

PRELUDE

Beginning Again

SO. TO BEGIN AGAIN. BUT WHERE THIS TIME?

As I approach the latter portion of my career, is it my own arrogance that wants to wax poetic, articulate grandly, assert in a summative way? What have I been doing all this time? Where has it taken me? I already feel the awareness in my lower body that wherever I have gone, wherever I have tried to take others, they have only ever used me as a guide (sometimes consciously, sometimes not, sometimes willingly, sometimes not) to chart their own paths, as surely as I have used others to do the same. But still, *where* have we gone?

I am thinking of repudiating myself. I have not always been right. And part of me is glad for that. I've never wanted to write a book that ends all books, that says everything that needs to be said, that has the last word. I've never believed such is possible.

But it is also not *desirable*.

OK, but this time, I will own it. *I do not desire to write the book that ends all books.*

So this is not that book. But it is a book that speaks of desire and writing, together, and what they have to do with each other. For as I

approach the latter part of my career, I realize I have not been writing about desire, but rather I have been *writing as itself a form of desiring*. I have been *writing as desiring*.

Let's turn up the volume here.

My first overt and explicit reference in this book to writing that is not my own (but is it ever my own? Already too many questions) comes from a few lines from a poem by the poet Eileen Myles from their collection *Sorry, Tree*:

I think writing is desire
not a form
of it. It's feeling into space, tucked into language slipped
into time, opened, felt. All this as a matter
of course of course
yet being
here somehow, open (15)

What I love about this poem—what I love about much of Eileen's work—is its willingness to risk assertion and, through assertion, the possibility of unexpected connection. This seems to me one of the primary traits of the poetic—its troping, turning language into a capaciousness that contains multitudes but also has, somehow, the capacity to capture more robustly the granularity of experience, of being. For Myles, those multitudes consist importantly of people but also material objects and nonhumans: trees, cigarettes, an animal companion, French movies, scribbles on napkins, the grime and grit of Greenwich Village. Myles collapses interiors and exteriors constantly; theirs is not a poetry of objective correlatives but rather of erasure between subject and object. The act of writing, what's tucked into language, *is a feeling into space*, into time, but also into matter, the word punning, as in something that matters but is also matter itself and perhaps matters as a matter of course precisely in its materiality. The poem (of course of course) assumes a specific form in the materiality

of language, and somehow the activity of languaging is simultaneously being here and yet also open, its act of interior discursivity a turn outward to mark the material world. Myles calls this desire.

Writing is desire.

This book, *my book*, explores what that assertion—that belief, that promise—might mean. *Writing is desire*. It is not so much a book about writing *about* desire (though it is that, in part), or about writing *on* desire (though it is that, in part, too), but a book about what happens when we begin with the idea that writing *is* the enactment of desire, broadly speaking. To explore this claim, I will have to think with you about how our field—rhetoric and composition, writing studies, but also perhaps English studies more broadly—has (and has not) approached desire, and I will need to clarify what I am offering now in leaning so much on desire conceptually. I know how this works, this academic approach. But I also hope to *create* something here, not just interrogate; to explore, not just map; to discover, not just claim. For perhaps the most important dimension of understanding how writing is desire is in the experience of *writing as desire*.

And already, a caveat. This book is *not* about the liberatory power of desire. It is rather about the cultivation and education of desire through writing, of understanding writing as a *practice* of desire, of feeling how writing *is* desire—and a particular kind of desire at that. I hope this will become clear over the course of these many pages, but I'll offer a personal story as a sort of grounding. (And in the process I'll start to repudiate myself, which is itself a form of desire: a desire to continue, to grow, to explore, to discover, to learn that you are not the end of all books.)

Earlier in my career, I wrote a book, *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, in which I attempted to mobilize the insights of queer theory for the teaching of writing. I began that work out of a sense of myself as not just an outsider to the field of composition studies, but also as an outsider to normative orders of being in the late capitalist cultures of a heteronormative and patriarchal

American hegemony, a hegemony that extended outward globally and inward (à la Foucault) to the construction of normative selves in the workroom of power we call the “self” and that Foucault and others rightly call the “subject,” as in what one is *subject* to. Queer theory, born out of these insights and deeply felt senses of the normative insides and outsides of the social, offered, it seemed to me, a way to think about how composition studies and its focus on language, communication, writing, and rhetoric might be reoriented toward an understanding and critique of the construction of normative discourses of the social and the self *and* toward an interrogation of a privileged heteronorm and a consequent derogation of lives, loves, interests, investments, and dispositions that lie, for whatever reason, outside those norms. I wanted to know, and explore with others, how the insights of the “others” might complicate the discursive and material construction of such norms and what kind, to borrow from Foucault again, of “available freedom” was possible, discursively and materially, through the act of writing.

I think now I was missing the point. In that book, I told a story about reading the author C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a boy—actually about how that book was read to me and other fifth graders in a class, and how the experience of that book and its telling of two stories at the same time (the fantasy story of Aslan the lion and the Pevensie children as allegory for the death and resurrection of Christ) opened my eyes to the possibilities of writing as the fantastical capacity to tell two stories at the same time, however related. Such seemed a magical power of storytelling, of creation, of writing. But I quickly moved to discuss how the narrative, a pedagogical story of Christian indoctrination for young minds, discursively and then just as surely materially, trapped me in the closet, my nascent queer feelings and being already identified in the schoolyard as faggotry, as sinful, as undesirable. I called Lewis’s wardrobe my first closet.

I wasn’t wrong, but I gave short shrift to what Lewis offered—or, perhaps more correctly, what I *took* from Lewis. For I have never stopped

believing in the power of writing to speak doubly, to tell a tale and tell a very different kind of tale at the same time. And if my perversion of Lewis's allegory lies in my commitment to writing as not just gesturing to the "real" story but to multiple, divergent, even contradictory stories, then so be it. For this is what it did. Yes, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* allegorized the story of Christ. But it also allegorized the creative power of the word to mean multiply—and perhaps to mean very differently than what was first intended or first apprehended or later imposed on the text. Writing couldn't be as controlled as Lewis had perhaps imagined, or wanted. Its correspondences were not as tightly braided as he hoped. It was fluid. It opened up and out. It is closer to Myles's troping, a feeling into space, a tree growing down and around and up, reaching. It is (to return to Lewis and *Prince Caspian*, the sequel to *Lion*, the first book I read cover to cover as a prepubescent boy) my young self imagining crawling into bed with one of the Pevensie boys, perhaps the bed of Prince Caspian himself, surrounded by his strong arms, cuddled and cradled, imagining connection, dreaming of a *being with* that, yes, I quickly learned to keep to myself, but that I sought out in book after book. And then I slowly started finding others with similar desires—even those with desires I didn't know were possible—that sparked and ignited and inspired and that kept me looking, reading, dreaming, discovering. That, in a word, kept me *desiring*.

Perhaps what I learned most importantly about writing and desire is that I pursued writing that opened up the world and its queerness to me *precisely to resist the discursive and material injunctions against my queerness that surrounded me*. I kept reading, voraciously, because I needed not so much to *find* myself in writing but to discover how to survive, to *reeducate* my sense of self away from the damaged conception I was given of a damned and sinful self and toward a vibrant and lively self I wanted and wanted to be. I then started writing my own fantasies, with accompanying maps, modeling myself on Lewis and others, because I needed to explore other worlds, other ways of being, other fantastical

and creative capacities for living that were otherwise foreclosed in my day-to-day existence. I have learned that such reading and writing were less about finding an identity than about the experience of language itself as a capacious, multiple, and generative process—less of being than of building, less of identifying and more of discovering. My writing was expressing a desire, multiple desires surely; but it was also, more importantly, desire itself. It was not just the representation of desire; it *was* desire.

