Computers and Composition*—to explore broadly the importance of considering sexuality in the composition classroom and to consider specifically the potential uses of queer theory in the teaching of writing. Michelle Gibson and I, in our introduction to the "Special Cluster: Queer Theory" in *JAC*, argue: "Queer theory moves us *beyond* the multicultural task of accepting and validating identity and moves us *toward* the more difficult process of understanding how identity, even the most intimate perceptions of self, arise out of a complex matrix of shifting social power. In this way, we believe queer theory has uses and applications for self-understanding that engage *all* students as they narrate their identities for us, tell us who they are, and give us—and themselves—the stories of their lives, past, present, and future" (2004, 3). Essays in this issue of *JAC*—by Jan Cooper, Robert McRuer, and Connie Monson and Jacqueline Rhodes—explore the necessity of, in Jan Cooper's words, "queering the contact zone" of composition and the composition classroom as a site in which the narration of identity, subjectivity, and normativity is disciplined, particularly as the self is ushered into "adulthood," "career," and "professionalism" (23).

Certainly, we want to promote tolerance for difference, but we also want to promote a capacious interrogation of self and subjectivity.

And since sexuality is a key component of subjectivity—if not *the key index of how we define our identities*—then a critical understanding of sexuality and the stories we tell about it is vital to understanding the stories we tell about ourselves and our culture. Michel Foucault has argued provocatively that "[s]exuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given. . . . [Rather, it] is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another" (1990, 105–6). For instance, how we present ourselves sexually and as beings with sexual interests is subject to our own fashioning *and* the interpretation of others—both modes that are shaped within the matrix of cultural codes that inform our understanding of what the "sexual" is. As such, learning to "read" that "great surface network" and become acquainted with the discourses of sexuality—what one can and cannot say about the sexual, how one can speak about it, what knowledges about sexuality are prescribed, proscribed, or held as taboo—are significant components of becoming *literate* in our culture.

Such thinking brought me to the idea of sexual literacy as I was working on a special issue of *Computers and Composition* that I guest edited with Will Banks, entitled "Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing." In the introduction to that issue, Will and I formulated the connection between sexuality, ideology, and language as linking sexuality directly to important issues of literacy, even to literacy itself:

> The consequences of thinking about sexuality in terms of literacy extend far beyond potential benefits to LGBT/queer students. What we are suggesting is that instructors interested in approaching the topic of sexuality in their writing courses consider their approach not from the standpoint of including queer voices, but as the possibility of ushering all students into an understanding of sexuality in its sociopolitical dimensions and of becoming literate about sexuality. . . . Ignoring critical inquiry into . . . connections [between sexuality and literacy] runs the risk of enabling, perhaps even furthering students' ignorance about the strong connection in our culture between sexuality and identity.
>
> Considering sexual literacy, then, not only promotes a complex rhetorical awareness of an issue of great personal and political importance, but it also promotes students' understanding of how sexuality is used to enable

> participation in the democratic project for some, while constraining it for others. (2004, 287-8)

My own work as a queer and feminist compositionist has benefited greatly from such theorizing. For the last several years, I have been using a number of classroom activities and technology platforms—ranging from listservs to Web sites to synchronous communication programs—to do such work and to expand on it (see Alexander 1997; Boardman et al. 1999). I have sought to prompt students to query the ways in which sexuality and sexual identity are constructed, narrated, represented, and contested in many American cultures. My aim has largely been a rhetorical one of the James Berlin variety, a critical pedagogy, in which I have used texts and Web sites with queer content to provoke students into thinking about the many ways in which gender and sexuality are represented in our society. I have wanted to prompt students to think more critically about how the languages we use to describe and define our seemingly personal identities are inflected by and interpolated within pervasive ideologies about manhood, womanhood, and "appropriate" or "normal" sexuality. Transgender-themed Web sites, for instance, such as Leslie Feinberg's transgenderwarrior.com, provide provocative insights into how sexuality and gender are narrated, but also how their more "traditional" narrations can be resisted and reconfigured in pursuit of different personal, social, and political ends. I have also assigned and analyzed with students essays by Susan Bordo, who has done tremendous and eminently accessible work in her book *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999), taking insights from feminist thinking and sexuality studies to examine the construction of male bodies and masculinity in our culture—constructions that are often held up as ideal and desirable. She points out in pedagogically useful essays that straight men are subject to the same kinds of gender role conditioning that women are. In many ways, this is the work of *queer theory*—a "queering" that interrogates our sexualities and their construction from the inside out.

