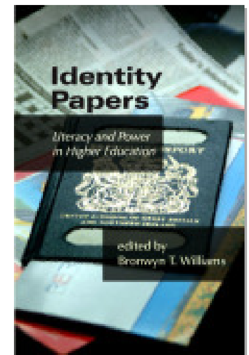
Identity Papers

Bronwyn T Williams



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5

WHEN 'MS. MENTOR' MISSES THE MARK

Literacy and Lesbian Identity in the Academy

Tara Pauliny

PROFESSIONAL DILEMMAS AND PERILOUS ADVICE

In a recent installment of her advice column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ms. Mentor (a.k.a. Emily Toth) counsels academic women struggling to negotiate their various identities (as minority women, mothers, untenured professors) with their sometimes disappointing and often misleading jobs.[1] Underlying the advice she offers is a stalwart feminist position: she "insists that women seize control of their work lives" and that academic women "self-promote," "speak about inequalities" and "be tough women, not docile girls" (Mentor 2005). Ms. Mentor's advice here is sound in its recognition of gender difference, racial inequalities, and in its uncompromising feminist stance. Where Ms. Mentor's guidance rings hollow, however, is in its forwarding of a heterosexist perspective. Both within this column and elsewhere,[2] Ms. Mentor's advice often elides sexuality's variance and neglects to note the precarious contexts encountered by graduate students and professors whose sexualities are nondominant. Just one year before the above-cited column, for instance, Ms. Mentor writes that "Matt," a graduate student who practices S/M, "must be *infinitely discreet* if he *insists* on practicing his sadomasochism." She "feels," in fact, "that his sex life is not her business, if he is doing *whatever he is doing* with consenting adults. But [. . .] he should not be *flaunting* it in college towns and scaring the horses" (Mentor 2004, emphasis added).[3] Not unlike homophobic discourse that relegates nonheterosexual forms of sexuality to the "privacy" of the bedroom where it can be discounted and ignored, Ms. Mentor's advice contains a (not so) subtle critique of S/M. Her use of the term "insists," and her caution against the assumably garish and inappropriate "flaunting" of "Matt's" sexual preferences, reinforces heterosexuality's cultural prominence, and promotes a context in which nondominant sexual practices and identities necessitate, at the very least, a closed door, but better yet, a retreat to the closet.

If the goal of advice columns like Ms. Mentor's is to help academic professionals successfully navigate the precarious terrain of their careers, that assistance should not only recognize the various contexts created by disparate identities, but it should also extend the egalitarian and political agenda offered by her feminism to queer academic dilemmas. Rather than articulating an "idealized" position in which professors are implicitly coded as either heterosexual or asexual, professional advice should recognize and address sexual difference. As a profession shaped in part by the diversity of our members, we need to investigate what it means to become literate within various professional contexts and with various sexual identities; we need understand what it takes to be "tough" and what tools we need in order to advocate for ourselves.

As a queer[4] addendum to an overwhelmingly heterocentric body of advice literature, my essay offers an alternative to Ms. Mentors' view of professional life. I locate sexuality as a key component of academic identities and professional literacy acquisition, and argue that the juxtaposition of "professional" and "queer" alters the shape of academic life. Furthermore, it is the performance of nondominant sexualities, I contend, that not only highlights the profession's inherent heterocentrism, but also offers bodies upon which to project such normative expectations and anxieties. "Coming out" therefore—whether partially or fully—and negotiating life as a queer professional, necessitates the recognition of institutional heterosexism and the need for tools designed specifically to address such difficulties.

A COMPOSITE IDENTITY: ONE PART TEACHER, ONE PART QUEER

During the years of my Ph.D. work, I lived part of my life as an out lesbian: I made my queer identity known to my family, friends, professors, and fellow graduate students, but not to the undergraduate composition and literature students I taught. My decision not to come out to my students was predicated on a number of reasons: I had only recently come to identify as a lesbian, and as such, I had some trepidation about how my students would react to hearing that I was gay. I was afraid they would no longer like me, and that my sexuality would overtake all their other thoughts and feelings about me as a person and as their instructor. More importantly, I worried about the pedagogical implications of coming out in the classroom: Did I have the right to come out?; If I did come out, were my motivations personal or professional?; and, Did coming out have a legitimate place in the classroom?