To be sure, writing can *represent* a range of desires. It can absolutely channel desires for foreclosure, for harm, for limitation. But it can also *be* the gesture, the enactment, the being toward the other, toward *otherness*, the being that is becoming. I have learned from my own story, my own desires, and the stories I have come to tell about those desires, about the need to cultivate, actively, my own desires—before they are cultivated in me, and even *after* they have been cultivated by others in me. I am not talking here about authenticity, about the true self and its desires. I have never been sure such exists. Rather, I am talking about awareness, about activity, about agency. We learn desires, even *how* to desire, through the sponsorship of different institutions; my fifth-grade teacher reading us a book for children by C. S. Lewis was attempting to shape our emerging beings, direct us on particular paths. But there is also writing that can direct us *beyond* the sponsorship of particular institutions, writing that resists certain forms of sponsorship and the values and ideologies channeled through it, and writing that opens us to the unknown territories of being and possibility. At moments, I want to argue (I *desire* to argue?) that the generative capaciousness of languaging, the inherent power of writing's fundamental metaphoricity, lies precisely in its *inability* to fix reality and instead in its capacity to open it up for other ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Lewis's allegory deconstructing itself in my fifth-grade mind, pointing me less toward the sacrificial Christ and more to the power to tell a very different kind of story, was my first encounter with such a capacity.

In this way, writing as desire can become a constant education and reeducation of desire itself. As one initial example, I can point to how Eric Pritchard relies on Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" to forward a theory of restorative literacy and love. He is thinking in particular about Black Americans and how they use language and writing to repair the damages done to them by racism. For Pritchard, writing is the desire for something different, something *better* than what is offered. He writes, "Lorde describes the erotic as a power source engendering the vision one has for one's life on one's own terms. . . . The erotic challenges and invites us to see how this kernel of energy animates the entire enterprise of our interventions, and of our lives as a whole. Lorde cites the erotic as an affective power within individual and collective struggles against oppression" (57). Indeed. But Lorde's turn to the erotic and its uses is not just in service of living life on one's own terms. It is also a turning outward and an opening to the experience of joy across multiple spheres, domains, and ecologies. As Lorde herself puts it, "[An] important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (89). Bodies, music, dancing, bookcases, writing, and ideas. This is the erotic as desire not just for the attainment and satisfaction of identity, but as a stretching, a hearkening, and an opening. And Lorde, as master poet, knew well of the capacity of writing to enact such eroticism, to be such desire.

A theoretical aside: As you can already tell, I am allowing myself in this book to draw from a range of disparate sources, critical and creative, but I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge up front my debt to both feminist theories and queer theories. As you will see throughout this book, I liberally draw on both strains of thought. Queer theory has done essential work thinking about desire, both how it is formed in social contexts and shaped by cultural norms, and how desires that

do not sit easily within a given culture's normative rubric have radical potential. The pages of this book are laced with the insights and contributions of numerous thinkers working under the rubric of queer theory, and I am indebted to all of them. With that said, I mark here two important strains, particularly as queer theory has become interested in *futurity*—and our *often competing and incommensurable desires for and about the future*—as a generative concept through which to think the workings of desire and ideology in personal and political domains. On one hand, some theorists, often white and male, such as Lee Edelman in his polemical book *No Future*, see an investment in futurity as one of the most pervasive hegemonic dimensions of heteronormativity, which requires that we sacrifice our current pleasures and possibilities so that we can ensure better futures for children, for future generations. Such “better futures,” though, rarely include expansive notions of intimacy, relationality, and love but rather focus on the maintenance of stabilizing status quo (hetero)family norms.

Other queer theorists, though, have seen in imagining futurity different possibilities for cultivating ways of thinking about social relations, including alternative models of intimate relationality and citizenship. These theorists, often writing from a queer-of-color critique, are unwilling to give up on the future; in fact, they often mark the *denial* of the future as a particularly privileged position, one from a raced and classed standpoint (usually white, usually male) that can afford to give up on its future because its present is so secure. Critiquing this privileged position in his book *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz develops what he calls a queer utopian hermeneutic, which is “queer in its aim to look for queer relational formations within the social. . . . Indeed it is the work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now” (28). For Muñoz, the value of such a hermeneutic is that it would be “epistemologically and ontologically humble in that it would not claim the epistemological certitude of a queerness that we simply ‘know’ but, instead, [would] strain to activate the no-longer-conscious and to extend

a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious” (28). The accompanying gesture in such humbleness is the casting of a critical gaze on the present and its seemingly sedimented ideological (and intimate) formations; as Muñoz puts it, “The [critical] purpose of such temporal maneuvers is to wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging in particularity that is not dictated or organized around the spirit of political impasse that characterizes the present” (28).

Muñoz’s intervention is enhanced and extended by that of other queer theorists who are trying to move beyond *No Future* and create ways of thinking about the past, present, and future that are not bound by the organizing structures of contemporary capitalist life and its reproduction of (hetero)norms or limited conceptualizations of what constitutes appropriate identity, family, and community, however “tolerant” of “diversity” such might seem at times. Many such theorists begin with a pointed rejection or “opting out” of such structures in the present. I take the phrase “opting out” from the title of Mari Ruti’s monograph *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects*, in which Ruti works through and critiques Edelman’s antisociality and embrace of “no future.” Ruti argues that one of the major hallmarks of contemporary queer theorizing, even encompassing theorizations such as Jack Halberstam’s turn to failure as generative and Elizabeth Freeman’s critique of chrononormativity, is the desire to opt out of organizing structures of life that emphasize and actively promote “capitalist accumulation, normative ethical paradigms, the cultural ethos of good performance and productivity, narcissistic models of self-actualization, the heteronormative family, and related reproductive lifestyles” (7). One danger in “opting out,” however, is a fixation on negativity and critique that fails to forward a more generative sense of the possible. As Ruti puts it, a politics of negativity that leans toward Edelman’s *No Future*

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[is] devoid of any clear political or ethical vision: it wants to destroy what exists without giving us much of a sense of what should exist. It

may of course be that offering an alternative politico-ethical vision is more or less impossible. Perhaps it is not the task of theory to define the future but merely to critique the present. In principle, I do not have a problem with the idea that the purpose of theory is to show us what is wrong rather than to tell us what to do. At the same time, I am more inclined to look for “real-life” referents for my theoretical paradigms than those who believe that theory is—or should be—an imaginative activity wholly divorced from the exigencies of lived reality. (38)

Ruti’s gesture toward referents in “real-life” and her interest in “what should exist” open up ways of thinking queerly not just as a mode of critique of the present but as a method for thinking critically *and creatively* about futurities, however tentative (and humble) such thinking must necessarily be.

Along these lines, scholars and activists working in intersectional ways have been pushing us to think about what kinds of social logics must be not only reimagined but *desired differently* in order for a broader array of queer and trans subjects and communities not just to survive but flourish. For instance, Kim TallBear joins other feminist, queer, trans, and indigenous scholars in critiquing the heteronormative drives toward reproduction and human expansion that contribute significantly to the instrumentalization of nature and subsequently to climate change, to the ongoing disordering of our world, and to its now fundamental metabolic, social, political, and ecological disorder. Tracing the development and imposition of heteronorms, she points out in particular how the monogamous couple form has largely been one foisted on indigenous populations by Western colonial settlers, with indigenous kinship practices and nonmonogamies stigmatized, forbidden, and punished to this day. She describes the ways in which indigenous children were often taken from their extended families to be raised by white settlers. Most interestingly, TallBear asserts that, particularly at this time of anthropogenic assault

on the environment, what is needed is *less* normative reproduction and *more* queer kinship, more connection across often isolating nuclear family units. Radically decentering the kind of reproductive family that has dominated Western culture in the last century, TallBear's nonmonogamy is in the service of reimagining desires and pleasures, and working the sexual as a modality of creating community and extending kinship. In her words, some indigenous kinship practices might very well be “culturally, emotionally, financially, and environmentally more sustainable than the nuclear family” (157)—particularly as sex is reunderstood as primarily not just for producing children, but for creating kinship connections and ties, ties in which the caretaking of children is shared and extended across multiple people, multiple relations.

