Susie Bright is a sex writer—a very good one, in my opinion. She has a wonderful ability to be both pragmatic and philosophical, writing candidly about the mechanics of particular sexual positions and why it is important to talk openly about sex and sexuality. As such, her writing in books such as *The Sexual State of the Union* is never just erotic, though much of her writing is. Rather, it’s about sexual politics, about the silences that keep us from talking openly about sex and the many reasons why such silences damage our ability to be intimate with one another—and to understand how such silences create damaging norms about sex and gender that limit our sense of possibility, of creativity, of growth. Suggesting that our country suffers from “erotic poverty,” Bright writes:

Sexual perceptions, those false premises, are formed by ignorance, pure and desperate. It’s not only the troubling things we don’t understand today, but also the superstitions of years past that cling to all the dark places where people don’t get information, don’t get examples, don’t get an opportunity to try out anything different. I’m not talking about a cave, I’m talking about everything and everyone—from entire states in this country where you can’t get simple information about sexuality, to a Los Angeles radio station manager who handed me a piece of paper that said, “Please do not use the word clitoris.” That’s the legacy of censorship and elitism: we are erased below the waist, in the interest of the so-called public welfare—an interest so narrowly defined that it rules out just about everyone who doesn’t own their own cable company or have a chair on the FCC. (1997, 17)

Bright’s writing, as in this example, is often polemical. But it’s neither simplistic nor naive. And in many ways, Bright’s work is all about sexual literacy—about understanding how to talk about sex and sexuality in ways that are open, honest, and critical. Her work is about understanding that the ways in which we talk about sex have much to say about who we are, individually and collectively.
I once told a colleague that I was seriously considering organizing a section of first-year composition around Bright’s *The Sexual State of the Union*. This colleague, herself a lesbian, flipped out. She thought I had really lost my mind. I have to admit that I began to wonder, have I gone too far? Am I incorporating *too much* sex and sexuality into my composition courses? Am I *stretching* the connection between literacy and sexuality—perhaps to the breaking point?

Perhaps I’ve gotten carried away. Maybe a recap is in order.

Throughout this book, I have argued for creating pedagogical spaces in which writing instructors can approach the topic of sexuality in their writing courses as a *literacy issue*—a realization that becoming increasingly aware of how “talk” about sexuality is tied to some of the most fundamental ways in which we “talk” about ourselves, our lives, our communities, our nation, and our world. Put bluntly, I have maintained that sexuality plays a significant role in how literacy is defined, understood, and articulated in contemporary Anglo-American culture. As a queer man, I am already well aware of how important such literacy is. My life has taught me that it is imperative that I “read” given situations, assess their potential threat to me in a homophobic culture, and perform identities that either keep me safe from harm or use my queerness to challenge norms of behavior, identity, and intimacy. Sometimes I have to navigate carefully between those positions, and I think that many queer people do this on a daily basis. It is part of how we are “literate” in society. So maybe my interest in Susie Bright arises out of the very frankness with which she understands and wants to talk about sexuality. She resists urges, injunctions, and demands that she be quiet about sex. She has “read” our collective cultural situation, and she wants to talk about sex and sexuality—to educate, to provoke, to excite, to question the forces that keep something so powerful “in the closet.” As someone who has at times had to be silent about sexuality, I can’t help but want to hear more.

But I also recognize that not all of my students will share my enthusiasm—and that they may resist the acquisition of such knowledges, such literacies, about sex and sexuality.

Indeed, I am sure that some readers are thinking it unusual that I have not covered issues of potential student resistance more substantively and earlier in this text. While I have touched on periodic resistances in the exercises and assignments I have described in preceding chapters, I have largely relegated a more thorough consideration of such resistances to
this final chapter for the simple reason that significant resistance has been uncommon in my experience of working with students on issues of sexual literacy. Let me be clear. I do not believe that I am a gifted teacher or particularly adept at teaching and learning with students about sexual literacies. But I do believe that my willingness to be open and upfront with students about sex—that is, my willingness to speak respectfully but frankly about such a taboo topic—helped to create environments in which students felt comfortable to explore sexual literacy. I believe that Gary, whose course I described in chapter 5, did much the same.

In the remainder of this chapter, however, I want to consider a set of resistances—both at the disciplinary level and in actual student-centered classroom situations—that composition instructors interested in exploring sexual literacy might encounter. Inevitably, we as instructors must also face our own resistances when thinking, writing, teaching, and talking about sex. To my mind, exploring such resistances, at every level, is a key part of developing sexual literacy.

THE STORY SO FAR: A RECAP OF THE PEDAGOGY OF SEXUAL LITERACY

As we saw in the first chapter, some teacher-scholars invested in queer theory and queer critiques have attempted to flesh out what such a pedagogy might look like, most notably the educational theorist William F. Pinar, editor of *Queer Theory in Education*. Among the most notable essays in Pinar’s collection is “Queering/Querying Pedagogy? Or, Pedagogy Is a Pretty Queer Thing” by Susanne Luhmann, who argues provocatively for “a queer pedagogy [that] exceeds the incorporation of queer content into curricula and the worry over finding teaching strategies that make this content more palatable to students” (1998, 141). Luhmann poses her goals as a series of questions interrogating what we take to be “normal”: “How do normalcy and abnormalcy become assigned subject positions? How can they be subverted? How can the very notion of a unified human subject be parodied and, jointly with other discourses, radically deconstructed into a fluid, permanently shifting, and unintelligible subjectivity?” (146).

Luhmann characterizes such questioning as “one of pedagogic curiosity, from what (and how) the author writes or the teacher teaches, to what the student understands, or what the reader reads” (1998, 148). It is just such curiosity—about ourselves, about our society, about how the stories of sexuality become enmeshed and intertwined with the stories
of who we are, both individually and collectively—that I have wanted to explore with students. This pedagogy of promoting sexual literacy must necessarily, as I have shown, take into consideration students’ own knowledges and reflections on sex, sexuality, and literacy. As Luhmann herself argues, “[s]uch an approach, rather than assuming the student as ignorant or lacking knowledge, inquires into, for example, how textual positions are being taken up by the reading or learning subject” (149). I could not agree more, and I believe that the exercises I have described in this book have pulled on—and challenged—students’ interests and insights about sexual literacy.

While a pedagogy of sexual literacy should rely initially on students’ knowledge and interests, we must necessarily keep in mind that approaching sex and sexuality in the classroom seems at times a “risky business.” Part of the sense of danger or risk comes inevitably from a continued sense of sex and sexuality as “taboo” subjects, best left to the realm of the private. But more broadly, questioning the stories we tell about ourselves, either individually or collectively, involves an inherent amount of risk. Put another way, “pedagogic curiosity” often runs counter to the sense with which many students (and some teachers) come into the classroom: the sense that Freire captures in the “banking model” of education, or the sense that instructors have knowledge to impart to students—not the sense that students and instructors together will explore difficult terrain, learning about it as they proceed. So, when it comes to thinking about sex and sexuality and their complex intertwining with literacy, with the very way in which we represent ourselves to ourselves and to one another, then the going is bound to be rough. We are dealing with highly personal material, even as we are asking students to consider the most personal aspects of ourselves as also densely and deeply public and political.

Approaching the nexus of the personal/political is tricky business, and I have relied on the thinking of others in our field to help me approach it—and to understand why it is crucial that we do so. In the introduction to this book I referenced Ira Shor’s concept of “desocialization,” which he defines as “questioning the social behaviors and experiences in school and daily life that make us into the people we are. Such desocialization involves critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations, and traditional discourse in class and out” (1992, 114). For Shor, it is imperative that we question such received wisdom because
it often contains within it values and ideologies that deeply shape not only our conception of ourselves and others but also our sense of what is possible. Critiquing how values come to be held and passed on from person to person allows us to understand their history—and to sense how they might change. For example, if we are socialized to understand sex as a purely personal matter, then we are blind to how ideologies and beliefs about sex, sexuality, and gender shape our sense of self, our sense of the normal, and our sense of future growth and possibility. As we desocialize sex and sexuality as purely personal aspects of existence, we begin to see how sexuality is tied to a number of norms that control and curtail our behavior. Indeed, some students question why I talk about issues of gender or sexuality—as though these things, sexuality in particular, really should not be talked about in public. I believe, however, that it is imperative to create pedagogical spaces to desocialize their hesitancies around sexuality issues—because so much social control is exerted through sexual orientation identities, restriction of information about sexuality, and our socially constructed views of sexuality.