As I wrestled with these questions, and was outspoken about my lesbianism in other areas of my life, my queerness remained unspoken while I performed my role of teacher. This partition of identities was enabled, in part, because the classes I typically taught, Second-level Composition and Introduction to Fiction, were small—none ever enrolled more than 24 students—and although I often got to know students well during the term, I had little to no contact with them once they finished my course. Also, at an institution that enrolled over 50,000 people, there was little opportunity for me to work with students more than once, or to have contact with them outside the boundaries of our class. This short-lived connection among students and myself allowed for an intense, yet fleeting relationship to bloom. And since I had the freedom to choose my course themes and texts, we routinely debated the sex/gender binary, investigated the overlaps of public policy and social mores, and examined the pathological history of sexuality, although we rarely, if ever, came in contact with one another outside the confines of our classroom or my office.[5] The space we created was thus liminal. As a teacher, I urged students to see the personal implications of the gender binary, to connect the messages within literature to their own lives, and to understand writing as a persuasive and individual process: our work, I urged, was more than theoretical—it mattered to real people. It mattered, in fact, to us. Ironically, however, it was just this kind of individual connection with the course material that drove me to separate one of the most intimate and significant parts of myself from my teaching persona. Because I designed my courses around the themes of gender, sexuality, and identity, a decision that often provoked students' moral sensibilities and required them to engage with their personal beliefs, I didn't want them to have to wrestle with these same questions in regard to their instructor. My identity, I argued to myself, would only get in the way of their learning; it would derail their investigations and take too much precedence in the course.

With this decision, I mirrored Ms. Mentor's professional ideal: my feminist focus remained strong both in and outside the classroom, but I conceded that issues of gender and sexuality could most productively be taught when the instructor's sexual identity remained "ambiguous." Like the graduate student, "Matt," whom she advises to keep his S/M practice separate from his teaching life, I kept my sexuality confined to extracurricular spaces. If students couldn't easily read me as gay, straight, or otherwise queer, I posited, they likewise couldn't dismiss my

courses' subject matter for their connection to my perceived "personal" politics. By choosing not to come out in the classroom, I believed that I was creating a classroom environment in which my identity did not overtly compel students to censor themselves or to try to appear "pro-gay" for the sake of pleasing the instructor. I had found a solution, or so I thought, to the complicated question of whether or not to out myself as a preprofessional teacher.

What I have since realized, however, is that my sexual "ambiguity" was most likely not read as such by my students. Given that I never named myself as a lesbian or clearly marked myself as other than heterosexual, it is fair to assume that I was read as straight. And since heterosexuality is culturally compulsory, as Adrienne Rich famously explains, and dominant culture forwards the notion that "women are inevitably [. . .] drawn to men [, . . .] that primary love between the sexes is 'normal,' that women need men as social protectors," and that heterosexuality is presumed as a 'sexual preference' of 'most women,'" it is probable that I was read in much this same way (Rich 1980, 642). So rather than enacting an open-ended identity in the classroom, I now believe that I passed—whether intentionally or not—as a heterosexual instructor.

My ability to shift in this way—from out lesbian to passing heterosexual instructor—was made possible by a particular set of circumstances and ideological ideals. For one, the urban environment in which my large graduate program was housed reflected a certain political geography, which, when combined with my preprofessional status, afforded me the privilege of a dual life: I could be a "straight" instructor in part because there were other places—literal and figurative—where I could comfortably perform my queerness. Then, at night and on the weekends I could spend time in queer bars and clubs, and in my graduate classes I could not only be open about my lesbianism, but I could also theorize the connections between sexuality and rhetoric: my particular specialty. Likewise, as a young, white, woman who looked vaguely alternative, I easily blended into the general college population. I could walk across campus, attend queer rallies, and frequent gay-owned businesses almost never seeing students I had once had in class. The easy availability and anonymity of queer spaces, combined with my preprofessional role, and perceived heterosexual normativity, allowed me to successfully negotiate the intersections of my distinctly different personal and academic cultures and helped me keep my sexuality and my teaching persona somewhat separate. I could perform two versions of myself because I had

the space to do so; I could move between these identities because my status as a graduate student allowed such movement, and because heteronormativity facilitated this easy transition. I passed, then, because I performed an "identity in such a way that it seem[ed] to match a norm," and because my attempt at ambiguity was read within a context dominated by heterosexuality (Brueggemann and Moddelmog 2002, 313).