One way to conceptualize what I attempt to do in the remainder of this book is as a tracking of my own movement from the former (Edelmanian) position to the latter (Muñozian, TallBearian), beginning with what seems a particularly individual set of problems in queer desire, admittedly focused at first on a white male subject, and then moving to a broader reeducation of my own understanding and approach to desire through careful consideration and engagement with a range of queer and trans thinkers. That movement in some ways parallels what I see in queer theory's own trajectory. Initially, it has tended to focus in its address and analyses on the individual and interpersonal levels, to think about the choices of individual subjects to “opt out” (in Ruti's language) or to fail to conform to and hence perpetuate a society grounded in capitalist accumulation and heteronormative reproduction. Queer theories now seem poised to move beyond individual concerns and think desire as not just the provenance of persons but as central—and *challenging*—to the organization of communal, collectivist, and political projects. To be sure, the serious consideration of multiple individual engagements and refusals might add up to wholesale social transformation, but queer theory has too often left its engagement in such transformation at the juncture of the desiring subject. I cannot pretend in these pages to offer a more

widespread plan of transformation, but I will assert that any such project *must* account for and think and *feel* its way through desire. I hope that I am at least pointing the way forward by tracing the trajectories of my own desires and their reeducation toward the communal, the collective, the sustainable, the socially and ecologically just.

This is a book about those desires, about writing as desire, about writing as the particular kind of desire that is a reaching out, a making contact, a forging of connections, a tracing of trajectories, a launch of self toward others. Not a fixing, but a becoming. Not an allegory, but a constant metaphorizing out that delights in difference, that learns to love the power of language itself to open us onto the brilliant and diffuse and shattering and extraordinary differences that surround us. This book is about what happens when we focus our attention on understanding how *writing is desire*.

Desire in Writing Studies

Now I need to reassume my role (if I've ever left it, if it's possible at this point in my career to leave it) of the academic and trace the ways desire has been thought in my field, the field of writing studies. For it *has* been thought, though diversely and not always coherently—which is not a critique. Desire is itself diffuse. And while I am starting to work toward a definition of desire (ha! as though *that* were really possible), it will help my readers, I hope, to see how my own thinking about desire comes out of the thinking of many others over many years about what desire and what writing might possibly have to do with one another.

Thinking about desire is not new to composition and writing studies, though explicit consideration of desire as a pertinent concept has been admittedly limited and is not currently in fashion. When it was briefly in vogue in the '90s and early 2000s, desire often appeared as a grappling with the theoretical legacy of Jacques Lacan, who modified Freudian concepts into a consideration of subjectivity as produced

discursively, in language. Marshall W. Alcorn's 2002 book, *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire*, views the work of James Berlin, Teresa Ebert, and Lester Faigley through the theoretical lenses offered by Lacan and his latter day disciple Slavoj Žižek to argue that understanding the complexities of desire should have primary consideration in the teaching of writing, particularly if such teaching is a social-epistemic practice aimed toward increasing democratic participation. On one hand, Alcorn is sympathetic to critical pedagogies and their critique of ideologies, but on the other hand, he also recognizes the complications of the postmodern subject, one that is fractured, partial, often incoherent. As Alcorn argues, "Teaching must make use of knowledge *and desire*, but it must not seek to define knowledge as a pure effect of desire or control desire by the insistent demand of a master [i.e., a 'correct' ideology or politics]. Both desire and knowledge must circulate freely and must interact in order for social justice to make progress" (8, emphasis added). Part of what Alcorn is responding to was the growing sense at the time that critical pedagogies of the Freirean kind might assume a stable subject who willingly adopts the ideological dispositions of an instructor in critiquing structural inequalities and, in the wake of such critical consciousness, inaugurates social, cultural, political change. Postmodern and Lacanian critiques of subjectivity cast doubt, if not aspersion, on such an agential subject as it exists in a supposedly metonymical relation to social structures, such that changing the subject is also changing the structure. Various theories of subjectivity, from the Lacanian to the Foucauldian, understand the subject as always already actively divided against itself in its desires or interpellated through the circulation of different kinds of power that not only discipline from without but also cultivate within the subject disciplines of self-regulation and self-monitoring that align individual desires with the larger desires of social orders. A failure to account for such complexities of desire might lure us into a kind of false consciousness, one that privileges knowing agents achieving critical consciousness

as the primary activity of liberation—a purely cognitive undertaking. Such a false consciousness also fails to acknowledge the perversities of desire that lead to contrarian activity and self-sabotaging tactics, not to mention unlikely encounters, unexpected intimacies, and other strange bedfellows.¹ At the very least, as Russel K. Durst had already argued in 1999 in *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*, critical pedagogies were often willfully ignorant of students’ often contradictory desires about what they wanted their collegiate education to do for them.

Other thinkers in the field quickly followed suit, such as Christa Albrecht-Crane, who in 2003 argued for “An Affirmative Theory of Desire.” Broadly, Albrecht-Crane asserted that “affect, and what makes affect possible—namely desire—form the conceptual turning points through which individuals experience and in fact struggle with and against places of learning” (564). Working through theories of desire by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, but also Catherine McKinnon and Jane Gallup, she sides with Guattari, who argued that a liberation model focused on identity needs to be replaced by a “liberation of desire” itself (565). Foucault might agree, particularly as identity is often the workroom of disciplining power. But what does such a turn to desire look like? For Albrecht-Crane, thinking specifically about the classroom experience and the circulation of competing desires in it, “The point that matters the most here is that [a] teacher and student create something together through their desire for a connection, an affective call-and-response game that produces a particularly positive and generative bond” (584). The kind and quality of that connection should not be predetermined by a master pedagogue but left open and, in Albrecht-Crane’s word, *generative*.

Thomas Rickert had already sounded similar notes in his 2001 article, “Hands Up, You’re Free’: Composition in a Post-Oedipal World,” in which he argues that the turn to postmodern subjectivity, particularly in its rejection of a Freudian trajectory of desire, would “refuse the

reproduction of the everyday and demand nothing less than the new, the unthought, the unaccommodatable. It would refuse accommodation entirely in favor of a radical abandonment, an abandonment that seeks to squander its energy through forms of desiring production” (313). Again, liberation through identity isn’t enough. Even new identities—queer identities, for example—are only characterized by “transgressive qualities [that] are defined within the field of contention set up and ultimately governed by the regulating social norms” (314).² What is needed instead is an opening up *beyond* identity, what Rickert calls a post-pedagogy, one that “declines to participate in the dialectics of control, [and that] is an exhortation to dare, to invent, to create, to risk. It is less a body of rules, a set of codifiable classroom strategies, than a willingness to give recognition and value to unorthodox, unexpected, or troublesome work” (314).

Rickert expands on such thinking in his 2007 book *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the Return of the Subject*, in which the aforementioned article becomes a crucial chapter. Marshaling Lacan and Žižek, Rickert extends his ideas on invention, creation, and risk and argues for taking seriously “the impossibility of knowing the areas of contention and struggle that will be most important to our students’ lives or of assuming that our lines of contention will be theirs. Pedagogy could reflect this concern by promoting the idea that each student’s life is its own telos: the individual struggles of each student cannot and should not necessarily mirror our own. This is but one reason for rethinking cultural studies pedagogies and their focus on oppositional and ultimately Oedipalizing strategies, moving toward less critical and more inventional pedagogies” (164–65). Rejecting an Oedipalizing structure of education means rejecting the reproduction of normative structures of desiring, whether that reproduction occurs as pressure from without or from psychic structures within. Rickert turns to Lacan and *jouissance* to find some free space for invention and risk, for the encounter with the unknown—again, both without and within. As he defines it, “*jouissance* emerges anywhere,

everywhere, and it is something that eludes our conscious control. It inspires reactions in us about what we do and how we see ourselves and it provokes reactions in us concerning others” (205).