Inevitably, though, resistances occur. Students do not always want to think about sexual literacy, and I am certain that some instructors reading this book have balked at the ideas that I have presented here. Let’s look briefly at some of those resistances and why it is necessary, I believe, to confront them and push through to an exploration of sexual literacy, as risky as it may feel at times.

**DISCIPLINARY RESISTANCES**

Clearly, one of the major resistances that anyone interested in exploring sexual literacy will face, from either students or other instructors, is a strong sense of sex and sexuality as “personal” issues, as aspects of life unfit for consideration in the public space of the classroom. Since this is such a potentially pervasive resistance, I call it a disciplinary resistance, one with which our field as a whole must grapple. I hope that my arguments throughout this book about the very public and even political nature of sex and sexuality have addressed the fallacy of thinking of sex and sexuality as purely personal. Of course, sex and sexuality are also personal issues, so they need to be treated carefully and respectfully. (More on that in a bit.) What interests me about hesitancies around sexuality in the classroom is a more general unwillingness among many in our field to consider the personal in the composition classroom.
In terms of sexuality itself, Gary Dowsett of the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society notes that when we think about young people’s sexuality we tend to think of it in terms of problems—as in, young people are having unwanted pregnancies, are exposing themselves to sexually transmitted infections, or are victims of date rape and other forms of sexual coercion. Rarely do we think about young people’s sexuality in more positive terms, much less the right of young people to explore and engage in sexual pleasures (Herdt et al. 2006). As such, cultural sexual literacy in the United States does not have much of a discourse of pleasure with which to approach sex and sexuality more positively. Given this, discussions of young people’s sexuality might seem too loaded or heavy-handed or more properly the subject of private moral and ethical discussion—not public consideration in a first-year composition course.

In some ways, the personal has always been a vexed subject in composition, at least since the work of Peter Elbow and the advent of expressivism. As compositionists, we worry about how much we are asking students to disclose about themselves when composing personal narratives or when they are supporting claims with personal experiences. Will they reveal “too much” and be sorry later? Will we be sorry if they reveal personal information in the classroom, particularly if it’s of a sensitive nature? In many ways, we are right to worry about this, in the sense that we should always tread carefully when considering other people’s lives, histories, and stories. But treading carefully doesn’t mean foreclosing such discussion or disallowing it because it’s risky. After all, what writing, except the most rote reporting, is not personal to some extent?

Some compositionists have argued persuasively for a more careful and candid (re)consideration of the personal in writing. In Deborah Holdstein and David Bleich’s edited collection, Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing, the editors note that “[o]ne of the reasons for the exclusion of the first person in scholarly writing is the idea that because scholarship is for everyone, narcissism is unwelcome” (2001, 19). At the same time, as Holdstein and Bleich point out, a variety of feminist and post-structuralist critiques have demonstrated that knowledge construction (and dissemination) is often grounded in the personal situations and contexts of those intimately involved in its construction. Such grounding arises from the conviction that all knowledge arises from personal investments made by knowing subjects, who are themselves products of particular times, places, and historical
circumstances. As knowledge producers, we have personal stakes in the knowledge we pursue and help construct. Knowing why we are personally invested in particular knowledges helps us understand better how knowledge is constructed. But more significantly, acknowledging our personal investment in knowledge construction helps us understand and clarify our values and our *ideological* investments. Or, as Holdstein and Bleich put it, “we also want to feel the authority that may come from an elaborated and developed style of personal candor, and we want to propose understanding that is more helpful because more clearly anchored in human experience” (7).

Candace Spigelman, writing in *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, believes that we should help our students develop such a consciousness as they think, analyze, explore, and write. She argues that “[w]hile composition teachers have expressed extraordinary support for public-directed writing instruction, its attendant texts seem distant from personal discourse. Nevertheless, I suggest that experiential evidence has a place in public writing, and in the work that surrounds the teaching of these discourses” (2004, 131). More specifically, Spigelman believes that “in addition to its appeals to emotion and identification, personal experience can make logical appeals, which can be evaluated as evidence in academic writing” (107). Of course, there are limits to how logical the personal can actually be, but Spigelman’s point is a compelling one: much of what we take to be purely logical or rational often hides personal and ideological investments. Linking personal interest to logical argument grounds our claims firmly in the realm of human experience. For instance, if I want to argue for an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation, I can present both logical arguments and my personal experiences, demonstrating the logical ill effects of discrimination in my actual life. Along these lines, Spigelman argues that we should be teaching hybrid and experimental forms and genres; she says, “[i]t seems to me that there is a greater advantage to blending discourses: using personal writing in and as academic argument” (14; emphasis in the original).

Beyond an unwillingness to explore the personal in the composition classroom, others continue to be uncomfortable with the move toward inclusive curricula or multicultural education in general. Such instructors may believe, as does Maxine Hairston, whose essay “Diversity, Ideology, and the Teaching of Writing” I cited in the introduction, that our courses should be invested in teaching “skills” as opposed to
“ideology.” Along these lines, supporters of David Horowitz’s “Academic Bill of Rights” want to “protect” students from undue political influences and return classroom instruction to the unbiased pursuit of knowledge (http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/02/17/ariz). While I believe that our classrooms should be free of indoctrination, I also firmly believe that a significant difference exists between indoctrination and critical examination. Our pedagogies must be curious. We should invite students to examine their lives, the stories they tell about them, the larger cultural narratives that organize and construct meaning, and the political tales that allocate and maneuver common resources. Suggesting that certain kinds of experiences should not be discussed publicly, such as sex and sexuality, is to foreclose on the fullest understanding we might have of the human experience, both individually and collectively.

Granted, sexuality is a volatile field, rife with contradictions—but it is volatile because sexuality is also a field of power. Debates and discourses about sex and sexuality, and the “moral panics” they sometimes seem to incite, are often about things other than sexuality. They are also points of contested power, points where issues of power and social control are in the process of being contested and sorted out. For instance, an unwillingness to talk frankly and comprehensively about sex and sexuality in the public school system represents not just a squeamishness about sexuality or a belief that sex is a purely personal, family matter; it is also about controlling young people’s lives, limiting their choices, channeling their energies into pursuits that the larger body politic deems necessary. Sexuality is a powerful connector, a powerful creative force. If young people’s sexual interests and energies are directed away from a capacious and experimental exploration of personal intimacies and toward long-term career and family planning, then traditional corporate and capitalist interests are well served. As such, educating students—and becoming educated with them—about how the stories and narratives of sexuality move in our culture and do a variety of “power work” is essential in developing critical literacy.

Perhaps even more pressingly, the intersections among sex, sexuality, and religion are in dire need of critical attention and examination. The great social theorists of the modern period, including Freud and Marx, believed that religion would eventually diminish in importance socially and personally. However, the last few decades have seen the emergence of strong movements of religious fundamentalism, including Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, which generally oppose many sexual rights
and freedoms and do not understand sex as pleasure or recreation. The rise of fundamentalism is a complex phenomenon, related no doubt to contemporary shifts in power. For instance, the demise of the Soviet Union, which attempted to squelch religious fundamentalism in areas it controlled and influenced, has allowed old animosities and conflicts to resurface with a vengeance. As fundamentalists abroad and in our own country (whether Islamic or Christian) oppose sexual freedom, it is important for all of us to ask, why? (Herdt, et al, 2006).