For me, these have been not just *attentive* pedagogies but also *critical* pedagogies—ones not invested only in a willingness to grapple with sexuality issues when they "emerge" in the classroom, but willing to approach explicitly the connection between sexuality and literacy, the intertwining of sociocultural narration, identity, and power. With that in mind, the part of Shor's *Empowering Education* that I have been drawn

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to most over the past few years is the discussion of "desocialization," or "critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations, and traditional discourse in class and out." Put another way, it is "questioning the social behaviors and experiences . . . that make us into the people we are" (1992, 114). I believe it is increasingly imperative to create pedagogical spaces to desocialize sexuality issues—if only because so much social control is exerted through sexual orientation identities, restriction of information about sexuality, and our socially constructed views of sexuality. As we will see throughout much of this book, sexuality *is* often a very tricky subject to deal with in the classroom. But it permeates so many aspects of our culture's (often terribly conflicting and conflicted) ideologies that I find it hard to miss in discussions about a variety of discourses and discursive fields, from popular culture to politics. As noted, and as I shall explore in a later chapter, just talking openly and honestly about marriage can lead productively to discussions of how sexuality and identity are bound up with who gets privileged in our society—and why. Indeed, the marriage issue is hardly only a "gay issue," for that matter; single women with children and those who choose not to marry also have much to say about the place of marriage in our society as a social marker of privilege. Again, discussions of sexuality and intimacy are part and parcel of the stories of self and society told by *all* of us. In this way, so much of becoming usefully and productively literate in our society—in being able to understand, partake of, and participate in significant contemporary social discussions—depends on becoming *sexually literate.*

THE CHALLENGE OF SEXUAL LITERACY

Given the close intertwining of sexuality and literacy in our culture, then, I propose that sexual literacy become a key component of first-year composition instruction—specifically, of a socially conscious critical pedagogy. I see this work as forwarding and complicating social-epistemic approaches to composition and writing instruction. Sexual literacy, in other words, asks us to take seriously the sexual and sexuality as significant dimensions through which we can understand the relationship between literacy and power.

I see two primary goals for writing instruction and writing studies scholarship if we are to take seriously the call to interrogate the interconnectedness of literacy and sexuality in our culture. First, we need

methods for writing instruction that allow *all* students—gay, straight, bisexual, or those refusing an identification—to articulate, understand, and critique the ways in which sexuality and literacy impact one another in contemporary Anglo-American culture. Such includes paying attention to and exploring how sex and sexuality are constructed and figured in literacies about gender, intimacy, relationships, and marriage. Second, we as scholars and teachers need to recognize how some students are already undertaking such analysis in their own extracurricular literacy practices, as well as how our own pedagogies might benefit productively from such an analysis.

This book is deeply invested in forwarding both of these goals.

While exploring what exactly sexual literacy might mean will be the primary focus of the next chapter, I believe that some initial definitions and clarifications are in order, given the largeness of my claim and my use of the word "literacy." Anthropologist Herdt and his colleagues at the National Sexuality Resource Center, for which Herdt serves as director at San Francisco State University, are profoundly concerned with investigating the notion of "sexual literacy." For Herdt, sexual literacy is "the knowledge you need to protect and advance your sexuality." Concomitant with this definition are the assumptions that "sexuality touches each of our lives and is essential to our well-being" and that "accessible information and resources are essential for healthy discussions, education, and decision-making about sexuality" (http://www.sexliteracy.org/). I believe that defining sexual literacy, as Herdt does, as the knowledge needed to advance and protect one's own sexual health and well-being is useful in that it offers a much-needed sense of personal agency and empowerment vis-à-vis one of the most complex and often misunderstood (and sometimes misused) aspects of our humanity (Herdt et al. 2006). At the same time, this definition leaves unaddressed a sense of how "literacy" plays a part in that sexual agency and self-understanding. Herdt uses the term "literacy" in its broad sense of "knowledge about" or "expertise with."