This definition of *jouissance* seems en route to what Rickert calls the *ambient* in his book *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*, published in 2013, in which Rickert makes a new materialist and Latourian turn and asks that rhetorical scholars ground their thinking in the interaction of actors, actants, and objects in the rich ecologies through and in which we live. The ambient is the environment that shapes and attunes, sometimes beyond our conscious awareness, our direct experience of the world, our horizon of possibilities for conceptualizing and imagining. To be clear, *jouissance* and the ambient are not the same. But what *is* comparable for Rickert, I believe, is the search for the agential as it exceeds *identity*.

Curiously, however, what gets left out of the move from *jouissance* to *ambience* is . . . desire. Desire is not a conceptually “live” term in *Ambient Rhetoric*. It appears most prominently when Rickert refers to Heidegger’s example of the jug—a metaphorically and materially rich example of something that is not simply just a vessel for human “desires” or needs, waiting to be filled up, but which, as an everyday, ambient object, is almost always part of ritual and community, even if not always consciously acknowledged as such. Think of the jug filled with water as central to a communal dining table. That is, jugs as material objects are also always social, cultural, political, and rhetorical in their material participation in the shaping of the experience of communal eating. As Rickert puts it, the object of the jug cannot be “reduce[d] . . . to a utilitarian understanding, as if all it does is take in and pour out what humans *desire*” (236–37, emphasis added). The jug is materially live in its relationality to the human—and desire here serves only as the foil to highlight the ecological, material, and ambient surround that richly shapes and contours not just our rhetorical but also our material being and experience.

Why is desire so sidelined, when its close cousin, *jouissance*, had been so prominent in Rickert's earlier work?³ For many of these thinkers, desire may have started to seem perhaps too tied up with identity, which smacks of the disciplining of subjects that Foucault identifies—of the ceaseless creation of new norms even around new, different, and supposedly “freer” identities. Even more, desire is largely elided, I believe, because the kind of de-Oedipalizing ways in which Rickert, Alcorn, and others were initially conceiving of desire leads all but inevitably to another trap: namely, that the privileging of desire as a freeing of self from social controls will somehow be “liberating.” The problem with this formulation is that the dialectic of control versus freedom is not so easily resolvable; it is, after all, a false binary. Again, as Foucault reminds us, any unleashing of desire often results in the creation of new norms, new controls, new identity formations, which are often based on the supposed unleashing of certain previously controlled or subjugated desires.

The path I am tracing from Alcorn to Rickert is not anomalous. We can see the steady elision—I want to say, the erosion of the consideration—of desire in adjacent theoretical discourses in the field as well. Victor Vitanza's 1997 *Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric* offered a call in the same vein as Alcorn and others writing in the 1990s to throw off the constraining shackles of binaries (such as male/female and even human/animal) that condition rhetorical practice and, in Vitanza's mind, even theories of rhetoric. He wanted to open up a new “country” of the rhetorical: a country that is “not a sentimentalized, romanticized, Rousseausitic country. It, instead, is a wild, savage (de Sadean, de Ridean, de Manian, de Salesian, etc.) country. If any country at all. It is an *atopos* of Third subject/object, sophistic positions-that-are-not-positions. It is, as Hélène Cixous calls it, *depays*, uncountry. . . . There, nothing is fixed by a genus, everything is fluid” (51–52). Vitanza's very language attempts to enact the decomposition of binaries as prelude to the emergence of the wild, a country that is also uncountry, where “everything is fluid.” The reference to Cixous is important in marking another concurrent

and collateral move in critical theory—namely, Cixous’s development of *écriture féminine* and the post-Lacanian favoring of forms of writing such as stream of consciousness that break down traditional (linear and hierarchical) modes of writing and thought in favor of making space for the hidden, vanquished, and even the inexpressible. In the field of writing studies, scholars such as Lynn Worsham picked up *écriture féminine* as a way to theorize alternative ways of understanding writing and its possibilities. Almost immediately, though, and in a shift resonant with Rickert’s, Worsham sees difficulties. In “Writing against Writing: The Predicament of *Écriture Féminine* in Composition Studies” (1991), she worries first over the disciplining, pedagogical epistemologies of composition studies that would seek to tame and domesticate the wilder energies of *écriture féminine*. And then, by 1998, in her famous essay, “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” Worsham complains that “[i]n developing a discourse on emotion, critical pedagogy has focused almost exclusive attention on pleasure and desire” (234). In putting all of its eggs in the basket of desire, as it were, critical pedagogy misses opportunities to “be sufficiently critical; it does not carefully consider, through a subtly articulated discourse of emotion, how students have been taught to name their affective lives, how they might begin the process of renaming and rephrasing” (235). Worsham moves on from the wildness of desire (comparable to Rickert’s *jouissance*) to a more careful consideration of the complexities of affective terrains (just as Rickert moves on to fine-grained analyses of the ambient). In a way, then, almost as soon as desire found its proponents, desire was critiqued and set aside as a generative term.

This wariness of the unfulfilled promise of desire is perhaps also why desire has played less of a major role in writing studies’ *queer* turn, despite its prominence in queer theory in the academy at large, with figures such as Leo Bersani and Teresa de Lauretis finding it central to their theoretical formulations. In writing studies, however, the emergence of queer theory into the field comes chronologically on the heels of the turn

away from desire, and such is perhaps why many of the early thinkers in rhetoric and composition who embraced queer theoretical models (e.g., Harriet Malinowitz's work, my own writing) turned more to the work of Foucault on disciplining and discursive structures of normativity than to the headier heights of the anti-Oedipalists.⁴ In the process, I believe that an important way of understanding desire has been sidelined. Sidelined, but not completely forgotten. My intent now is to trace the development of queer studies within the field and then to foreground desire's emergence in the most recent moves of the queer turn in writing studies—an emergence that is in some important regards a *reintroduction* of desire into the theoretical conversation in writing studies—but perhaps, this time, desire with a difference.

Queerness in Writing Studies

As noted, the queer turn in writing studies followed on the heels of the decline in explicit interest in desire, and that turn has increasingly grown and expanded, encompassing many different forms of critique, analysis, and possibility. Fortunately some (e.g., Alexander and Wallace; Cox and Faris) have authored literature reviews that offer a snapshot of the concerns that scholars working in this domain have addressed. Much of the early work in this vein attempted to turn the field's attention to the literacy practices and needs of LGBTQ+ students (Malinowitz; Gonçalves); theorized the relationships among literacy, sexuality, and identity in western culture more broadly (Alexander, 2008); questioned the heteronormative structures and practices, both inside and outside the academy, that limit a more capacious understanding of literacy, writing, and their personal and political uses (Wallace and Alexander); considered the intersections of sexuality and rhetorical practices in querying norms of intimacy as well as gendered and sexual politics (Wallace; Alexander and Rhodes, 2015); and worried over the possibility of composing queerly and whether or not such is possible (Rhodes and Alexander). All of this

work is laced with the importance of bringing to the field's attention the fact that not all identities follow a heteronormative and gender-normative path, and that our understanding of subjectivity, embodiment, identity, and politics is severely damaged to the extent that we fail to acknowledge a sense of the plurality of human identification and desire.