HETERONORMATIVITY AND ACADEMIC ADVICE TEXTS, OR, A QUEER ACADEMIC ABSENCE

As I was in the process of transitioning from graduate student to assistant professor, I began to rethink my decision to be closeted in the classroom, and went searching for advice about such matters. My review of the discipline's advice literature, however, was met more with absence and silence than reasoned recommendations. Unfortunately, of all the advice manuals currently available, none focus solely on the challenges faced by queer academics. Instead, what exists are numerous articles and books designed to advise academic job seekers and new professionals in general.[6]

On the whole, academic advice collections take a decidedly pragmatic or thematic approach. Their content and organization is often either shaped by the logistics of the hiring process, or arranged to reflect an overarching disciplinary focus. Instructional texts such as *Job Search in Academe* (1999), *Getting An Academic Job* (1997), and *Faculty in New Jobs* (1999) all follow a chronological schedule and fall somewhere within the timeline that includes preparing for the job market, interviewing, planning for the first-year on the job, and becoming acclimated to your new position. While these approaches do not preclude conversations about professional quandaries related to identity, or concerns that arise from various contexts and personal politics, they do take a fairly generic approach to the prospect of job acquisition and professional development. In the "Rehearsing and Ad-libbing" section of their book, *Job Search in Academe*, for instance, Dawn M. Forno and Cheryl Reed use first-person accounts to help prepare job seekers for inappropriate or odd questions from members of hiring committees. Quoting Ellen M. Gil-Gomez, they note how a candidate may be faced with "informative illegal questions" ostensibly meant to "uncover [. . .] sexual behavior and/or racial identity such as: questions about [. . .] birth control practices, [. . .] family planning, [and . . .] whether [the candidate] care[s] about the [culture she studies] or just [the] books [she reads]" (Forno and Reed 1999, 100).

Similarly, in "The Awards Ceremony," when the same text advises successful job candidates on the process of accepting positions and negotiating offers, concerns related to sexuality are dealt with cursorily. While answering questions about employee benefits and how to counter a job offer, the editors offer only the briefest advice about partner benefits, and do not suggest that such benefits might be used as one of many bargaining points (Forno and Reed 1999, 114–24). As a result, although identity and difference are afforded a minor space in this text, they do not play a fundamental role. Dealt with anecdotally, rather than substantially, these concerns become one of many idiosyncrasies included in the price of admission to the profession. Conspicuously, specific strategies for managing such situations, or a critical analysis of the institutional and ideological explanations of such "oddities" are noticeably absent. Rather, by way of advice, Forno and Reed suggest that, on the issue of benefits, "you will want to talk to the Human Resources Management director," and in regard to improper questions:

> You can never prepare for every sort of question that may get thrown at you. Sometimes, illegal or esteem-threatening questions are simply the result of interviewers who have received inadequate (or no) training in proper interview procedures. Other times, tricky questions give you real insight into the atmosphere you'd face if you accepted an offer from that particular institution. Our advice to you [. . .] is to come prepared to articulate who you are and what you want to do. (Forno and Reed 1999, 101)

What Forno and Reed neglect to mention, however, is precisely how "who we are" and how we identify offer particular challenges to the presentation of ourselves and our abilities—as well as to how those abilities and identities are read.

Unfortunately, Forno and Reed's volume is not alone in its limited approach; even texts that focus specifically on gender in the academy tend to do so in a decidedly heterocentric fashion. Sexuality—especially nondominant sexuality—is rarely considered within the numerous books and essays that examine closely the influence gender had, and continues to have, on women's abilities to attain academic jobs, to keep those appointments, and to be awarded tenure. Like feminism itself, these early gender-centered texts also neglect to consider fully lesbian or queer sexualities as they report on women's professional status, roles, and opportunities.

Even when lesbian sexuality (and I use lesbian here specifically since only one text I examined considered any identities outside the

hetero/homo binary) is addressed within advice manuals, it is done so briefly and without paying critical attention to the heterosexist culture of the academy. Early volumes within this genre include such texts as *Academic Women Working Towards Equality,* (Simeone 1987), which details women's second-class status in the profession during the 1980s and, *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove,* edited by Aisenberg and Harrington (1988), which scrutinizes women's place—at the time—and alienation within the academy. While both works are overtly and uncompromisingly feminist in their approaches and methodologies, neither interrogate heterosexism the way they do sexism. In Simeone's study, for example, although lesbians are mentioned within the discussion of how marital status affects male academics' view of women, the conversation takes place within one lone sentence. "Single women," Simeone writes, "whether lesbian or heterosexual, may be seen by men as more serious professional competition, but they may be threatening and confusing because they have seemingly rejected their most important gender-linked roles" (Simeone 1987, 139). Such an omission of analysis is surprising, given that earlier in the text Simeone acknowledges and laments lesbian invisibility within the academy (Simeone 1987, 70, 94–95). However, despite her recognition that lesbians' "achievements and contributions are sometimes ignored," and that lesbians are "further pushed aside by heterosexist intellectual constructs which see women primarily in terms of their relationship to males," lesbian's silence is nevertheless perpetuated when single women and lesbians are simplistically folded together (Simeone 1997, 70). Naming these two groups of women as equally distasteful and "abnormal" to their male colleagues, she does little to ameliorate or oppose such a characterization.