I believe, though, that "sexual literacy" should be much more than just *knowledge* about sex and sexuality; it should also be an *intimate understanding of the ways in which sexuality is constructed in language and the ways in which our language and meaning-making systems are always already sexualized.* In this regard, I have learned much from scholars in the New Literacy Studies (which I explore in the next chapter), such as Brian Street's understanding of literacy "as inextricably linked to cultural

and power structures in society" and his belief that "literacy practices [are wrapped up] in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination" (433–34). While the word "literacy" is certainly overly used at times, I believe it is the correct one in this context. As we will see in the discussion in the next chapter, "literacy" implies not only fluency with discourses but an ability to think critically about them and use them to explore possibilities of agency. If sexuality is a dominant construct of identity, of how people understand themselves and one another, then it is a construct of power; learning how to articulate a *critical* understanding of that construct, then, provides greater self-understanding and potentially greater agency in changing the construct, or at least resisting it when necessary. But moreover, so many of our most pressing social issues are wrapped up in the power/knowledge complexes of sexuality that participation in our democratic project necessitates a fluency with discourses of sex and sexuality. Attention to *sexual literacy* provides such fluency.

When I use the term "sexual literacy" in this book, then, I want to evoke a sense of how understanding sexuality is vital to one's literate practice in the West today—and vice versa. Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter on theoretical approaches to sexuality, the insights of sexuality studies broadly and queer theory especially are designed to enliven critical thought about the construction of sexuality in our culture as a dominant—and often dominating—set of tropes and narrations that organize desire, intimacy, and identity. Development of a sexual *literacy*, then, is development of fluency with the very *narrations* through which so much cultural and political work is accomplished, and through which our identities themselves are often achieved. As such, a critical approach to sexuality as a *literacy*—as a topic, a set of controlling narrations, and a site of contested meanings—seems not only a wise and useful subject of composition studies but a compelling one. As social historian and sexuality scholar Jeffrey Weeks eloquently puts it, "Struggles around sexuality are . . . struggles over meanings—over what is appropriate and not appropriate—meanings which call on the resources of the body and the flux of desire, but are not dictated by them. This approach fundamentally challenges any idea of a simple dichotomy between 'sex' and 'society.' Sex and sexuality are social phenomena shaped in a particular history" (1985, 178).

Turning our attention and our students' attention to sexuality as an intense site of meaning making should enhance their critical abilities

to investigate, explore, and question some of the dominant stories we tell about our lives and identities. As such, the concept of *sexual literacy* may be useful in helping us unpack the connections among sexuality, discourse, and their construction in language.

At this point it may be crucial to differentiate what I am advocating from what is more traditionally understood as "sex education." In their introduction to *A Dangerous Knowing: Sexuality, Pedagogy, and Popular Culture*, Debbie Epstein and James T. Sears usefully differentiate between what they call "sexual pedagogies": those that consist of "formal sex education" and those that examine the "production of sexual identities." They explain the differentiation this way:

> We are taking "sexual pedagogies" . . . to include, at one end of the continuum, formal sex education and teaching in schools aimed at sustaining or undermining hetero/sexism and patriarchal gender regimes; at the other end we are concerned with the production of sexual identities in conditions not of our own choosing and always related to other "differences which make a difference." We are interested in tracing the means by which borders are policed . . . on the one hand, and people interpellated into dominant forms of heterosexuality through seductions of, for example, the popular media on the other—and always recognizing that these may be happening simultaneously. (1999, 2–3)

Epstein and Sears want to move our understanding of "sexual pedagogies" from the basic and often rather mechanical "sex education" to more nuanced understandings of how knowledges of sex and sexuality are produced and disseminated. Inevitably, as I will discuss at length in the next chapter, such knowledges—from the deeply personal to the broadly collective—are negotiated and even constructed through a variety of language and literacy practices. As such, it makes sense to me to think about sexual literacies, or the ways in which constructions of and discourses about sex and sexuality come into existence to circulate in our societies.

Moreover, some scholarship suggests that gender and sexual politics are actually becoming more complicated, as one might expect at a time when discourses about sex, sexuality, and gender permeate our culture. For instance, in *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, Yale lawyer and legal scholar Kenji Yoshino argues that "[w]e are at a transitional moment in how Americans discriminate," particularly in terms of issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. He maintains that sexual minorities

are increasingly tolerated by and accepted into mainstream American society if they can successfully "cover"—that is, if their difference is not readily noticeable from mainstream norms. Yoshino borrows the term "covering" from sociologist Erving Goffman and explains his position as such: "In the old generation, discrimination targeted entire groups—no racial minorities, no women, no gays, no religious minorities, no people with disabilities allowed. In the new generation, discrimination directs itself not against the entire group, but against the subset of the group that fails to assimilate to mainstream norms. This new form of discrimination targets minority cultures rather than minority persons. Outsiders are included, but only if we behave like insiders—that is, only if we cover" (2006, 21–22).