Let me forward a few questions based on contemporary examples that speak powerfully to the intersections among sexual orientation and religion. As sexual expression is curtailed, whose interests are served? As male youth engaging in homosexual acts in Iran are hanged publicly, who benefits? As some Christians in the United States picket funerals of gay youth, whose view of the world is challenged, whose validated, whose delimited, whose sanctioned? As Western societies generally debate the role of marriage and consider a variety of arguments, including religious ones, about the “proper” sanctioning of marriage, whose stories about intimacy and family are forwarded, whose denied, whose impoverished, whose enriched? These are just a few of the contemporary issues in which religious belief and sexual expression and relationship are clashing in significant ways. As we work toward understanding the contested stories circulating now about religion and sexuality, we should seriously consider inviting our students to participate in our deliberations, our debates. Doing so will both enhance their ability to participate as literate citizens and serve to educate them about the world they are inheriting from us.

Another significant resistance that I have encountered as I have talked about sexual literacy with a variety of colleagues and compositionists comes in the form of a question: Does this really work? Do students actually write better because of all of your effort in inviting them to think about sexual literacy? I call such questions “resistant questions” because they betray hesitancy by asking for “proof,” for validation that my means (developing sexual literacy) are justified in the ends (better student writers), despite the benefits I have claimed throughout for exploring sexual literacy in and of itself. Don’t get me wrong: I’m not dismissing the need of composition pedagogies to improve student writing and critical thinking skills. Far from it. In fact, my experiences detailed in the previous chapters, as well as the experiences of Molly (in chapter 1), James (in chapter 2), and Gary (in chapter 5) strongly suggest that attention to
sexual literacy improves student writing on a number of fronts.

In a very basic way, inviting students to work with us on sexual literacy takes advantage of a topic—sexuality—that is of increasing importance to many young people. As compositionists, we know how difficult it can be to find topics, or even to assist students in finding topics, in which they can be invested. The pedagogical work throughout this book attests to the high level of investment that many students writers have when talking and writing about sex and sexuality. But more than increased investment, I believe that addressing not just sex, but sexual literacy, enhances students’ ability to think critically. In my work with students in interrogating narrations of gender or examining representations of straight sexuality, students had to consider carefully how one positions oneself rhetorically as a gendered and sexually oriented subject. Such subject positions presuppose certain assumptions, so examining narrations of them closely is an acute exercise in reading for hidden, even contradictory assumptions, particularly when, as in the case of a narration of a “straightboy” who likes a “boy band,” the narration is complex and nuanced. Moreover, learning to ask critical questions about things often taken for granted, such as gender and sexual orientation, attunes students to the work of critical inquiry. I believe that Gary’s students in particular learned much about questioning large-scale cultural assumptions, narrations, and ideological investments in concepts such as marriage and monogamy.

In terms of more specific writing skills, I believe that students who write about sex and sexuality do so often with much careful consideration. Like us, they understand that sex/uality is a “difficult subject” and must be handled with rhetorical sensitivity. Sex/uality itself, just as a topic, raises students’ attention as a subject requiring deft handling lest readers and interlocutors misunderstand one’s intent and goals. I have seen students pay much more careful attention to their word choice when talking and writing about sex and sexuality than at nearly any other time or with regard to nearly any other subject. Of course, there are inevitable exceptions, but I would argue that most students are more attuned to language use when writing about sex/uality.

I have also seen significant attention paid to issues of audience in essays written on sex and sexuality. In some of my earlier work, most notably the penultimate chapter of Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web (2005), I describe my experiences working with first-year writing students on the development of the YOUth & AIDS Web
Project, which spanned several years during my tenure at the University of Cincinnati. During that time, students wrote extensively about sex, sexuality, sex education, sexual health, and the political battles over HIV and AIDS. One of the last phases of that work involved launching a sub-site of the main site, called “Voices of Youth,” in which student writers were invited to speak candidly with fellow students about sexual health. Certainly, the pedagogical context—an invitation for students to write to one another about the “touchy subject” of sexual health—may have attuned students’ attention to the importance of audience. But the actual writing (currently housed at http://homepages.uc.edu/~alexanj/voices_of_youth.htm) speaks volumes about how students will work with language to reach one another with important information—and important literacies. Students wrote about topics such as “AIDS and Youth Denial,” “Myths about Condoms,” and “Negotiating Healthy Relationships.” In each, student writers carefully crafted information for easy access, explained difficult or confusing concepts, and wrote in what they called an “accessible” manner. Interweaving facts with narrative examples, students created pieces that are models, I believe, of persuasive writing, urging their classmates and readers of their work to think carefully about their lives, their bodies, and their intimacies.

What I most appreciated about this work was not only students’ rhetorical savvy in addressing their chosen audiences, but also their increasing awareness that sexuality and literacy are deeply intertwined. As the titles above suggest, students wanted to address literacy issues—How can we become more informed about important topics? How can we debunk myths and false information? How can we negotiate our desires? The clarity of the writing in “Myths about Condoms,” for instance, makes immediate and compelling claims about the importance of sexual literacy:

Most of us have probably already been told by somebody that if you are going to have sex you should use a condom. This is true. Proper use of condoms is an important precaution that you should take to protect yourself from contracting HIV, and although this site is dedicated to the prevention of HIV/AIDS there are various other sexually transmitted diseases, along with unwanted pregnancies, that you will also protect yourself from by using a condom.

Unfortunately there is a lot of misinformation out there about sex in general.
When a subject remains taboo as sex does it creates an environment in which rumors become widely believed. Most of us have probably heard something that sounded exaggerated or just plain wrong. The problem is that when these rumors are about sex, young people might not know how to find out if they are true or false. Further, when we were younger, we may have been afraid to ask a parent, or any adult, questions about sex and we may have been left believing things that are not at all true.

What I frankly love about the writing here is its insistence that sexuality is not just an intimacy issue, but also a literacy issue. As discussed throughout this book, sex and sexuality are constructed not just through biological and scientific facts, but often through ideologically valenced beliefs and presuppositions. Understanding how stories, rumors, and often (mis)information about sex and sexuality circulate increases students’ ability to understand the sociopolitical dimensions of literacy at a very fundamental—at a bodily and intensely intimate—level. Put another way, how we talk about ourselves in such basic dimensions—about our bodies, our intimacies, our identities—is vitally important. We can be misinformed, to our peril and detriment. But talking in informed ways—talking literately about sexuality—constructs healthier sexualities, healthier people. Doing so also allows one to be more critical, to be able to analyze and sift valid and useful information from rumor. In the process, one has the opportunity to see the ideological values or blind spots that support rumor and misinformation, usually in the name of making sex/uality do other ideological work. When sex is taboo, as this author suggests, ignorance about sex and sexuality keeps people afraid, sometimes unwilling to ask for information. People are kept illiterate about some of the most powerful emotions, experiences, and intimacies that they are capable of having. In many ways, such writing powerfully suggests that a failure to be sexually literate is a failure to be literate about informed living.

Given both sex and sexuality’s pervasiveness in our culture and their contested position vis-à-vis other social issues (such as education, marriage, family life, reproduction, and religion), it is important that students be invited to examine sex and sexuality critically. Our discipline must put aside its squeamishness. If anything, I hope the preceding chapters have served as an argument for developing discourses through which we can discuss with one another more positive and nurturing ways to
discuss sexuality. Such is part and parcel of developing individual, group, and disciplinary sexual literacy.

MORE PERSONAL RESISTANCES

In *Disciplining Sexuality: Foucault, Life Histories, and Education*, Sue Middleton succinctly notes the ways in which power circulates, even somewhat sexually, in classroom situations: “Through Foucauldian lenses, power indeed shows up as ‘capillary,’ as it flows through all parts of the school’s ‘corporate body.’ All individuals channel power: Students and teachers police each others’ outward appearance, deportment, and behavior, although it is the teacher who officially has power over the students” (1998, 21). Given this multivalent channeling and policing of power, it is not surprising that students at times will use their own power to resist what we as instructors are trying to do. Such resistance may be particularly apparent when we approach taboo subjects such as sex and sexuality.