In a similar fashion, Aisenberg and Harrington's text, *Women in Academe,* also fails to challenge heteronormativity. Here, their lack of critical attention to the plight of lesbians in the academy rests, they claim, not in their hands, but in the fact that none of the women they interviewed for their study actually named themselves as lesbians. "We know that our interviewees [. . .] included lesbians," they write, "but none identified herself as such. Thus we have stories from these women that correspond in many aspects to those of heterosexual women, but we cannot draw explicit parallels or distinctions because the lesbian women themselves did not do so" (Aisenberg and Harrington 1988, xii). Lesbian invisibility, then, begets invisibility. Its absence disallows a critique of the very structures that maintain its oppression, and heterosexism escapes analysis because it perpetuates a system that works to silence its detractors.

While this approach to advice texts is certainly disheartening, it has not remained the norm. Thankfully, just as feminism amended its perspective with time, so too did books centering on women in the academy. In the 1990s, for example, when racial and sexual difference made significant inroads into feminism as a whole, this inclusion also entered feminist academic advice texts. These newer professional guides for women greeted their expanding audience of female scholars with texts that are reader-friendly and politically motivated. One of the earliest of kind, Paula J. Caplan's *Lifting a Ton of Feather: A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World* (1993) is also the one most sensitive to lesbian concerns. Rather than the additive approach adopted by some of the texts that follow hers, Caplan integrates sexuality—homosexual and heterosexual—directly into her various discussions of the profession. This consideration of sexuality begins early in her text when, in her discussion of the academic climate, she writes that there is "greater harassment and exclusion of women from nondominant groups and of feminists," that there is an "expectation that women will fit feminine and racial stereotypes," and that "general maleness, racism, and heterosexism [exist within the academic] environment" (Caplan 1993, 29–30). As the text continues, her focus on the treatment of nondominant groups remains clear when she advises graduate students to "consider organizing a group of students to request that seminars be held for professors about the effects of the chilly climate on the learning and achievement of women and on members of racialized groups, students who are not able-bodied, older students, and gay and lesbian students" (Caplan 1993, 117). And finally, at the end of her book, Caplan includes an exhaustive list of factors to consider when choosing a job and evaluating a university. This list, which spans more than eleven pages, consistently includes issues related to sexual identity. Two, among the numerous examples I could have chosen, illustrate Caplan's concern about institutions' "record of hiring and promoting women and people of both sexes from nondominant groups at all levels of the academic ladder," and whether or not universities have a "policy that discrimination on the basis of sex, race, age, disability [. . .] and sexual orientation is prohibited" (Caplan 1993, 162–63).

Caplan's approach, however, is not typical. In fact, a number of gender-focused advice books followed hers, and none treat sexuality as centrally as she does. Instead, most take an additive approach, devoting a single chapter to the concerns and situations of interest to lesbian academics. *Feminist Academics: Creative Agents for Change*, edited

by Louise Morley and Val Walsh (1995) for instance, limits most of the text's attention to lesbianism within the academy to Debbie Epstein's chapter, "In Our (New) Right Minds: The Hidden Curriculum in the Academy." Other texts, such as *Career Strategies for Women in Academe: Arming Athena*, Collins et al. (1998), and *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change*, Blackmore (1999), rather than devoting a single chapter to lesbian matters, pay little or no attention to sexuality. Collins' text, for example, offers advice for handling subtle sex discrimination, navigating the precarious terrain of Affirmative Action, and taking advantage of the possibilities offered by administrative roles, but rarely mentions how lesbian sexuality might complicate these concerns. Lesbians are explicitly mentioned, in fact, only when "intellectual intimidation" is discussed. Likewise, Blackmore's volume, which reflects on how the restructuring of the academy has produced new dilemmas and potentials for women within the profession, only mentions lesbians when explaining some of the reasons why women in educational leadership positions are reticent to name themselves as feminists. "Many rejected the term 'feminism,'" she writes, "because of its depiction in popular discourses as being 'rabid', 'ball busters', 'man haters', and 'a lesbo', thus equating feminism with abnormality" (Blackmore 1999, 189).

Unfortunately, many advice texts are similar to those cited here. So although there are a few guides, like Paula Caplan's, which work hard to both note and analyze how the academy is homophobic and heterosexist, there are many more that deal with sexuality only in passing or with heterosexist remarks. Disturbingly, one of the most popular of these texts—Emily Toth's *Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*—is also one of the most egregious when it comes to handling issues related to nondominant sexuality.