Much of this work has aimed at *expansiveness*, or expanding a sense of what counts as meaningful communicative, literate, rhetorical, and pedagogical practice. Some quick examples illustrate this. For instance, in *Compelled to Write: Alternative Rhetoric in Theory and Practice*, David Wallace works primarily with four figures—Sarah Grimké, Frederick Douglass, Gloria Anzaldúa, and David Sedaris—and each serves as a model of an alternative rhetoric that deploys both “opacity,” a concept from Judith Butler that emphasizes a subject's ultimate unknowability, and intersectionality with other minoritized positions. Wallace's goal is to engage opacity and intersectionality to critique the dominant discourses of power and inequity that cluster around gender, race, and sexuality.⁵ Focusing on one group more particularly, Eric Darnell Pritchard's lovely and vitally necessary book, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, combines interviews with sixty Black LGBTQ+ folks, archival research, and analyses of pertinent literature and film to better understand the literacy practices of Black queers. Pritchard is particularly attuned to the ways in which some Black folks have been punished or penalized by literacy instruction, often invited to feel inadequate or inferior for their nonstandard but nonetheless creative use of language. As a result, Black queers frequently have fewer “official” models and venues for developing the kinds of literacy practices that enrich, much less sustain, their lives, and Pritchard traces the subcultural development of such important spaces for Black queers. Returning us to the classroom, Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer* offers a compelling extension of the queer turn in composition studies, building carefully on the work of previous scholars and theorists to articulate how queer theories, which have at their heart the desire to challenge normative ways of being and

understanding, can be used to problematize what we know about writing and what writing can be used for.⁶ Waite offers a careful analysis of teaching materials, including student writing, classroom discussions, and critical reflections on teaching, to consider “queerer possibilities” for teaching writing. Much of that queerer possibility focuses on the teaching of “queer forms” and attention to “scavenger methodologies,” a concept borrowed from queer theorist Jack Halberstam. Scavenger methodologies describe how queer approaches open up possibilities for rethinking what we know; for instance, instead of adhering to a set, disciplinary path, we allow ourselves to play at large among different kinds of knowledges, experiences, and potentialities. Such play can produce unexpected meetings and meanings, confrontations and contestations—difficulties and even incoherencies for sure, but also chances (in the *play* of chance) for something different, perhaps a new way of knowing. What might writing poetry about scientific discoveries, for example, teach us about both science and poetry? Waite invites students (and us) to move between the critical and the creative, the theoretical and the practical, the rhetorical and the poetic. She thus extends the work of queer theory by troubling binaries that normalize certain kinds of writing in the academy—a normalization that has often kept the critical and the creative and the rhetorical and the poetic fully separate.

Another recent example of how writing—especially such an expanded sense of writing as Waite desires—might emerge queerly occurs in Aneil Rallin’s experimental and aphoristic piece for *College Composition and Communication*, “Can I Get a Witness?: Writing with June Jordan.” Writing alongside the African American lesbian poet, Rallin articulates how the poet’s voice is “lodged inside my head” and how they, as a “queer immigrant scholar/teacher of color” want to write using an “experimental form to break the hold of dominant (white) rhetorical traditions that are failing us, intertwining [their] words with Jordan’s words amidst ongoing assaults on our lives/imaginings.” (615). Rallin’s intra-action, as we might put it, with Jordan’s work—what Laura Micciche would call a “writing

with”—is in the service of “rais[ing] our voices to ask whose and what interests are served by the insistence on coherent plot. We will confront the abyss and write the void” (630).⁷ Rallin is doing more than entertaining propositions here; they’re speculating ethically while writing with.⁸

A few thinkers in the queer turn are starting to take more seriously what such expansive thinking might teach us about writing, about writing with others, with the material world, with an awareness of the thick and deep ecologies in which we live, which we all too often take for granted. Jacqueline Rhodes, in her introduction to a special issue of *Pre/Text* on queer rhetorics, cites Karen Barad, a feminist thinker who has embraced the new materialism in her thinking, theories, and critiques. Rhodes argues that “[w]e have yet to contend . . . with Barad’s refashioning of our notions of performativity, that touchstone of queer theory . . . Such a rethinking of performativity necessarily queers our own thinking about materiality, about embodiment, about our own thing-ness. And about sex. Where will we go from there?” (4). Rhodes is thinking in particular of Barad’s assertion that gender is never just “discursively fashioned and performed, but bodies themselves ‘come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity’” (4). And then in her online article, “Becoming Utopias: Toward a Queer Rhetoric of Instantiation,” Rhodes suggests how Muñoz’s call to think queer futures as a potentiality, in which a “certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense” (9), seems to run parallel to the work of the new materialism, which embraces, in Rhodes’s words, “the rupture of convention and the insistence on emergence and becoming and entangling.” Ultimately, thinking Muñoz and Barad together, Rhodes suggests that we might arrive at an “erotics of generative thought—and ethical creation—[that] is material and embodied in everyday queer life . . . an erotics of instantiation, an ecstasy of belonging-with.”

These gestures to the materiality in queerness—or the queerness of materiality—find their most explicit exploration in the work of a few

scholars who grapple even more particularly with *erotics* and *desires*. In Rhodes's *Pre/Text* special issue, Timothy Oleksiak's "Composing in a Sling: BDSM, Power, and Non-Identification" and Wilfredo Flores's "Kink as Praxis: Tying Up Sex with Queer and Cultural Rhetorics" both argue for moving away from an understanding of queer rhetorical practice as being rooted in discourses and identities, and toward being rooted in bodies, sensations, and erotics—what Rhodes calls, borrowing from Barad, "entanglements." Oleksiak, thinking of BDSM sex and how its rituals and objects "orient and disorient bodies," maintains that a focus on sensation as opposed to identity might help us see "that bodies and objects, their arrangements and deployments *do* create space for communal listening practices that go beyond an individual's *a priori* assent to openness" (22). Oleksiak is thinking here of encounters with unexpected sensation in a BDSM scenario as a potential model for "writing" as an embodied practice of a radical openness to the unknown. The kind of openness that Oleksiak argues for is not just a "paying attention" but an *attunement* that moves beyond the discursive (listening better) to the embodied (feeling more openly). Similarly, Flores's engagement with kinky sex, which his piece enacts as a multisexual encounter with various queer theorists and thinkers in rhetoric and English studies, advocates for a queer praxis of assemblage that sees minds and bodies breaking down barriers in the generation of new forms of knowledge, sensation, and being. This is not just writing with. It's *being* with, sensing with, fucking with.

The tightest (so far) braiding of queerness and the material, embodied world occurs in Michael Faris's chapter in the recently published *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods, Queer Projects* on "Queering Networked Writing: A Sensory Autoethnography of Desire and Sensation on Grindr."⁹ Faris focuses on sexual activity as facilitated through online and mobile applications, arguing how such material and embodied activity requires that we "turn away from the centrality of hermeneutics, identification, and representation in rhetoric and turn instead

to affect and sensations” (129). Grindr is a communication platform, surely, but it facilitates communication that forefronts bodily interaction that might open onto new possibilities of technological, somatic, and affective intra-action among users and their apps as people meet, hook up, and explore intimacy in potentially unexpected ways. For Faris, a queer rhetoric informed by new materialism can “trace objects, affects, and sensations” (129) and thus “contribute to investigating how alliances, relationships, and collective life assemble in new and unpredictable ways through attending to desires, sensations, and affects” (143).

This move from identity to erotics, from bolstering the needs of a particular group or community to understanding queerness as the possibility for opening up new “desires, sensations, and affects,” finds parallel in the work of trans scholars in the field as well. Trans scholars have come to the fore recently to express their desire not just for recognition of identity but for *voice*. For sure, they powerfully claim the right to speak *on their own behalf*, as opposed to being the subject of scrutiny or “debate” (which has marked the trans experience extensively for at least the last one hundred years, since the sexological “identification” of transness). In the special issue of *Peitho* on “Transgender Rhetorics,” edited by GPat Patterson and K. J. Rawson, Patterson writes succinctly and pointedly, “Trans people are not topics to be trotted out into our classrooms for the purpose of practicing ‘the arts of persuasion’ through sloppy pro/con arguments. Trans people are real human beings.” They hold the field accountable for silencing trans voices, for making insufficient space for them, and even for speaking about trans people in ways that mobilize them for rhetorical ends as opposed to honoring and valuing the lived experiences—the human lives—represented by those voices. Such is perhaps why the special issue begins with a series of manifestos, including this powerful statement by Sophia Maier, V. Jo Hsu, Christina Cedillo, and M. Remi Yergeau, “GET THE FRAC IN! Or, The Fractal Many-festo: A (Trans)(Crip)t”—a glorious invitation: “You are tired of having to mold yourself for others. We know that. You are tired of watching your friends

sequestered, imprisoned, evicted, institutionalized, deported. We know that too. And you are tired of trying to write/teach/learn in a place you were never meant to belong. We know this most of all. This manifesto, then, is dedicated to you. We dedicate to you a space, perhaps for now imaginary, where you may enter, complicate, transform, expand, and flourish.” The desires expressed—and enacted—here are complex and multifold, articulating a desire to feel more at “home” in the world, to right the wrongs of the past, but also to reimagine, to risk the possibility of imagining a different way of being, of flourishing. Recognizing the complexity of trans as an “identity category,” these writers are not content with just creating space for identities to be recognized, but rather they desire to create space where the complexities of lived experience can meet the ongoing, ever-developing desires to “expand” and “transform.” Yes, trans people need to “enter,” but also “complicate”—others, themselves, structures of gender ideology, the world around them and through which we all try to live.