Be that as it may, few guides to teaching writing substantively address how to think critically with students about ideological conflicts when they arise in the classroom, and I have seen precious few trainings, for either graduate teaching assistants or new faculty (or “old” faculty, for that matter) in teaching “sensitive” subjects such as sexual literacy. In terms of the available literature, Brock Dethier’s *The Composition Instructor’s Survival Guide* (1999) lists and briefly discusses “common problems” such as the “quiet class,” the “painful conference,” and the “difficult student.” Comparably, *Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom—And What Instructors Can Do about Them*, edited by Dawn M. Skorczewski and Matthew Parfitt (2003), has a similar focus on “practical” resistances such as grade disputes, and also contains a section on handling topics of “race,” though much of the discussion is focused on issues of language difference. *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* by Lad Tobin (1993) explores very well the kinds of conflicts that can arise when students and teachers work intensely on writing together, and Tobin comes closest to understanding, I think, such experiences as truly intimate, needing careful attention to students’ lives and interests. Along such lines, Suzanne Diamond notes in her essay “When Underlife Takes Over: An Insight on Student Resistance and Classroom Dynamics” (2003) that we should be attentive to students’ “underlife,” a sociological term used by Robert Brooke to identify disruptive behavior in classrooms—behavior that signals potential student resistances to the
material being taught in particular or to the process of schooling in general. However, the topics of sex and sexuality are never mentioned, and the focus in these guides is primarily on dealing with challenges to authority rather than ideological conflicts or resistances to the material that is being grappled with in the classroom.

Increasingly, though, I believe we will see more guides to working with resistances to topics and course content. For instance, some online resources about talking with students about terrorism and the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 are easily available on the Web—signaling a growing need among instructors to be able to discuss touchy subjects as they arise nationally. Along these lines, one compositionist, Bill Wolff, describes in his essay “Reading the Rhetoric of Web Pages: Rethinking the Goals of Student Research in the Computer Classroom” (2003) how he designed a course that focused on critically analyzing how information about war, such as the various conflicts in Kosovo and the war in Iraq, is represented, constructed, and disseminated in the mass media, particularly the Web. Wolff’s aim is “to develop a truly dialogic pedagogical practice that fosters critical thinking and writing.” More specifically, he wants to “bridge the chasm between the traditional goals of a university liberal arts education, urgent contemporary issues, and a lack of critical thought about technology . . . by advocating the use of Web sites—both ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’—which can then enable students to think more critically about issues of relevance to contemporary society.” Wolff’s decision to focus on the representation of war is timely—and potentially risky. But, as his goals make clear, his purpose is not to promote a particular view of war but to invite students to think rhetorically about how war is represented, which should prompt them to think more critically about the ways in which wars are supported, sustained, and legitimized. Comparable to my interest in sexual literacy, Wolff’s work with war might be called “war literacy.”

Other pressing issues have provoked some important discussion. A recent book from some colleagues in our field, the collection Social Change in Diverse Teaching Contexts: Touchy Subjects and Routine Practices, edited by Nancy G. Barron, Nancy M. Grimm, and Sibylle Gruber, focuses on handling race and racial issues in the classroom. The editors frame their project’s goals in this way:

This collection of essays opens a window on the “inside job” that committed teachers must undertake to be effective literacy educators in a racially divided
nation. This inside job includes the deeply reflective intellectual and emotional work whereby courageous teachers engage honestly with the tensions between their social roles as teachers in a nation that holds to myths of colorblindness and meritocracy, and their individual identities as people with complicated personal histories and theoretical commitments. When unspoken racial tensions undermine classroom dynamics, teachers need a high degree of social knowledge, skill, and tact to address them effectively. (2006, 10)

For Barron, Grimm, and Gruber, teachers must be willing to risk difficult discussion in working with students on developing “racial literacy,” or a better sense of how the stories we individually and culturally tell about race (our various race “myths”) are tied to material differences in how people are treated and to their experience (or not) of economic justice. Clearly, then, when it comes to issues of war and race, some compositionists are working hard to think critically about how such topics might be profitably encountered in the composition classroom. More significantly, as these two examples show, war and race are not simply “topics” but intertwined with literacy issues in complex ways—in much the same ways, I believe, that sex/uality and literacy are densely interconnected.

However, when it comes to thinking critically with students specifically about sex and sexuality and confronting potential student resistances, next to nothing exists in English studies literature. As such, there is little to help us as instructors sift through potential student resistances. One exception comes from one of our colleagues in literature and literary studies, a slender book called *Teaching Literature* by Elaine Showalter, which includes a brief but useful chapter called “Teaching Dangerous Subjects.” Showalter at once praises English instructors, particularly literature instructors, for willingness to approach difficult material and cautions us all against doing so without some sense of caution: “the awareness literature teachers bring to representations of race, dialect, and ethnicity does not usually extend to the many other difficult subjects literature presents, and sometimes romanticizes, such as suicide, abortion, pornography and sexually graphic language, drug addiction, and alcoholism. Because we have become accustomed to treating the material as fictional or textual, teachers can overlook the sensitivity of content.” A failure to consider “sensitivity of content” might very well lead to some students feeling alienated or even hostile. Such is particularly the case for students who might not want to discuss sexually loaded topics. For Showalter, honesty is the best policy in diffusing potential resistance:
“One important principle is candor and clear labeling—telling students in advance that they may be offended or upset; contextualizing the topic with some sociological or historical background; being prepared for some students to be shocked or upset no matter what you do, and allowing opportunities for them to respond” (2003, 126). Showalter is even more explicit in her advice about dealing with sexually sensitive material. She advises: “I believe that the professor’s behavior and tone are crucial in shaping students’ attitudes towards sexual language. If we are embarrassed, they will be embarrassed. If we are salacious, they will leer. Nonetheless, especially for women professors, sexual language and material can be problematic. I try to demystify and legitimize sexually explicit language in the classroom by using it in lecture, when reading passages from the text, without fuss or emphasis” (129).

I believe Showalter is generally correct, and my experience has demonstrated that if I approach a “sensitive” topic, such as AIDS or sex education, with respect and as though it is perfectly normal to talk about such topics, then students are likely to follow suit. As mentioned above, in a previous book, Digital Youth, I recount my experiences with multiple sections of first-year writing courses primarily focused on exploring HIV and AIDS as personal, social, cultural, and political issues. Students were nearly unanimously engaged with the project—not because I am a particularly good instructor, but because we committed as a class to think and write about the subject respectfully—and to respect one another’s views and positions.

At times, though, some students will resist participating, if only because they are uncomfortable talking about sex and sexuality. And this is totally understandable—and should be openly acknowledged as understandable. Pamela L. Caughie eloquently addresses the risky nature of talking about sensitive subjects such as sexual diversity in her book Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility. She notes that “[w]hat makes learning about diversity so risky, as Spivak, hooks, and others have pointed out, is the imperative it brings to unlearn our own forms of privilege. . . . In unlearning forms of privilege, in responding to the challenge of their own ignorance, students, it is generally assumed, must be willing to take the risk of uncertainty and to suspend their desire for mastery. Asking them not to pass as authorities, we ask them to take the ultimate risk of not passing at all” (1999, 61). At such moments of risk, avoidance is easy. In “Conflict and Kitsch: The Politics of Politeness in the Writing Class, (2003), Wendy Ryden notes that classroom discussions
that might involve conflict or ideological dissent can sometimes sidestep such dissent through the often unspoken operation of an “etiquette” that disavows the possibility of conflict. In other words, many students (and perhaps some instructors) automatically move in the direction of ignoring potential conflict as a way to “keep the peace.”