Not unlike the column that commences this essay, Toth's text as a whole forwards a "don't ask, don't tell" philosophy in regard to queer sexuality. Repeatedly, she advises junior faculty members and graduate students to wait until they are tenured to come out, or even more alarmingly, wonders why such an individual would desire to come out at all. When asked by a new faculty member, for example, if she should come out as a lesbian, Ms. Mentor responds by asking "another question first: Why?" She then continues to make blanket and essentializing statements such as follows: "If you are teaching queer theory, everyone will assume you're a lesbian anyway"; "If you teach about lesbian and gay rights, or if you advise the local homophile [*sic*] group, or if you hang out in lesbian/gay bars, or if you speak out against homophobia—or even if

you're unmarried with short hair—many people will assume you're a lesbian." And besides, she writes, "So what?" "Your sexuality is your own business" (Mentor 1997, 67–68).

Mirroring the advice she offered "Matt," the S/M practitioner, Ms. Mentor once again forwards a heterocentric perspective in which naming yourself as "married" or in a heterosexual relationship is considered standard, while doing the same in regard to queer relationships is "flaunting" your sexuality and making inappropriate reference to "private" matters. Such discourse reifies heterosexuality as the norm, equates homosexuality with deviance, and ultimately supports the heterosexist assumptions and practices of the academy—the consequences of which are not merely damaging to academic institutions, but also to individual readers as well.

Taken in its entirety, this cursory review of advice texts illustrates that, although there are currently myriad instructional texts available, few of them adequately acknowledge—never mind address—the particular difficulties faced by graduate students and professionals who do not identify as heterosexual or conform to regulatory gender and/or sexuality roles.[7] With this deficit in mind, I offer an account of my own: a story of how the transition from graduate student to assistant professor was complicated by my queer sexuality and my varying decisions to out myself. For although the MLA's *Guide to the Job Search* assumes that "by the time you leave graduate school and accept a job, you should have made the transition from thinking like a student to thinking like a professional" (and, on the same page, advises women to "wear a skirt and jacket" to interviews), my movement from graduate student to tenure-track professor has been neither seamless nor simple (Showalter et al. 1996, 35).

RENEGOTIATING THE TRIAL SEPARATION: THE RECONCILIATION OF MY QUEER IDENTITY AND TEACHING PERSONA

If my decision in graduate school to be closeted was motivated, in part, by internalized homophobia, it was also prompted by my desire to embrace and enact a theoretical understanding of ambiguity. I was attempting (however unsuccessfully), to perform a queer identity—to resist normalization, binary categorization, and essentializing. And because I premised my understanding of queer sexuality on "the idea that sexual identities as well as gender itself are historically contingent, socially constructed categories which can and have been assembled at different times," I aimed to reflect these concepts in my performance of self (Rudy 2000, 198). When I graduated, however, and made the

decision to be an out lesbian in my new job as a tenure-track professor and Writing Center director at a Midwestern four-year comprehensive university, I came to understand how difficult (although certainly not impossible) it is to subtly thwart cultural conventions. Importantly, I also realized that transitioning from a graduate instructor who passes, to a completely out professional, reflected more than a distinction in rank and choice. Being out, I soon discovered, was a professionally risky endeavor.

When I revealed my sexuality on a day-to-day basis, I came to see that I also altered the ways my professional and personal identities intersected. I quickly learned, for instance, that if I wanted to be an out lesbian in the town of 60,000 where I live and work—which I did and still do—my sexuality and professional persona had to come into dialogue. In this new landscape, the spaces that at one time were safe havens for my sexual identity were now fraught with unmapped professional expectations. The knowledge of the academic panopticon—that, as a professor in a small town, I cannot escape my professional identity even in off-campus spaces—separated me both from the queer sites in which I was previously comfortable, and from the pedagogical safety of a passing teaching persona.

When I started working as an Assistant Professor in the Fall of 2002, one of the first service positions I agreed to hold was the faculty advisor for the Rainbow Alliance for H.O.P.E. (HOPE), our school's LBGTQ student organization. I was excited to take on this role since I saw it as a way to quickly connect to the campus' fledgling queer community, and because I was eager to lend my support to such an organization. As a result, I attended the group's first meeting of the semester, introduced myself as a new faculty member who identified as a lesbian, and agreed to be their advisor. Reflecting the "gung-ho" attitude adopted by many new assistant professors, I attended the group's Monday night meetings, met frequently with their executive board, and was present at many of their events. Departing from my earlier attempts at ambiguity, I now worked diligently to claim and proclaim my queerness. In my new, authorized role of assistant professor, I wanted to produce progressive pedagogical consequences; I hoped that by performing a lesbian identity, I would "call into question traditional expectations of the kinds of knowledge that can be shared with students," and that I would "redraw the lines between the intellectual and the personal, the sanctioned and the taboo, the academic and the experimental" (Brueggemann and Moddelmog 2002, 312).