For example, straight-acting gays can successfully "cover," while gays who are too effeminate are deemed less acceptable and consequently face much more discrimination. To work against this tide, Yoshino suggests, in a very Habermasian fashion, the need for open, widespread, and reasonable discussion about discrimination:

> I am troubled that Americans seem increasingly to turn toward the law to do the work of civil rights precisely when they should be turning away from it. The real solution lies in all of us as citizens, not in the tiny subset of us who are lawyers. People who are not lawyers should have reason-forcing conversations outside the law. They should pull Goffman's term "covering" out of academic obscurity and press it into the popular lexicon, so that it has the same currency as terms like "passing" or "the closet." People confronted with demands to cover should feel emboldened to seek a reason for that demand, even if the law does not reach the actors making the demand, or recognize the group burdened by it. These reason-forcing conversations should happen outside courtrooms—in workplaces and restaurants, schools and playgrounds, chat rooms and living rooms, public squares and bars. They should occur informally and intimately, where tolerance is made and unmade. (2006, 194–95)

While we could argue the relative usefulness of such "reason-forcing conversation" in effecting material political and cultural change, I believe that Yoshino's main claim—the need for a move toward rational, open, and mature conversation about difficult topics such as sexuality and sexual literacy—is not only valid but absolutely essential if we are to become more literate as a culture about sex, sexuality, and their relationship to how we think about ourselves, both individually and collectively, and the stories we tell about ourselves, both individually and collectively.

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ENCOUNTERING RESISTANCES

Of course, some compositionists, and some students, will resist this call to think more critically about sexuality. They will not understand its connection to literacy and see it rather as either superfluous to their writing or as an overtly political intrusion on the instructor's part. I will detail and address such resistances throughout this book, particularly in the final chapter. For now, though, let me state that it is difficult to write about sexuality as a literacy specialist and not hear the voice of Maxine Hairston, as given to us in her essay "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing" (originally published in 1992). In this controversial piece, Hairston critiques a model "that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student" (2002, 117). In the process of undertaking her critique, she takes several prominent scholar-teachers to task, including David Bleich, James Berlin, Lester Faigley, and Dale Bauer. Hairston suggests that greater student diversity, as well as a desire to make English composition a "sexier" course, probably drove the "social turn," at least in part. In contrast to "politicized" pedagogies, she maintains that "students' own writing must be the center of the course. Students need to write to find out how much they know and to gain confidence in their ability to express themselves effectively" and that "as writing teachers we should stay within our area of professional expertise: helping students to learn to write in order to learn, to explore, to communicate, to gain control over their lives" (125). With such values in mind, she resists the urge to put "multicultural issues" at the center of writing courses. At the same time, however, she maintains that "we can create a culturally inclusive curriculum in our writing classes by focusing on the experiences of our students" (129). Put more bluntly, she maintains that "[r]eal diversity emerges from the students themselves and flourishes in a collaborative classroom in which they work together to develop their ideas and test them out on each other" (130).

Certainly, there are blind spots and limitations to such a formulation. Not all students are going to feel safe or secure enough to let their diversity "emerge" from them. For instance, closeted students—whether closeted due to sexuality issues, past abuse and trauma, ongoing battles with mental illness, or the possibility of religious bigotry and misunderstanding—may hesitate to "work together to develop their ideas and

test them out on each other," particularly when the ideas they may most want to explore and write about might elicit bias, fear, or loathing. In some ways, though, I agree with Hairston when she says that "students' own writing must be the center of the [composition] course." But what if that writing just happens to be about sexuality? And why *shouldn't* it be about—and grapple with—issues of sexuality? And why shouldn't it acknowledge that sexuality is wrapped up in complex ways with what it means to be literate in our culture?