In the face of such silences, I have found Dawn M. Skorczewski’s advice in *Teaching One Moment at a Time: Disruption and Repair in the Classroom* to be particularly helpful. She argues for the use of a “freeze frame” technique, which she describes at length:

To begin to think about what is happening (from the perspective of teaching) in a discussion that is moving along, I consider its opposite: the interpersonal dynamics of moments of disruption, moments when the discussion is not working. I also introduce a pedagogical tool, “the freeze frame,” that I have found useful to my understanding of the classroom discussion. The freeze frame refers to a process through which we examine student-teacher interactions in a classroom by stopping the action to talk about what is happening at any given moment. The freeze frame is a break from the action, in which the facilitator halts the action of the discussion to draw our attention to what we are feeling in the room, what we are creating with the rest of the class, and how we are expanding ourselves as thinkers and writers. The majority of freeze frames are initiated because of the discussion leader’s perception that something is not happening in the room that should be happening or because of her or his confusion about how to proceed. They also, more infrequently, occur at moments when the discussion is going well and the leader does not know why or how this happened. (2005, 40)

The “freeze frame” is particularly useful for discussion of sex, sexuality, and sexual literacy because it allows students to express their discomfort about talking (or writing) about sexuality. In the process of discussing such discomfort, they are taking their first steps toward desocialization around sex and sexuality—and toward sexual literacy, or being able to talk intelligently and critically about sex/uality.

But silence is not the only form of resistance. While some students might choose to remain silent about sex or sexuality topics, others might openly oppose consideration of the topics at all. Other work in the field of composition studies, while not focused on thinking about resistances to sexual literacy curricula or discussions, confronts student resistances that are potentially more active than passive silences or lack of participation. I am thinking here specifically of the work of Jim Berlin. Berlin’s
work with students in inviting them to think critically about the languages of advertising, of work, and of education met with some resistance, particularly as he and other pedagogues turned students’ attention to unexamined assumptions and values. Indeed, he notes that “the most remarkable effect of the course has been the intensity of resistance students have offered their teachers, a stiff unwillingness to problematize the ideological codes inscribed in their attitudes and behavior” (1991, 52). His response? “We do insist . . . that students take into consideration the oppositional point of view continually forwarded by the teacher, by a number of the essays read, and by other students. . . . The result, we hope, will be to encourage a more open and tolerant society, one in which the full possibilities of democracy might be openly explored” (53–54).

Berlin’s “insistence” that students “take into consideration the oppositional point of view” may serve a rhetorical purpose, but I wonder if students are left feeling coerced. Put another way, as we invite students to engage in the process of “desocialization,” to borrow Shor’s term, do students feel bullied into doing so? I would hope not, and I cannot support any kind of instruction that bullies students. But I am certainly well aware that inviting students to think critically and write substantively about difficult material can seem bullying, if some students are particularly invested in not considering sensitive material. I have been fortunate in my nearly two decades of instructional experience (in places as diverse as Louisiana, Colorado, and Ohio) not to have had a student flatly refuse to participate in my courses dealing with sexual literacy issues. But with some students increasingly invested in promoting religious fundamentalism, I dare say that such active resistances are certainly possible. And they may be squelching instructional opportunities to consider stories of sex and sexuality from a variety of perspectives in certain parts of our country (much less of the world).

Some compositionists are clear about the importance of addressing conflicts, particularly ideological conflicts, as they arise. Ryden suggests, though, that when conflict arises, as it inevitably does when dealing with sensitive topics or material, it should not be avoided: “I’m not sure that crisis should or even can be manufactured, but when it occurs we might need to resist the urge to contain it too handily through an evisceration of its emotional component. An expanded understanding of rhetoric might lead us to a praxis that would recognize and do justice to the primacy of emotion in intellectual exchange” (2003, 91). Susan C. Jarratt’s
“Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict” even more directly and succinctly proposes that we must be willing to risk some amount of conflict if we are to teach well: “Even when teachers announce the desire to create a particular climate, they can’t neutralize by fiat the social positions already occupied by their students. . . . Differences of gender, race, and class among students and teachers provide situations in which conflict does arise, and we need more than the ideal of the harmonious, nurturing composition class in our repertory of teaching practices to deal with those problems” (1991, 113). Indeed, as noted in the introduction, Gerald Graff has famously argued in his book Beyond the Culture Wars that we actively “teach the conflicts” as part of our higher education curricula: doing so, he maintains, may serve to “revitalize” American education by showing students democratic debate in action.

But the question obviously is, how? How do we allow conflict to occur and resistant thinking to find voice while still maintaining a productive learning experience for all students?

One of the most important books to confront this issue in composition studies is Collision Course by Russel Durst. In this book, Durst acknowledges the “strong tendency now in composition studies to focus discussion almost exclusively on ideological matters such as students’ political beliefs; race, gender, and class inequalities; the oppressiveness of our institutions; and how we might effect change.” While he applauds this trend, recognizing that issues of “curriculum ha[ve] always been political,” he also advocates for what he calls “reflective instrumentalism,” or paying attention to and honoring the goals that students themselves bring into the classroom. Put another way, Durst believes that we should both embrace a critical literacy that “focus[es] on the political . . . [as] a critical part of students’ intellectual and moral development” and acknowledges students’ interest in getting good jobs, finding satisfying careers, and achieving financial security. He explains his position thus: “In my view, we can best teach critical literacy in first-year composition not by denying or trying to undermine students’ careerism. Rather, I believe we can best teach critical literacy by accepting the pragmatic nature of most students’ approach to the first-year writing course, by taking students’ goals into consideration when designing curriculum, and then by attempting to build a reflective, intellectual, politically aware dimension into this instrumentalist orientation” (1999, 5–6). I find myself in general agreement with Durst, and I think that students’ interests and investments should be acknowledged and honored,
even as we enact critical pedagogies that ask them, à la Berlin’s work, to question the assumptions, values, and ideologies upon which their investments build.

If anything, I want to augment Durst’s approach by suggesting that sex and sexuality are among the great unspoken interests and investments that students have—unspoken and unacknowledged in our composition classrooms. Durst asks the right questions: “Who are our students? What do they want? And what should be teach them?” (1999, 170). For Durst, the answer to the last question should of necessity follow, at least in part, on answers to the first two questions. Durst locates career at the top of the list of student interests. I don’t disagree in general, but I also believe strongly that attention to other important aspects of our experience—sex/uality and religion being two of the most significant—is crucial. Indeed, as I have shown in chapter 3 and throughout this book, students have much to say about sex and sexuality. Paying attention to what they say and designing courses with them that help them address sex and sexuality issues in an intelligent and sophisticated manner serve not only to develop their (and our) sexual literacy but also to honor a significant personal interest that many students have. Doing so openly and respectfully, at the beginning of the term, can deflate much student resistance, particularly if we involve students in the design of our courses. As Durst puts it, “I would suggest that setting up composition curricula that ignore or dismiss student instrumentalism has serious negative consequences in our courses, often leading to student alienation, hostility, disengagement, avoidance behavior, and unproductive conflict” (1999, 177).

David Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald’s Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom provides wonderful advice for how to set up composition courses that actively involve students in curricular issues. As they put it, “[m]utuality is invoked in that knowledge is not a pre-packaged commodity to be delivered by the teacher but is an ‘outcome’ constituted in the classroom through the dialogic interaction among teachers and students alike” (2000, 4). Specifically, Wallace and Ewald argue for the following when “valuing students’ interpretive agency in writing classes”:

- contributing to students’ agency in defining tasks and topics, and thus tapping students’ prior theories about writing as part of the ongoing meaning making in the class
requiring both teachers and students to embrace subjectivity as represented in their own sets of prior theory and as reflected in the diversity of passing theories that may emerge during, and as a result of, classroom interaction

making it necessary to recognize ideological stances within one’s own subjectivity that, if unacknowledged, may not only inhibit participants coming to a shared passing theory but also may affect the agency that students are able to assume as writers within a given classroom situation. (102)

Wallace and Ewald are invested in creating pedagogical spaces that simultaneously value students’ interests and seek to challenge them and their assumed values and ideological stances in productive ways. I believe that such an approach is crucial not only in diffusing potential resistances but also in creating learning spaces that can address sexual literacy in a larger cultural climate that still constructs sex and sexuality as essentially private or taboo.

Perhaps one of the most important assumptions we can examine with students, particularly at the beginning of any term, is the assumption that a classroom is a value-free or neutral space. Let me be clear: inasmuch as possible, our classrooms should be relatively “safe spaces,” and I believe that Wallace, Ewald, and Durst offer great ideas for helping to produce such “safe spaces.” But Durst is right: they are never neutral. Honesty about that is essential.