As the semester continued, however, I began to notice that, while my newly acquired status as an out faculty member may indeed have begun to have these particular effects, it also came with some unexpected consequences. I quickly realized, for instance, that I could no longer move easily from my role as visible authority in the classroom to unremarkable layperson outside of the classroom. At this institution, whose campus stretches a mere few blocks, I was always recognizable as an instructor. No longer was I mistaken for an undergraduate student or even graduate student. I was consistently surprised, in fact, when students I never remembered meeting, or faculty and administrators I had not yet come to recognize, remembered my name and said hello as we passed one another in the library, student union, or academic buildings. While this kind of connection was welcoming, it was also unsettling. The comfortable anonymity of passing—to which I had become accustomed—was now gone; no longer could I move deftly out of my academic (read: heterosexual) persona into my queer one.

One particular incident that occurred in the middle of the Fall semester secured this change in my mind. To celebrate National Coming Out week, the HOPE group routinely planned activities to honor LGBTQ people and history. One of the most popular of these events was a drag show performed in the school's union. When I first heard of the show, I was impressed that such an event had already become a regular affair on campus, and I was pleased that so many students supported such a performance. I was also excited that I had the opportunity to be part of a community that showcased drag performances, since attending drag shows had been one of my favorite activities as a graduate student. My research, in fact, is based in part on the rhetoric of drag king performance, and I rarely missed local drag shows while completing my Ph.D. Drag, I thought, could function as a bridge between my graduate student life and my professional life; it could continue to be a queer space of comfortability as it also became a place where I interacted socially with those students I now advised.

On the night of the actual show, however, I learned that my new institutional context and identity performance reshaped my relationship to this queer space. When the performances began, I adopted my characteristically enthusiastic demeanor: I danced and cheered, clapped my hands, and got my singles ready for tipping. As I was enjoying myself I looked around and began to notice that some of the audience members were watching me almost as closely as they were watching the show. Feeling self-conscious, I soon realized that, within this context, I was not

just another audience member, and that I certainly wasn't unrecognizable. So, when one of the female HOPE members appeared on stage dressed in the finest masculine hip-hop garb, I knew I was in trouble. Although I was proud of her and showed my support by standing and clapping, I stopped there. I did not approach her, make eye contact, or slip a tip into her waistband. This decision, it turned out, was serendipitous, because at the end of the show, the emcee, the president of HOPE, invited all the group members on stage—including me—and without warning, handed me the microphone and asked me to close the show. In this moment I realized that while I had gotten what I wanted: to be completely out, I had also given up my freedom to be just another queer attendee.

With this event, it became clear to me that my professional and personal selves had now fully collided; by living as an out faculty member whose identity was integrated into her various academic roles, I lost the ability to separate these parts of myself. What I gained with this identification, however, was the potential for students to read their fears, hopes, and anxieties about homosexuality onto me. Since I now named my body as "other"/"lesbian," it became a text upon which students' reflected and responded. And because, as Brenda Brueggemann and Debra Moddelmog contend in their essay, "Coming-Out Pedagogy: Risking Identity in Language and Literature Classroom," that the act of coming out, of "disclosing a historically abject identity [. . . gives] the teacher a body, and not only a performing body, but one that functions (or does not function) in physical, erotic, passionate, and sexual ways," my body became a site of just these kinds of interpretations (Brueggemann and Moddelmog 2002, 312). The HOPE students I worked with, for example, came to read me as much more than a faculty advisor meant to assist them in writing budgets and planning events. Rather, they assigned various responsibilities and roles to me: they wanted me to be a sympathetic confident, a vocal faculty supporter of queer issues on campus, an idealized version of a queer professional, and a nonconfrontational peer. And this disruption of spaces in which I could be comfortable did not end here. Once I came out, the classroom also became fraught with homophobic tension and heterosexist anxieties.

As an out lesbian instructor I was faced with reactions from students, the likes of which I had never before experienced. Although as a graduate student I had taught texts that dealt explicitly with gender and sexuality and those written by lesbians and gay men, I never once had a student complain—either in person or on course evaluations—about

this decision. Even when students disagreed with homosexuality on religious grounds, they did not generalize this discomfort by criticizing me or the course's design. Once I chose to stop passing, however, all this changed. When I began to identify myself as a lesbian—sometimes by naming myself as such, sometimes by mentioning my female partner, and sometimes by making other casual comments that pointed to my sexuality—my students' responses to the topics of identity shifted. They were now more defensive, less apt to talk about these issues, and when they disliked a text for its homosexual content, they attributed this displeasure to the course as a whole.