Pritchard, Waite, Rallin, Rhodes, Oleksiak, Flores, Faris, Patterson, and their contributors—all desire that writing move in the world not just to make room for diverse subjectivities but even to question the grounding of subjectivity and experience in identification itself—a move that curiously parallels that made by Rickert and others earlier when thinking desire in relation to composition pedagogy. Further, the most recent queer scholars grapple with erotics and desire as a complicated but necessary component of understanding *interaction among people and things*. Finally, they steadily shift the center of gravity away from not only identity but also discursivity—each, to varying degrees, embracing not only the materiality of writing but the materiality (and potentiality) of embodied entanglement and erotics. Writing is always an activity of intra-action—and very likely, in the broadest sense, *erotic* intra-action.

In looking back on this overview, I see how the early queer scholars in the field (myself included) perhaps eschewed a more explicit engagement with desire because we were (r) following on the heels of

those in the field who were already giving up on desire as conceptually generative and (2) perhaps wanting to ease a rather conservative field into thinking about queerness. We were also writing at a time, the 1990s and early 2000s, in which rhetorical claims based on identity were powerful—and often powerfully needed—in forwarding various rights and equality claims based largely on identity. I am delighted that the continued development of queer thinking in the field has brought us back to a consideration of desire—but this time, I think, with some complexity. Desire, in this unfolding queer turn, is not liberatory power but rather a way of moving that acknowledges otherness and our always already intimate interconnection. Indeed, what the queer turn is increasingly bringing to the field’s table, as it were, is twofold: First, in the work of Wallace and Pritchard (among others), the queer turn reminds us how discursive, ideological, and disciplinary structures of normativity shape, privilege, and limit desires and thus the ability of some to engage meaningfully and generatively with the world. Some are even limited out of survivability itself. Second, and in response to this delimiting, the queer turn cultivates particular desires to use writing to explore, experience, and create new forms of *being with*—and not just for specifically queer-identified people. Such work is a form of ethical speculation. Remember our earlier consideration of Muñoz’s queer utopian hermeneutic, which imagines intimate entanglements that exceed our capacity to imagine their specificity. Queerness, coming out of its own hermeneutics of the sexual, the intimate, and the erotic, explicitly theorizes and attempts to account for desire in all of its messy complexity with ethics, even if it can’t fully imagine or account for those complexities in the present. At the same time, though, it imagines and *insists* on our connection, our interaction, our intra-action, and our *desire* for one another and our world as always already the ground of ethical engagement.

So then: what does such theorizing of desire do for our conceptualization of writing?

What *Is* Desire?

To approach such a question, I finally need to tip my hand even more and offer some (always already) provisional claims about what desire is, and even as I write that sentence I shudder at the task. What can be more slippery to define than desire, except perhaps writing itself? (And I am attempting to equate the two!) Indeed, I have so far resisted offering an acute definition of desire, in part, because desire seems so ineffable but also because *what desire is* has been the subject of some debate and remains an open question for many theorists and thinkers who have begun taking it up again as a subject of concern. However, now that we have traced where desire appears and where it is elided in the scholarly literature of writing studies, we should consider more carefully what definitions of it might be most generative, for much of desire's potential usefulness as a concept will depend on how we understand it and understand its relationship to writing.

For some, desire is about fixations, the return again and again to wanting that which is lacking, the want and the lack characterizing the force and persistence of desire. We have Freud to thank, if not just for identifying, then at least for popularizing this modality of desire. But I hold here to my own desire to shift our understanding of desire away from such a model, from an understanding of desire as the fulfillment of particular needs and wants (often but not exclusively based on identity) to an openness, an orientation toward others and the world that embraces entanglements and potentiality. I think this is the direction that many of the earlier writing studies scholars—from Rickert to Vitanza—were working toward, particularly in the move to de-Oedipalize desire, but this take on desire doesn't fully emerge or form until some queer theorists in writing studies carefully resuscitate desire as a potentially useful concept and category. We can see that shift at work in how Connie Monson and Jacqueline Rhodes, in their 2004 article, once risked a definition of desire, calling it “a multiplex whose manifold implications are most

evident when its object is seen to be shifting, unattainable, and finally unnameable” (84). This definition, from “Risking Queer: Pedagogy, Performativity, and Desire in Writing Classrooms,” announces a call for risking the kinds of desires that question normative identities, relations, and intimacies (pedagogic and otherwise). Their language approaches the problem of lack (the unattainable) but then veers into potentiality (the shifting and unnameable)—a potentiality that Rhodes herself returns to in more recent work. Such a potentiality seems to gesture to or at least resonate with what we saw earlier in Audre Lorde’s understanding of the erotic as an *opening*.

To be sure, this is an approach to desire that is in tension with other experiences of desire. Lauren Berlant, in their eloquent book-length essay *Desire/Love*, argues, “Desire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it” (6). This is desire as *lack*, as distance that we seek to fill between what we want and what is not us. Berlant made a fabulous career of measuring the gaps between our culture’s promises of the good life and its incapacities to make good on such promises; they expertly assessed how certain forms of desire always turn into “political question[s] about the ways norms produce attachments to living through certain fantasies” (7). But this version of desire begins with the promise of fantasy, with a preconceived notion, however perversely implanted by a culture, about *how* to desire, *what* is desirable, what the proper objects of desire should be—which are numerous and varied, admittedly, in a capitalist culture but almost invariably focused on what can be acquired, owned, controlled, and possessed. Is this the only model of desire, however dominant it might appear to us in the Western world at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

Like Monson and Rhodes, I am more interested in shifting the conversation away from languishing in the implanted fantasies of late capitalism and toward dwelling in the *gap* that animates desire. Berlant herself puts it this way: “[D]esire also measures fields of difference and

distance. It both constructs and collapses distinctions between public and private; it reorganizes worlds” (14). This is much closer to the desire I’m interested in—the gap, the distance that is not necessarily about fulfilling a particular fantasy but about exploring a possibility. Berlant is keenly aware that much desire driven by fantasy is based on a desire to control: “[W]hen someone desires, one motive is the mastery of the desired Other[;] it is also the case that people seek to recognize the Other as a subject, for only under these conditions can humans truly receive the recognition they crave” (39). If we set the former form of desire aside for a moment, we see in the latter form a desire for connection *beyond* control, an ask as opposed to a demand, a recognition of an other’s alterity as opposed to an attempt to master them. Turning away from Freudian and even Lacanian models that emphasize lack and the never-ending desire to repossess a lost wholeness (e.g., the security of the womb, the imagined plentitude of language that knows no gap between signifier and signified, the fullness of one’s bank account securing one beyond financial precarity), Berlant sketches out a form of desire that accesses more the Spinozan tradition of Deleuze and Guattari: “The radical potential [of desire] . . . emanates from the model of the constantly bending, folding, and twisting incoherence of libidinal activity” (51).¹⁰