Interestingly, an article by Richard E. Miller published just two years after Hairston's tentatively takes up such questions, showing how sexuality can seemingly "erupt" in a composition classroom context. The essay, "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone: Assessing Homophobic Student Writing," which originally appeared in *College English*, discusses a very controversial student essay (entitled "Queers, Bums, and Magic") and an instructor's attempt to work with the student and the extremely homophobic content of the essay. In fact, the piece insinuates that the student writer had been involved in a homophobic attack on another person. Miller's intention in recounting this essay is to note that we in composition are often ill equipped to deal with such "touchy" material, particularly material dealing with sexual and sexuality issues. He notes the following: "To sum up, then, these two lines of response to the student essay—the one recommending the removal of the offending writer from circulation, and the other overlooking the offensive aspects of the student text in order to attend to its surface and structural features—taken together dramatize how little professional training in English studies prepares teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone of the classroom" (2000, 240).

Miller rightly suggests that such student writing is probably highly uncommon in classrooms, which leads him to assert that "[t]his, surely, is a testament to the immense pressures exerted by the classroom environment, the presentation of the assigned readings, the directions included in the writing assignments, and the range of teaching practices which work together to ensure that conflicts about or contact between fundamental beliefs and prejudices do not arise" (2000, 245). As such, the classroom is not often, in Mary Louise Pratt's words, a "contact zone," "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34).

At times, though, "difficult" subjects *will* emerge. And I would argue that, in an era increasingly comfortable with talking about sexuality in the public sphere, and when easily accessible news reports, media programs, and Internet sites readily circulate information, opinion, and discussion about sex and sexuality, it is likely that a variety of sexuality topics will emerge in the writing classroom with greater frequency. How should we handle such? Miller suggests that "[t]he most promising pedagogical response lies . . . in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone" (2000, 251–52).

Beyond paying attention to and knowing how to respond responsibly to such "threatening" texts, some scholar-teachers argue that we *must* approach difficult and challenging subjects with our students. In *Beyond the Culture Wars*, Gerald Graff considers how some of the most significant debates about culture and politics are not critically examined in higher education pedagogies. In particular, he suggests that multicultural issues, a heated realm of debate in the public sphere, are infrequently addressed with students as debates or points of contention and cultural tension. As a result, he argues, students aren't being exposed to what an academic approach to such debates might offer; so he proposes instead that we actually "teach the conflicts," or acknowledge areas of cultural debate and actively process them with our students: "Teaching the conflicts has nothing to do with relativism or denying the existence of truth. . . . Acknowledging that culture is a debate rather than a monologue does not prevent us from energetically fighting for the truth of our own convictions. On the contrary, when truth is disputed, we can see it only by entering the debate—as Socrates knew when he taught the conflicts two millennia ago" (1992, 15).

Graff does not consider issues of sexuality in his book, but I believe that his basic premise—the necessity of "teaching the conflicts" in our classrooms—applies directly to "teaching the conflicts" about *sexuality* that currently range (and rage) throughout our culture. Moreover, turning our attention to how students "talk" about sex and then actively inviting them to talk and write critically about sex is in itself an act of critical pedagogy. Put another way, opening up a space for them to write about their concerns simultaneously invites them to bring their own sexual knowledges into academic discourse about sexuality *and*, potentially, to influence the direction those debates and discussions take.

Indeed, I believe that our students are already grappling with such "threatening" material. As we will see in the third chapter, many of our students are already considering sex and sexuality in some complex and revealing ways in the writing they do outside of our classrooms. Numerous online forums, such as blogs, Facebook, Friendster, role-playing games, and many other social networking platforms in which many of our students actively participate show them discussing and debating a variety of sex-related topics, such as reproductive issues, the availability of reliable information about sex and sexuality, and how sex is treated in the mass media. In other ways, some of our students are also already writing more explicitly and critically about sex and sexuality not only outside the composition classroom but *in it* as well. This is in part due to the development of socially engaged curricula over the past few decades. Many undergraduate composition classes across the country have students explore and write about a variety of themes, many of them concerning issues of social importance. For instance, the composition curriculum at the University of Cincinnati, where I served as composition director for four years, had students compose pieces on issues such as gun control, school violence, censorship of the Internet, and the sociocultural and political goals of higher education. At times, some students, usually on their own, considered issues of gender and sexuality as they pertain to these themes and issues. For example, some wrote about issues such as sex education in the public school system, the availability of contraception on campuses, censorship of sexually explicit material on the Internet, sexual orientation nondiscrimination policies, and teen/single-parent pregnancy issues as they affect college students and others. Being attentive to such issues can help us find critical ways of working with students to develop sexual literacies.