To illustrate this response, let me offer an example. In my Second-Level Writing course, I focus the theme and readings around the medicalization of the female body, and I routinely teach Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals.* One of the main subjects of Lorde's text, of course, is her lesbianism and how it impacts her treatment by medical professionals. When we worked with this text in class (and this reaction has surfaced almost every time I teach this book), the students were reluctant to even name sexuality as one of the themes, never mind engage with it critically. Furthermore, my course evaluations for this course habitually contained comments that singled out Lorde's text and used it to condemn the entire class. Students wrote that Lorde's book contained "inappropriate lesbian content" that did not belong in a writing class, they claimed that the course would have been fine it if wasn't for all the "lesbian stuff we had to read," and they complained that the course was "all about lesbians." In addition to these persistent remarks, a few semesters after I began teaching this particular course, a colleague of mine overheard three of my students discussing me and claiming that "they knew I was a lesbian" and that they were going to make "their disapproval of my lifestyle" clear to me.

Of all the thoughts I have about these responses, I continually return to the fact that it was my outing of myself, and my decision to reject the privileges of passing, that precipitated these circumstances. And when I think about the ways I might engage these new challenges, I realize that the advice offered to me by Ms. Mentor and others like her, simply falls short. Because Ms. Mentor forwards an idealized position in which the professional and the personal are kept neatly separate, she leaves no space for a queer academic to perform as such. For if being out means being visibly queer at all times—in the classroom, the library, campus events—then the "personal" issues of gender expression, sexual identity, and sexual politics are also visible. Rather than facilitating the

integration of the personal and the professional, Ms. Mentor's advice encourages silent acquiescence to heterosexist norms and leaves queer academics with few options.

NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS AND THE DISCIPLINING OF THE QUEER

> *When a lesbian professor comes out in the classroom, she not only makes body, gender, sexuality, desire, and emotion legitimate subjects of discussion, but she questions the foundation of the institutional structures that has depended for its very existence on the systematic removal of these 'others' from its dualistic epistemology. Her body and sexuality make themselves present in the space that has denied them.*
>
> —Rebecca Mark ("Teaching from the Open Closet")

> *Like every discursive system, the culture of professionalism attempts to make itself omnipresent and thus transparent, invisible. It maintains power through a delicate balance of approbation and punishment, through explicit rules and implicit etiquette.*
>
> —Chinn ("Queering the Profession, or Just Professionalizing Queers?")

If, as Rebecca Mark's comments suggest, coming out in the classroom signals both a resistance to public/private boundaries and a defiance of heterocentric norms, then the exclusion of these acts—which is rife in advice literature—works not only to maintain the silence surrounding sexual difference within the academy, but also reifies and sustains regulatory professional norms. This rampant silence—and repeated acts of silencing—obscure the academy's dependence on and reproduction of heteronormativity and exposes its fetishization of liberal humanism.[8] Importantly, when the majority of current advice texts reiterate these conceptualizations, they perform a disciplining function: they encourage readers to conform to reductive and restrictive codes of behavior, they reproduce heterocentric regulations, and they persuade readers to assimilate these norms into their professional identities.

Subjects who reside within the academy are thus compelled to digest conventional heterosexual standards as they are simultaneously seduced into the humanistic ideal of the self-determined individual. Embedded within a university system that is predicated on "the assumption that [. . .] a set of attributes that can be acquired by various Others [that . . .] will enable them to realize a stereotyped dream of success," academic subjects are often subtly (and sometimes overtly), encouraged to engage

in the "process of acquiring such attributes [even though it] involves jettisoning undesirable traits and associations that [such Others have] brought with [them]" (Gibson et al. 2000, 70). So, when queer faculty and graduate students are advised to keep their "private" lives separate from their professional selves, when the legitimacy of coming out in the classroom is questioned for its (in)valid connection to pedagogy, and when discussions of sexuality are relegated to clinical, depersonalized discourse, subjects are confined to narrow professional identities that erase sexual difference and promote connections to regulatory cultural norms. Effectively, subjects are expected to accept "that power in the academy is consistently associated with a predictable and unchanging set of personal characteristics, and [. . .] that [their] self-representation must reflect only those 'power' characteristics and no other" (Gibson et al. 2000, 70). To be a successful member of the profession is thus to replicate a form of polite individualism in which subjects are "free" to advance as long as their work is rigorous and plentiful, and their professional performances mirror heterosexual kinships.