I think that the primary reason that I object to neutrality is that some of us do not have the luxury of neutrality. For example, I cannot always pass as anything other than a queer man in my classes. And many students inevitably read my gay self as inevitably liberal. Okay, not a catastrophe—hardly. Such a reading often allows me to have rich discussions with students about how stereotypes function rhetorically in our culture, and about how the idea of the “norm” and the “normative” are powerful rhetorical forces socially and politically. I bring into such discussions Kenji Yoshino’s use of Erving Goffman’s concept of “covering”—or how members of minority groups that seem more closely aligned with the prevailing “norm” are more likely to be accepted by the normative society, despite their minority status. In others words, straight-acting gays are just more acceptable and more likely to be accepted socially (and politically?) than queeny fags. The rhetorics surrounding this phenomenon
of covering are rich and complex, and I have found that students seem to thoroughly enjoy talking about them—even as they know I am gay.

Are some uncomfortable with the discussion? Inevitably. But so am I. And we discuss such discomfort as well. We discuss how it is political for me to discuss such topics in the classroom and how it would just as political if I did not. Every choice of reading matter or discussion topic is political and ideologically valenced. And the subject of choice itself should always be part of a class’s ongoing metadiscussion.

As I have discussed these issues with instructors, some have countered by saying that, as an openly queer man, I have a “natural” reason to want to discuss sexuality issues with students. I am dubious about this because all of us have sexualities—not just queers. But I wonder: is it easier for an openly gay teacher to talk about sex and sexuality in the classroom than a heterosexually identified teacher? I have no idea, though I suspect students would not think that a nongay teacher teaching a “gay text” or talking about queer sexuality (or sexuality in general) is trying to convert them or liberalize their thinking. Maybe. Maybe not. Regardless, it would be totally disingenuous for me to pretend to be the “heteronormative teacher.” I am not that teacher. Specifically, I would be robbing students of my attempt to model an academic who tries to be both fully aware of his own contextualized position and grapple with tough stuff from a variety of viewpoints. That is the trick, no? Pretending to neutrality lessens the complexity of the rhetorical task, and lures us into thinking that there is a neutral position. There isn’t. And I don’t think we’ll ever come together and rationally hash through our various issues unless we acknowledge our positions—and acknowledge others’ positions as part of the process.

Note that the content here is really all about rhetoric. And rhetoric is inevitably political. As our students take up a variety of issues as citizens in a pluralistic democracy, it behooves us to introduce students to how issues are cast rhetorically, how they are often falsely binarized in the media, how views about issues stem from complex contexts, and how a greater rhetorical awareness of those contexts provides us a more subtle way of understanding those issues and communicating effectively with those whose views differ from ours. Ultimately, I find myself most strongly agreeing with Patricia Roberts-Miller in Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes: “People experience conflict as difficult because it is difficult. . . . A world without any enclaves at all, in which one could never find a comfortable place of agreement, would
be exhausting, but a world where people really disagree, where our central assumptions are questioned, can be exciting. The task for any democratic theory is to describe a city where difference is productively challenging, and to persuade people to spend much of their lives there” (2004, 57).

Our students deserve nothing less than an introduction to that complexity. And perhaps, as I have argued throughout, a productive introduction to challenging complexity begins by joining our students’ conversations about sex and sexuality—and perhaps joining them begins first with listening.

**ENCOURAGING TRANSGRESSION, ENCOUNTERING RESISTANCE, OR A CASE OF FAILING TO LISTEN**

Resistances to our work can occur in seemingly odd, unforeseen ways, particularly when our own agendas, often not thoroughly acknowledged, foreclose on what our students are trying to tell us about their interests, values, and needs. In the final chapter of *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities*, Harriet Malinowitz argues that teachers should think fully and carefully about the ways in which the identities that both teachers and students bring to a writing classroom are complicated and varied. More specifically, she asks us to acknowledge the extent to which we might wish to maintain, rather than erase, our differences; as Malinowitz puts it, “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, 251–52). Such “friction and contradiction” can offer a plentitude of critical entrances for “queering the brew,” as she puts it, or for critiquing the dominant narratives with which and through which our lives are constructed and lived. Configured as such, the writing classroom becomes a powerful site for developing skills of cultural critique, investigating the social functions of narratives, and examining the construction of personal and political identities through social deployments of language and story.

To promote both inclusivity of viewpoint and a critique of dominant modes of thought, I have tried, like many other compositionists, to encourage students to explore how their outsiderhood, the various ways they simultaneously do and do not fit into our normalizing culture, produces transgressive and critical knowledges that they can use to critique and potentially subvert their placement within the culture at large. In many
ways, as I have argued throughout this book, increasing sexual literacy itself may act as a mode of transgressive critique, as a way of opening a space to think critically and differently about identities, relationships, and normative values.

At the same time, it is important to realize that the role of the teacher in this exercise is often left undertheorized—an oversight that enables critical blind spots in our understanding of our pedagogical performances. Most discussions of transgressive pedagogy figure the teacher as an uncomplicated “nurturer” of transgression, who empowers his or her students to think critically and thereby subvert those aspects of the status quo that are oppressive. For instance, Malinowitz, borrowing from Lester Faigley, suggests that “[h]elping students to achieve critical awareness of the ways that definitions of the self emerge from discourse and of ‘how definitions of the self are involved in the configuration of relations to power’ . . . is the closest we can come to ‘empowering’ them; it is only when one is self-conscious about position and location in this way that one can act to repurpose and relocate oneself in the world” (1995, 72). More specifically, in her discussion of creating writing courses that are friendly and supportive (of lesbian and gay students, for instance, or of those with alternative views), Malinowitz maintains that while “no teacher can completely control [classroom] conditions,” a teacher can nonetheless “promote and encourage a classroom environment which, beyond being ‘affirmative,’ is structured to creatively tap the involvement of queer subjectivities in the class’s epistemological brew” (1995, 258).

As promoter and encourager, the teacher’s role seems relatively clear-cut and transparent. My experience in the classroom, though, demonstrates that the teacher’s subjectivity and identity, particularly in classrooms in which transgressive knowledges are nurtured and developed, offer a few more challenges than has yet been adequately understood. Specifically, the teacher’s position in the university and the identities that students—particularly students already drawn to transgressive ideas—construct for her often presuppose that she is neither aware of nor interested in transgression, that her very position in the classroom indicates her support of the status quo. Moreover, we are not immune to the tendency to construct our students’ identities, to see them as “members of the choir,” as fellow resisters, as transgressors of the status quo. Such complex projections can create identifications, misidentifications, and points of resistance that can teach us much about one another, the
classroom as a site of learning, and the possibilities and limits of thinking transgressively.

An example of this complex phenomenon, and the unforeseen resistances that can emerge within such complex pedagogical environments, may be useful here, and I’d like to outline briefly a course I co-designed with two of my longtime colleagues, Michelle Gibson and Deborah Meem. Informed by feminist, queer, and postmodern theories, our course had as its primary text Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*. We believed that this book’s transgressiveness and insistence on dismantling traditional, sentimental constructions of family and morality would provide students with a way to begin the process of intellectual and emotional self-examination. My colleagues and I designed the course syllabus together, worked together throughout the term, and wrote essay assignments together. We also asked our students to interact with one another through e-mail as they read, discussed, and wrote about Allison’s book. Our goal was to help students see Allison’s process of undermining and transgressing traditional notions about family, friendship, sexuality, gender, and so on in order to help them begin to critique their own long-held beliefs about these issues. In general, we wanted to (1) help students see the transgressive in their reading, writing, and experience; (2) champion the transgressive; and (3) increase students’ awareness of transgression so that they might begin to understand its complex relationship to critical thinking, as well as to their own lives. In many ways, this curriculum was among the first I experimented with in trying to help students develop a critical sexual literacy—a literacy that would analyze and interrogate normative constructions of intimacy in our culture. To facilitate these goals, we hoped that a close reading and discussion of the issues in *Bastard out of Carolina* might prompt those in the class with transgressive experiences or knowledges to begin thinking critically about them. Moreover, we hoped that a respectful consideration of such knowledges would serve as an invitation to share them with others, thus further reinforcing the creation of an atmosphere in which transgression could be understood and appreciated—and perhaps even used.