Perhaps it's time for us to catch up.

THINKING LITERACY AND SEXUALITY TOGETHER: WHAT THIS BOOK WILL DO

With such thoughts in mind, the chapters in this book examine three specific questions:

How do students write sexuality—that is, how do they write about sex, what do they say, and what does their saying reveal about their understanding (or misunderstanding) of sexuality as a political issue, as a dense node in the intersection between the personal and the political?

How do sexuality and literacy interconnect in complex ways? That is, how is an understanding of sexuality a key component in being literate in contemporary Western culture and society?

How can we create pedagogical environments to invite students—safely, productively, and insightfully—to compose about sex and sexuality, particularly in ways that will help them (and us) foster a greater appreciation for the intertwining of sexuality and literacy in our culture?

I firmly believe that studying how students develop sophisticated literacy skills through critically thinking about sexuality should shed light on literacy, sexuality, and their interconnection in our society.

Granted, as a specialist in composition and writing studies, and as someone who has also built a scholarly record in sexuality studies, it is only natural that I consider my two areas of scholarly interest in light of one another. I have done so tentatively in previous projects, and this book-length study will build on that earlier work and expand it in ways that I hope will link productively the study of sexuality to the study of student literacies and, in the process, extend the social-epistemic project and further complicate composition's "social turn." Indeed, the preceding discussion in this introduction can only begin highlighting and drawing our attention to the kinds of connections between sexuality and literacy that I believe powerfully permeate public discourse. The remainder of this book will explore these connections more fully and richly. I also want to make the claim that such connections should be of crucial concern to writing and literacy instructors, which assumes, of course, that in many ways they have *not* been of much importance in the past. And they haven't been. As such, this book may be of most interest to those who have tentatively considered sex and sexuality as significant to literacy issues, but who otherwise do not know how to approach the topic of sexual literacy, as I have defined it here, in their composition classrooms. My goal in these pages is to provide such readers with powerful theoretical and pedagogical tools for exploring sexual literacy with their students.

A word on overall methodology. My approach in this book is not focused on analyzing and promoting entire courses organized around sex and sexuality as topics. While I believe such courses are useful, challenging, and productive for students (having taught them myself), my goal is more to demonstrate, through an analysis of writing exercises and essay assignments, that (1) students can write powerfully and critically about sexuality; and that (2) we can do much to help them develop

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a strong sense of the connections between sexuality and literacy. It is this latter dimension of literacy that we are often missing in our courses, and I conceive of this book as both a theoretical and pedagogical intervention, inviting—even insisting—that we assist our students in developing more nuanced discourses and sophisticated literacies to understand the centrality of sexuality as a construct of knowing, thinking, and being in our culture. In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae asserts in a well-rehearsed and widely accepted argument that "writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders'—that is, of being both inside an established discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak" (2001, 516). Bartholomae is thinking of the specialized academic discourses that we variously ask students to adopt and write within as they progress through their college careers, and the development of fluency in such discourses is important, surely. But we shouldn't lose sight of the very powerful discourses that already inhabit us, such as discourses of sexuality that are so often central to our personal and cultural identifications. We are already always "inside" such discourses, and paying attention to them is an important first step in developing a critical sexual literacy that will allow us to understand them, challenge them, and critique them when necessary. A failure to pay attention to such discourses, to a sexual literacy, is a failure to prepare students for rich participation in a culture that understands sexuality as fundamental to some of our most important cultural narrations of self and other, as individuals and as various political collectives.

To promote a richer understanding of sexual literacy, then, the following chapters examine both some of the venues in which many students are currently writing about sex and sexuality and some of the ways in which we, as writing instructors, might create provocative exercises to help students—and ourselves—explore sexual literacy. To undertake such an examination, I use a variety of methods, including case studies of classroom practices, interviews with students and teachers, reviews of teaching materials, and surveys of some of the forums in which students are writing, often critically, about sexuality and literacy. While such surveys can hardly be exhaustive, they should serve as a provocative insight into how our students are using a variety of communications platforms to explore constructions of sex and sexuality in our culture. In fact, one of my primary claims, which I hope to demonstrate in these chapters, is that students are already creatively and even critically talking and writing about sex in ways that can enliven our classrooms, address their

concerns and issues, and enable all of us to understand more critically the complex relationship between literacy and sexuality in our culture.