Connecting this perspective to the structure of the traditional nuclear family, Robyn Wiegman argues that professors' "marriage" to the academy "reiterates the structural dynamics of the patriarchal family," and elucidates the academy's reliance on heterosexual modeling which, in turn, demands the replication of heterosexual contexts, behaviors, and identities (1997, 3). Under this rubric, women become the wives and mothers of the profession, and their primary foci become textual (re)production and professional self-sacrifice. The "academy," continues Wiegman, "has required [women in the profession] to be its bride; it wants [them] to believe in [their] own suitability as a regular member of the family" (1997, 15). A successful female academic must then, be constantly engaged in the process of sustaining her "suitability"; she must submit to her place in the academic family and, as Ms. Mentor reminds us, be careful not to express any "lifestyle variations" she may have (as quoted in Gold 1998).

In the case of the queer female academics, whose "lifestyles" certainly stray off this "straight and narrow" path, familial/maternal expectations most definitely abound. If a queer woman is out on her campus, the demands on her time and energy reach far beyond the borders of her office hours and required service responsibilities. As my own experience illustrates, the queer academic is always visible and routinely called to duty. Whether she is asked to be the faculty advisor for the school's LGBTQ student group, to be the representative of "diversity"

on committees, or to be the resource for all things nonheterosexual, her status is clear: she is expected to be the altruistic caretaker of queer-related students, issues, and sometimes new faculty hires. Furthermore, as a queer instructor, she is likely to become, as Michèle Aina Barale notes, "the perfect symbol for a variety of meanings. [Queer teachers] may represent all the possibilities of rebellious sexuality [. . .]; we can become sites for the expression of both [students'] liberalism and their bigotry, their fascination and their horror [. . . ,] and god knows that we play out parental roles that we can't begin to fathom" (1994, 19). Queer female faculty members often become, then, "alternate" mothers, once again reinstating the heterosexual model. Queer female faculty are expected to play the part of the dutiful spouse who takes primary responsibility for the care of "difficult" children, and assume the role of the devoted mother who tirelessly tends to her family's wounds and needs.

These queer academic subjects, however, while appreciated for their (often unpaid or underpaid) labor, are also expected to be silent commodities: "valued for [their] diversity," they are simultaneously "relegated to shadows." Within the official discourse of the academy, they can "only speak *about* but cannot speak *as* lesbians, except insofar as [they] are prepared, in such speaking, to make of themselves lesbian objects, objects of study, of interrogation, of confession, of consumption" (Mary Bryson and Suzanne De Castell 1997, 286). Within a university system whose foundation is built upon a paradigm of liberal humanism, academic subjects are presumed to have unified identities that can be easily assimilated into academic culture; they are expected to conform to an ideology in which difference is valued as long as it does not upset underlying assumptions.

Unfortunately, most advice literature (intentionally or not) disseminates, and ultimately helps to support, these principles. By recommending that their readers keep their nonnormative sexualities a secret, that they conform to expected codes of "politeness," and that they save any dissent until they have realized the "American dream" of tenure, these texts elide the intensely political culture of the academy and work in collusion with the disciplinary drive of the institution (Wiegman 1997, 4). The normalizing function of advice texts therefore assists the academy in "neutraliz[ing] the political aspects of identity performance" (Gibson et al. 2000, 70) and aids in the continuation of its "intentional silencing and exclusion of the female body and sexuality for which [it] was founded" (Mark 1994, 253).

Significantly, this cooperative relationship between advice texts and institutional norms is not only ideologically problematic—but also

dangerous. Such a collusion privileges acquiesce over critique and works to safeguard the status quo. And, in a time when homophobia and heterosexism are endemic to institutions of higher learning, this problematic coupling should not be overlooked. To do so is to ignore material realities faced by academic subjects everyday—realities like those compiled by a recent campus climate study in which

> nineteen percent [. . . of those surveyed] reported that, within the last year they feared for their physical safety because of their sexual orientation/gender identity [. . .] 51 percent concealed their sexual identity/gender identity to avoid intimidation [and . . . t]hirty-four percent [. . .] avoided disclosing their sexual identity/gender identity [. . .] due to a fear of negative consequences, harassment, or intimidation. (Rankin 2003, 34)

Faced with such evidence, it is clear that issues of sexuality on campus are much more than theoretical; equity is not the only thing at stake here—safety is also at risk, and that, I maintain, is considerably more important than "not scaring the horses."