In significant ways, my approach to desire in this book lies far more within the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari, even more specifically the work of the latter thinker, who recognized the need to resist preconceived paradigms—of human subjectivity, of human relationality, and of human interaction with the planet—to explore not just “freer” but more connected and ethical relations with one another. Inspiring Vitanza, Rickert, and others in writing studies, both Deleuze and Guattari rejected the Freudian Oedipalizing structures that conceived of the self as primarily lacking a wholeness, doomed to a life of constant sublimation or even outright repression. Guattari, a practicing psychoanalyst, worked diligently to understand different forms of mental illness as less the residue of maladaptation to a life of sublimation and repression and more as a

set of potential insights into cultural and political structures that actively positioned subjects as sites of deprivation—a deprivation amenable to a capitalism and consumerism that would have them constantly buying things to fill the holes of oneself. Whatever one might think of their work at this point (and there are many, many thoughts out there!), I want to revisit and dwell in their initial impulses to conceive of desire as not just the perversely implanted consumerist motive of a capitalist society bolstered by the nuclear family, but more the energy of reaching out to connect—an energy still actively, and damagingly, directed in our culture toward consumerism and the instrumentalization of others and the planet to this day. What if we understood that energy, that impulse, that possibility *differently* than currently directed by a capitalist culture? This is not a new question, granted, but one that still seems shockingly relevant. As Guattari puts it in “Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium,” “Liberated desire means that desire escapes the impasse of private fantasy: it is not a question of adapting it, socializing it, disciplining it, but of plugging it in in such a way that its process not be interrupted in the social body, and that its expression be collective” (43). This is a desire that, yes, *can* move from the individual outward—not as an exertion of fantasy fulfillment but as a collective need to connect, to recognize the other, to cultivate care for each other and our world.

In a late work, *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari developed his thinking into a coherent philosophy that attempted to account for our relation with and within three “ecologies”: our environment, our social relations, and a deep human subjectivity. He had a strong consideration of all three as not just interrelated but inter-animating, which would shift our practices—and desires—away from instrumentalizing the world and each other for the fulfillment of private fantasies and instead toward imagining new possibilities for collectively addressing the needs of many to live in sustainable and nurturing ways. Guattari couldn’t articulate precisely what this world would look like, but he could identify the importance of cultivating the desire to move in this direction; as he put

it, he believed that we could collectively move toward a more ethical set of human and material relations “through the promotion of innovatory practices, the expansion of alternative experiences centered around a respect for singularity, and through the continuous production of an autonomizing subjectivity that can articulate itself appropriately in relation to the rest of society” (39). Granted, a lot rests on what “appropriately” might mean, but Guattari knew that the current capitalist/consumerist system isn’t working, or that it at least promoted forms of desire that were far more destructive than sustaining of life: “[I]t is less and less legitimate that only a profit-based market should regulate financial and prestige-based rewards for human social activities, for there is a range of other value systems that ought to be considered, including social and aesthetic ‘profitability’ and the values of desire” (42).

The desire to think beyond the engendering of certain forms of desire produced in us through capitalism constitutes an important dimension of desire explored in this book. Guattari’s ecological approach to desire gestures toward the kinds of desiring I traced above in my overview of the queer turn in writing studies, a desire that “will not simply attempt to preserve the endangered species of cultural life but equally to engender conditions for the creation and development of unprecedented formations of subjectivity that have never been seen and never felt” (*Chaosmosis* 91). Such desire is also akin to the kind of queer utopian hermeneutic that centers José Esteban Muñoz’s late work.

Such creation first depends upon recognizing the ways in which our desires are always already being shaped by a capitalist/consumerist culture. Mark Fisher, in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, asserts that “[w]hat we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (9). Fisher analyzes economic structures and deep subjectivity as so intertwined that the interpolative hailing of a capitalist citizen is always a hailing into an

ideology of consumption, acquisition, instrumentalization, and greed—summarized in the fulfillment of (implanted) desires. Fisher only sees an alternative as possible if such works at the level of desire itself: “To reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital” (15). This formulation is a few steps beyond even Mari Ruti’s “opting out,” however much such opting out might constitute a first initial step. Rather, if our species and its relationship to this planet are to survive, if we are to heal relations among humans and work toward a more equitable engagement and worldbuilding with each other, then such will only occur if we learn to *desire differently* than we have been taught and acculturated to desire.

I understand this call—indeed, I am *attracted* to it—because I have felt its power and possibility in my own life. Growing up on C. S. Lewis and the homophobia of Catholicism, fundamentalist Christianity, and the hatred for sexual and racial difference politically and culturally organized throughout the Deep South, I had absorbed a self-hatred that nearly killed me. I could only survive not necessarily just by “liberating” my desires (and myself from the damaging context in which I was raised) but by *reeducating* myself to desire differently than I had been taught: that is, to learn not just to accept my queer desires, but to experience them as an opening where once there had been a foreclosure, to experience them as possibility where once there had been denial, to experience them as a reaching out to others where there had once been a shunning, a shaming, a refusal. There’s an important distinction here, because I *could* understand my emergence into sustainable queerness as a fulfillment of a personal fantasy, and in a way, the first time I kissed a boy I was, partly, fulfilling a fantasy I had long had, for sure. But that kiss can only ever be one part, and ultimately a small part, of making a possible life. I had to learn to unhate myself, to learn to unhate others like me, to learn to be open to the many queernesses of others—queernesses I couldn’t anticipate or even imagine. I had to reeducate my sense of what was and is desirable. And that work is ongoing. It is no easy task to remain open, or to love oneself and others when you’ve

been taught so assiduously to hate yourself and others like you. Even now, I find my sense of the world challenged by young people, by trans folk, by other queers, especially queers of color—all of whom teach me about the profundity and diversity of being and becoming in our world. But for me, queerness—my *queer desire*—is precisely that radical openness. This book is filled with my encounters with, and I hope an articulation of my openness to, the miracle of others and their being and becoming.

For me, such a cultivation of desire saved me from a Christian culture working hand in hand with capitalism to secure a normative version of family and the production of consumerist citizens. Others have worked toward similar forms of such cultivation, and I have been inspired, for instance, by the work of adrienne maree brown and her development of pleasure activism—an education and reeducation of desire and engagement with bodies that moves from the demands of capitalism and toward the possibilities of mutual care and discovery. As brown puts it in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, “[A]s I get older, I keep intentionally expanding my sensual awareness and decolonizing it so that I can sense more pleasure than capitalism believes in” (7). For brown, much like for Guattari, contemporary capitalism holds out promises of pleasure but only through consumption and acquisition of material goods while requiring that we work our bodies to death just to afford the items that so often fail to provide the pleasures they promise, or do so only in limited and ultimately frustrating ways. Instead, brown argues, “Pleasure is not one of the spoils of capitalism. It is what our bodies, our human systems, are structured for; it is the aliveness and awakening, the gratitude and humility, the joy and celebration of being miraculous” (16).

What I appreciate about brown’s work most is that she is committed to the work of *writing* as opening up such possibilities of pleasure and desire for others. She writes from deep personal experience, critiquing her own approaches, expanding her sense of what’s possible. She interviews others working toward similar or adjacent projects, interweaving their thinking, speaking, and writing into her own work. She invites others

to cowrite with her, making space in her books for other voices, other views. The work of science fiction author Octavia E. Butler (discussed later in this book) deeply inspired brown, particularly Butler's portrayal of diverse bodies seeking to live in and share space with one another. In writing and curating the writing of others, brown continues to explore the possibilities of cultivating pleasure, of nurturing and educating desire. When I read brown's work, I am reminded of what Robert P. Yagelski asserts in *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*: "[W]riting is a way of being in the world. Whatever else it may be (and it is many other things, too), writing is an ontological act. When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to the world around us. Therein lies the true transformative power of writing" (3). In her work, brown is enacting her being in the world—not just representing her thoughts, but *shaping* her engagement with the world as one of openness, care, and desire. Is her view utopian? Absolutely. It believes in the power of writing and desire to move us toward a better, more equitable, more just, more sustaining, more nurturing, and frankly more pleasurable connection with each other and the planet we inhabit. And it should come as no surprise at all that brown is queer, that her commitments are to pluralities of love, diversities of being, and carnalities of expression and experimentation. This is why brown calls what she does pleasure *activism*. Again, this work is not just about fulfillment of desires; it is *aspirational*, and that aspirational quality—a desire to be open to the future, what's possible, what's not yet realized—may be its queerest quality, a true queer utopian hermeneutic.