All in all, though, we felt successful in provoking discussion and thought about several thorny issues, and our discussions generally kept students from recasting the novel into “traditional” modes of understanding. However, we found that our own positions as teachers in the university sometimes worked against the goals outlined above—particularly with students who already saw themselves as transgressive
before they entered the course. Many of those students were inclined to resist the novel and the transgressive ideas we were espousing because they were presented by teachers and because these students had constructed the teacher’s identity as in sync with the status quo. While certainly not all students chose to resist our work, I could see such resistances at play in certain students, most notably a very bright young man named Zach.

I liked Zach immediately. Among all of my students that quarter, he clearly had the most developed—and consciously cultivated—sense of personal style. Dressed every day completely in black, including starkly dyed hair and matching satchel, Zach stood out from the other generally casually dressed students in the classroom. And that was the point, I think. For his style was clearly designed to transgress the norms of appearance absorbed by so many of my other students, whose clothing mostly mimicked those worn by the fashion models of Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, or their favorite band’s neo-grunge lounge wear. But Zach’s penchant for black was more than just a fashion statement. It announced his attitude—a studied cynicism, a cultivated skepticism. Zach was no mere goth. In a way, his black outfit was a metonym for his whole demeanor: he didn’t mind standing out, in both dress and beliefs.

This attitude found prime expression in the numerous buttons and pins he had attached to his book bag, which added a bit of color to the black motif. But here again, the pins served a calculated purpose; they often bore political statements, with usually subversive sentiments, such as “Nuke another godless, homosexual baby seal for Christ!” They were clearly designed to “torque off” those who happened to see them—and they were hard to miss. As such, I gathered they were a little dose of the personal (and the political) to counteract the amnesia of conformity surrounding him. The buttons also revealed, subtly but subversively, that Zach was queer. And I could barely contain a bit of pride and admiration in such daring coming from a nineteen-year-old.

All in all, Zach’s appearance, pose, and attitude forcefully drew my attention. As a queer teacher, I felt compelled to “watch out” for all of my les-bi-gay students. But more than that, I felt a special affinity for Zach—particularly the button-toting Zach. His “in-your-face” pins reminded me immediately of the kinds of pins I used to wear as a teenager. While I was never allowed to dress all in black or dye my hair (which I desperately wanted to do to mark metonymically the distance between my queer self and my Southern Baptist parents), I would often sport a button with some
provocative statement. I wanted to draw attention, disturb, and, in a word, “queer” the surrounding landscape of political and personal conservatism and conformity. I was to southern Louisiana as Zach was to Cincinnati. I could understand his motivations, as they had been—and are to this day—mine as well. So, with Zach’s self-presentation and overt queerness triggering my memories of my own longed-for transgressive young adulthood, I couldn’t help but identify with Zach. He seemed so much what I had hoped to be as a young man, as well as what I still hoped to be from my position within the academy. Moreover, I thought that Zach would be the perfect co-conspirator in this class. He, of all the students, would understand the kind of transgressive thinking I would be encouraging.

But my delight was soon to receive a “reality check,” demonstrating to me that my identification with Zach was more a product of my own projections than anything else. I wanted the students’ final essay for the class to trace how their engagement with Bastard out of Carolina had “queried” the values they wrote about at the beginning of the course. I felt this would be a perfect opportunity for Zach to expound more on his transgressive style and politics, especially since he claimed to have enjoyed the book so much.

But this is not what Zach had in mind at all.

My first moments of dis-identification occurred during a teacher-student conference about the topic of Zach’s last essay, in which he wanted to discuss and problematize the relationship between child abuse and the development of homoerotic feelings—a connection that some students in the class were linking causally because Dorothy Allison, a lesbian, had been abused as a child. I was intrigued by the topic, primarily because I thought Zach would transgressively challenge the “received wisdom” of his classmates and argue against such a pathologizing understanding of the queer. Instead, Zach told me that the primary reason abuse and homosexuality shouldn’t be linked is because no one in his or her right mind would consciously choose to be homosexual; in his view, homosexuality was inevitably a biological predisposition. The development of a gay identity had little to do with abuse, and everything to do with genetic coding. I was taken aback—and really couldn’t believe that somebody who self-presented so transgressively, and seemingly “queerly,” could hold such seemingly conservative views. Zach was invested, understandably so, in tolerance for queers.

In our conferences together, I had attempted to challenge some of Zach’s essentialist notions, hoping to provoke a bit more transgressive
thinking about the value of homoerotic interest not as an identity but as a possibility—a position—of critique. Regardless of its “origin,” I wanted to help students see an open and celebratory queerness as a critique of heteronormativity; queerness was a celebration of sexual freedom, the choice to be proud of one’s desires and intimacies, regardless of their etiology and precisely because they were so disparaged by the larger “straight” culture. Instead, Zach ignored my advice and produced an essay that explored homosexuality as a biological given, an essential trait. His was a plea for tolerance, not transgression.

By the end of the quarter, I realized that I had been misreading Zach’s self-positioning within the classroom. Despite my identifications, and what I took to be his initial identification with me, we were hardly co-conspirators. And while I initially believed I had “failed” to encourage transgressive thinking on Zack’s part, I realized that I had failed to recognize his own investments, his sense of what is “transgressive,” in my rush to promote transgressive thinking and critique. So ultimately, Zach certainly transgressed—but not at all in the ways I had intended. His brand of transgression turned out not to be the kind of transgression that I was hawking in the classroom. Rather, his transgression was to resist me—to resist what he saw as unproductive for his life, his world.

Certainly, in creating spaces in which it is safe to transgress, we open up the possibility of having our own cherished ideas, beliefs, and authority (as transgressive as they may be) come under subversive scrutiny. I can’t help but feel that it might have been my early identification with Zach that may also have contributed to his resistance to my brand of transgression. With my fumbling attempts to make a connection with him, as well as my pronounced interest in letting him know that he had a queer ally in the class, I might have set myself up as someone this student had to transgress. In short, my identification with Zach might very well have foreclosed on the possibility of my recognizing transgressions that I had not “authorized” in the context of the class.

Jeffrey Weeks offers some useful thoughts on the nature of transgression that might provide a way to analyze and understand what happens when we attempt to “nurture” the transgressive in the classroom. In Invented Moralities, Weeks notes: “Transgression, the breaching of boundaries, the pushing of experience to the limits, the challenge to the Law, whatever it is, is a crucial moment in any radical sexual project. As an individual act it speaks of a self obscured by an ignoble sexual order. For
many this act of defiance is the expression of a buried truth. It is the characteristic stance of the individual resister who says ‘Here I am, I can do no other’” (1995, 108). In many ways, Zach was telling me his “buried truth,” that he could “do no other”—and, as Weeks might suggest, he was taking seriously our call to think and act transgressively. Zach, probably for the first time in his life, was confronting large institutions—and their representatives (us)—with his own self-representation, his own self-knowledge; therefore, his initial utterances of self-articulation, hurled at the educational machinery, may have been an attempt to stake out a sense of self, produced as a defensive truth about oneself, against the seemingly cold and indifferent institution.

The dilemma, then, of nurturing the transgressive in our classrooms is a complex one. The transgressions we wish to encourage may not be those necessarily shared by the students themselves, who often have their own transgressive agendas. Moreover, the power/narrative of the classroom inevitably positions the student and the teacher in an agonistic relationship, in which the teacher, as authorizing agent, necessarily sets the boundaries of the classroom—boundaries that remain, despite our intentions, invitations to transgression. In other words, my “nurturing” of transgression could be read as an attempt to “authorize” or even “normalize” certain forms of transgressive thought and behavior—normalizations that our students may try to resist. With such knowledge, I can do much better than lament these first tentative steps toward transgressing and critiquing the socially normative; I can—and should—honor such attempts, even if such attempts are not my own. Perhaps they should be honored precisely because they are not my own, but someone else’s, constructed and articulated to meet an individual’s needs. I am not sure there can be any sexual literacy without such a basic appreciation for our differences.