The first chapter, "Discursive Sexualities: Bridging Sexuality and Literacy Studies," sets the stage for the rest of the book by exploring recent theoretical work in queer theory, sociology, and linguistics that explores the construction of knowledge about sex and sexuality in the West. I connect work in these fields to the New Literacy Studies to demonstrate how the seemingly "personal" discourses of sex and sexuality are inextricably bound up in larger public discourses, and literacies, of culture and politics. Such a connection makes a compelling case for the importance of studying how sexuality and literacy are interpolated throughout our society and its attendant culture and politics, and this chapter moves toward articulating a theoretically capacious and pedagogical efficacious definition of *sexual literacy*. At then end of the chapter, I turn our attention to teaching and the classroom, asking how a sexual literacy might impact what we do as compositionists, as literacy specialists.

The second chapter, "Beyond Textbook Sexuality: Students Reading, Students Writing," offers a brief consideration of how our field overlooks the connection between sexuality and literacy in some of its primary pedagogical materials, namely, composition textbooks; in contrast, student writing *outside* the composition classroom—in blogs, on Web sites, through video games, and other forums—demonstrates not only a profound interest in sexuality but an emerging critical awareness of the importance of sexual literacy. Specifically, student writers are concerned with significant issues, such as sexual health, reproduction, and the possibilities and potential perils of polyamory. Key concerns continue to focus significantly around sexuality and sexual identity; students are concerned about what their sexual practices and desires say about themselves as people with complex identities and needs.

The following chapters turn our attention to student writing *in the classroom* and how many students' interest in sex and sexuality might productively be used to foster a greater awareness of the importance of sexuality in becoming literate. Each chapter offers detailed case studies of specific classroom experiences and assignments that illuminate this awareness. The third chapter, for instance, "Queer Theory for Straight Students: Sex and Identity," considers some of the uses of queer theory in designing writing assignments that prompt students to consider more fully how narratives of selfhood are often intimately constructed

around issues of sex and sexuality—whether the narratives are about gay or straight identities. The fourth chapter, "Transgender Rhetorics: Sex and Gender," explores how recent theories emerging out of transgender studies can enliven our and our students' thinking about the relationships among gender, sexuality, and identity, particularly as all three are articulated, understood, and constructed in language. The fifth chapter, "Straight Talk about Marriage: Sex and Politics," expands on earlier discussions of sexuality and identity to consider the notion of "sexual citizenship," and how participation in public discourse presumes certain knowledge about (and ideological understandings of) sex and sexuality. To explore this material, the chapter offers a case study of how one instructor, a straight married man, explored with his students through reading and writing assignments the conflicted position of marriage in contemporary American society. Students' writing in this class revealed a complex engagement with issues not only of marriage, but also of monogamy, polyamory, prostitution, and reproductive rights and responsibilities.

The concluding chapter, "Susie Bright in the Comp Class: Confronting Resistances," considers theoretical and practical issues concerning possible student—and instructor—resistances to considering the interrelationship between sexuality and literacy. Resistances are inevitable; how we cope with them can shape productively how we introduce and work with difficult and "sensitive" topics. In the final chapter, I also offer suggestions for promoting a greater awareness of how literacy and sexuality are co-constructed in our culture. I maintain that we need to explore how we as writing instructors might capitalize on some of the creative discussions that students are already having about sex and sexuality—in an effort to expand our mutual understanding of how constructions of and knowledge about sexuality inform, and are informed by, what passes as "literate" in our society.

Inevitably, one book can only do so much, and, as I have worked on this project over the past few years, I have felt again and again remiss in the number of subjects that I have *not* covered. As I stated earlier in this introduction, sexual literacy should be taught alongside and in conjunction with gender, racial, religious, and class literacies. Further work along these lines needs to be done, and I can only gesture in its direction in this text. I also realize that I have focused my inquiry on *sexuality*, particularly as it intersects with issues of individual and collective identity. Of course, "sex" is a huge terrain; many dimensions of

sexual literacy—such as literacies and discourses about reproductive freedom—need further consideration and exploration to enhance our collective understanding of sexual literacy. I discuss some of the possibilities in the concluding chapter. Ultimately, as I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, our students' (and our own) sense of literacy, of being *literate* in contemporary Anglo-American culture, may depend in many ways on our understanding of sex and sexuality.