WHAT DO WE DO NOW? OR FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF SEXUAL LITERACY

Throughout this book, I have offered examples from my own and others’ classrooms of pedagogies that both highlight and interrogate intersections among literacy and sexuality—as well as the sexualized nature of literacy throughout the West. My goal has been to emphasize how a significant dimension of literacy education and development in our first-year composition classrooms is being overlooked and can be addressed through engaging, thoughtful, and critical writing exercises.
Granted, my focus has been more on issues of sexuality as largely related to identity, and I admit that I have addressed only glancingly a wide variety of “sex issues”—ranging from reproductive freedom to sex education—that should be considered in the composition classroom as much as issues of sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual identity. My only defense in not picking up these issues for discussion is that one book can only do so much. As such, I want in the remaining pages of this last chapter to be suggestive of how other sex and sexuality issues can be approached profitably and productively in first-year composition courses.

So, when we ask our students what kinds of sex and sexuality issues are important to them, we might be surprised at the responses. If we have been paying attention to venues such as Facebook, MySpace, student newspapers, or other online forums, we may see that students are invested in exploring not just the mechanics of sex (the “how to”) but intersections among sex, discourse, culture, and politics. And as we begin to address sexual literacy in our courses, we must consider its intersections with other literacies. In particular, issues of religion and race intersect sexuality in powerful ways. I have, for instance, had students who have wanted to write about their experiences with biracial relationships, or with navigating intimacies with people with disabilities. Many readings could augment such explorations, in-class discussions, and writing experiences. The work of Audre Lorde, for instance, offers a rich set of insights into how a thoughtful individual occupies and interrogates intersecting identities. Lorde is a queer lesbian of color who struggled with cancer; her essays in *Sister Outsider* model ways of thinking about the complexity of experience—about the ways in which one’s sexuality, one’s race, and one’s body are simultaneously one’s own and not one’s own. Our deepest senses of self are both deeply personal and deeply socially imbricated. And experiencing oneself sexually as a white person is not always the same as experiencing oneself sexually as a black person in our culture. Lorde’s writing on such subjects could prove illuminating for a wide variety of students, and I wouldn’t be surprised if many students have much to add to Lorde’s initial thinking about the intersections among sexuality, ability, and racial identity. For instance, students could follow the lead of Dwight A. McBride in *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch*, who critically examines how race and class markers, not just clothing, are marketed erotically in the company’s sexy advertisements of beautiful young (white) people: “Surely we know that people are not buying ‘Abercrombie’ for the clothes. The catalog itself
Susie Bright in the Comp Class

isn’t even about featuring those, after all. People buy ‘Abercrombie’ to purchase membership into a lifestyle” (2005, 86). Critically and rhetorically examining view books, catalogs, Web sites, and even A&F stores might stimulate students’ thinking about the complex literacies of sexuality put into service to promote particular racial and class values.

But there’s so much more. Students are clearly invested in issues of sex education, many of them having just encountered a variety of different sex education experiences in high school. Certainly, the politics of sex education most reveal how deeply personal issues are intertwined with public debates, with the rhetoric of different ideological positions that jockey for influence. And as students move into sexual maturity, they may want to consider the variety of sexual enhancements that are marketed to them. Whose interests are represented in enhancements such as Viagra, or in effective contraception? How are such marketed? What rhetorics are at play in both their marketing and in the public discussion of them? And certainly, what about sexual violence? Discourses surrounding sexual violence, particularly against women and children, reveal significant cultural values and ideologies at play, as women, for instance, are often depicted as agentless victims. What gender politics is working here? What sexual literacies need understanding—and critique?

When thinking about such assignments and the courses I might build around them, I have generally kept a few key questions in mind, a few guideposts for the writing of assignments that keep them flexible, attuned to student interests and needs, and capable of challenging students in productive ways. I always ask myself, what do my assignments assume? What kinds of voices do they elicit? What kinds of voices do they potentially silence? Whoever creates assignments through which others are asked to interrogate their thinking must also be open to interrogation as well. Along those lines, I have posed students the following questions when they are confronting different representations, particularly representations that portend to represent their interests as sexual people:

How does the representation “think” me?
How do others think me?
How am I given to myself in the representation?
How do I think myself?
How could I think myself?
From here, students can explore the politics of representation, the ways in which rhetorics and discourses touching on our most intimate selves circulate publicly, how possibilities of relationship and intimacy are opened up and foreclosed upon by such discourses, how certain lives are validated, others not.

When considering such questions, I inevitably find myself thinking of the work of Foucault, with whom I largely inaugurated this project in the first chapter of this book. In particular, I am interested in the ethical dimension of Foucault’s work, because I firmly believe that, more than anything, we are asking students to consider densely ethical questions when we ask them to consider their own literacy practices, not just their sexual literacies. Thinking critically about the comportment of one’s body in relation to others, in the representation of one’s desires for others, in the stories that we tell about sex, sexuality, sexual identity, and intimacy, we are grappling most profoundly with ethical issues, with relations between selves and subjects. In *The Ethics of Marginality: A New Approach to Gay Studies*, John Champagne characterizes Foucault’s relationship to ethics this way: “This care of the self, a theme throughout Foucault’s later work, represents the attempt by the (subjugated) subject to work within cultural forms of subject production, countering the practices of modern disciplinary subject formation through what Foucault terms practices of self. . . . Foucault suggests that such practices ought to move toward freedom, which Foucault suggests, after the Greeks, is an ethical practice of self-government” (1995, xxix). Foucault wants us to recover—and further—the Greek philosophical principle of the “care of the self”; or, more specifically, “[t]o take care of oneself consists of knowing oneself. Knowing oneself becomes the object of the quest of concern for self” (231). Along these lines, I have striven to situate my classroom at a curious juncture in Western education, Western philosophy—between “know yourself” and “take care of yourself.”

If, as I have maintained throughout this book, knowing yourself in contemporary Anglo-American society is to know yourself sexually, then the furtherance of sexual literacy should be a key goal of critical education. And indeed, it should be clear at this point that exploring connections among sexuality, language, and literacy is to probe political dimensions both of language use and of constructions of sexuality. Foucault, a political activist himself, was well aware of the potential for not just scholarly but also political critique present in his work, and he conceived of this political dimension in very personal terms. Perhaps Foucault’s
most provocative statement in regards to his philosophy is found in a late interview, in which he opted for anonymity: “The movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules—that is philosophy. The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all of the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is—that, too, is philosophy” (1997,327).

I believe that inviting us all to explore sexual literacy is an invitation not just to know ourselves better, but to “think otherwise,” to push at current “frameworks of thinking” and challenge “received values.” I don’t know if we will become “other than what one is,” but we may at least become more critically cognizant of what we are.

So, as I approach the end of this book, I am asking myself if I will ever teach a first-year writing course with Susie Bright’s *The Sexual State of the Union* as the primary course text. Frankly, I am uncertain. That course would be stimulating and exciting—and risky—in ways that I often find hard to resist. (I completely understand Oscar Wilde’s sentiment about being able to resist anything but temptation.) But I must admit that I have enjoyed thoroughly the incorporation of issues of sex and sexuality into the writing classroom alongside other issues of literacy, as in the assignments I have described throughout this book. In many ways, such incorporation (as opposed to domination!) seems particularly productive because my students and I have explored sex/uality and their connection to literacy in the context of a variety of literacy issues. Doing so, in a way, normalizes discussion of sexuality. Sexuality isn’t something particularly “special” we’re going to talk about. It’s simply another issue, another important aspect of the human experience that deserves our critical and rhetorical attention. I believe all of us can—and should—consider the development of sexual literacy as a significant component of becoming literate in our society, and the only way to work with students on such sensitive material is to do so calmly, respectfully, openly, and honestly. Our students deserve nothing less.