Along these lines, in the fetchingly titled essay "Rhetorical Futurity, or Desiring Theory," Kendall Gerdes maintains that a "*queer* desire is, at its roots, a way of wanting something that's not available. Queer theory can teach us about how desire gets formed, edited, mitigated, and adulterated, and how it can change its own conditions and expand beyond its originary constraints" (233). I couldn't agree more. Heteronormative and

gender-normative and even *homonormative* desires, which I often call commercialized gayness, are about implanting a fixed and static notion of what is desirable; *queer* desires are about making room to imagine the not-yet possible, or as Gerdes puts it, for “wanting something *else*, something other than what is given” (234). In this way, then, “[d]esire is markedly queer” (240). Gerdes makes a compelling case, drawing on the work of Muñoz and others, for recentering rhetoric and writing studies on desire—not just *wanting* but *opening* ourselves to possibility:

The queer desire that animates rhetorical practice ought to be an object of rhetorical study, but a rhetorical theory of desire need not constrain itself to giving an account of the causes or origins of desire, not to explaining in specific cases what certain desires have made possible in a given instance. A rhetorical theory of desire must also give an account of *how* desire makes things possible, or of *how to do things with desire*. . . . [L]ook to queer desire to teach us about the movement of the unavailable from somewhere near the margins to the center of availability. (240)

I quote at length from these writers to show my indebtedness to them, for helping point the way toward an understanding of desire—and of writing as desire—that is about how it “makes things possible.” Indeed, thank you, Kendall. Thank you, adrienne maree brown. My book, I am hoping, is about “how to do things with desire,” how to cross “the given limits of availability,” and how to move the “unavailable” from the margins to the center.

The only question remaining in this introduction is *how*.

Desiring Methods

37

As you can tell, the mode of this book is somewhat polemical, at the very least invested, and also deeply personal. It cannot *not* be, from my

perspective. If I take seriously the call to educate and reeducate desire toward openness—that is, to conceive of desire as a *practice*—and then also to understand *writing* as the practice of that desire, then I must inevitably touch on some of the most personal moments of a life, mine and others. But even more, this book is polemical in the sense that I am actively arguing *for* a particular conception and practice of desire and of writing as desire. Such has come, after many years, out of my own practice, reflection, theorization, and rich conversation with others.

As already suggested, this project would not be possible without the grounding work of Audre Lorde. When first exploring my body as an openly queer man in my mid-20s, living in a Colorado that had just made it impossible for LGBT people to claim discrimination and, at the campus on which I worked, being the subject of death threats and other forms of harassment, I found tremendous comfort in Lorde’s work, “The Uses of the Erotic,” which I’ve already mentioned, and especially in the poem “A Litany for Survival.” Lorde knew that we were never meant to survive as openly queer people—or even *not* openly if we were ever caught straying from the bodily dictates of hetero-culture. She writes,

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

I cannot read these words decades later without tearing up, remembering that I read them at a candlelight vigil just days after the torture and murder of Matthew Shepherd. Lorde's is a poem against being silent. In honor of her, my book is a book against being silent. But more, this is a book about speaking in the face of threat, and even more, about writing toward the world that we want.

Thinking about Lorde, then, the primary questions I ask in this book are the following: *What are the uses of writing as a form of desire, and how does desire find form through writing? What are the practices of writing as desire, especially if we understand desire as less the fulfillment of lack and more the opening out to possibility?* Answering these questions, as I've said, is inevitably personal for me and, as such, is inevitably queer. Therefore, methodologically, I focus first on different forms of life writing, on the work of those who have committed themselves to using writing and other forms of composing to explore *and discover* possibilities of being.

You will quickly see that I take a very capacious approach to what I mean by "writing." I have allowed myself to range widely, in part because looking for queer practices of composing has required that I cast a broad net, but also because such practices are themselves capacious, experimental, speculative, bold, and daring. Further, the forms and practices of life writing, the composition of self, that I examine here are not about representing identities as much as they are about exploring possibilities. Therefore, there is much here that deals with fantasy and

imaginative possibility, as opposed to historical reality. Put another way, even as I have become interested in practices of life writing, I have also, through my own unique penchant for catachresis, realized I have always been interested in *writing as a practice of life*. I have been inspired by the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who spoke so eloquently about the need for a reparative reading, a way of reading that is about finding and creating oneself, one's community. I suppose, in a way, I am talking—*writing!*—in this book about *reparative writing*. As such, I turn from life writing to speculative forms of composing, including imaginative films, art installations, and interactive computer games—forms of authoring selfhood that open us out to the possibilities of thinking, feeling, and experiencing desire differently. Earlier in my career, I would have spent more time differentiating among the different multimodalities of such composing, specifying their particular rhetorical dimensions and affordances. Now, I gather these different modalities together under the rubric of “writing” so I can explore a primary affordance offered by multiple forms of composing: *the act of such writing and composing as desire*. Such writing, such desire through writing, such writing as desire, is often incredibly diverse in its play of forms, and I have allowed this book to become my own personal archive of writing and making that has inspired, challenged, delighted, angered, and transformed me. I have also allowed it to incorporate some of my own experimental writing, my own writing as desire, my own desire as writing. To those ends, this book brings together some of my writing from the past ten years, written for many different venues and occasions, with new writing that attempts to stretch what I know about writing and desire.

Yes, writing can powerfully engage critique; the queer turn has made that clear. So too have others in the field of writing studies. Such is the part of the deep history of writing as critical practice, of writing as desiring a different world. In *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, Aja Y. Martinez argues for the development of practices and pedagogies of the “counterstory,” a narrative method that relies on personal

accounting and testimony. As Martinez puts it, “Counterstory is methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies” (3). I agree wholeheartedly, but I also want to push on counterstory as not just revelatory but also transformative, as a way to understand *writing queerly as a transformative practice*. Life writing, broadly conceived, is the set of genres through which we might see the practices that queer and trans people apply in order not just to survive their lives but to create and re-create them. Queer people who write, compose, and make art about living are just as likely to comment actively on their making as a critical practice of queering. I investigate through numerous case studies what those practices are, and how writing as desire animates their writers’ and artists’ conception of what writing is, what desire is, and what writing and desire can do to transform the self and world. Or, as Paul John Eakins puts it in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, writing the self is a process of making the self: “We tend to think of autobiography as a literature of the first person, but the subject of autobiography to which the pronoun ‘I’ refers is neither singular nor first, and we do well to demystify its claims. Why do we so easily forget that the first person of autobiography is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation? Because autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: *I write my story; I say who I am; I create my self*” (43). Even more, I am drawn to and have produced this book out of a shared sense with Trinh T. Minh-ha of writing—like my conception of desire—as a generative opening; as she writes in *Woman, Native, Other*, “[I]t seems obvious that writing does not express any more than it ‘in-expresses’ or ‘mis-expresses.’ Having always traced its own limits while going beyond the limits of its assigned role as expression or communication, it may be viewed as that which does not translate a reality outside itself but, more precisely, allows the emergence of a new reality” (21–22). Expression, yes, but also exploring limits and “allow[ing for] the emergence of a new reality.” This seems to me as good a definition as any of how *writing is desire*.

With that said, we must contend with the realities that we are given, with the ways in which we are always already complicit in the realities into which we are born, that have made our births and lives possible in particular times and places. No new reality can emerge—emerge *ethically*—without a recognition, accounting, and transformation of the ground on which it seeks its emergence. The need for counterstory arises because there is already a story being told as we enter into its narrative, and it is just as often a story that hurts, that maims, that wounds, that kills. Along these lines, I am grateful to my colleague, sometime collaborator, and friend David Wallace for pointing me in the direction of “Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities,” a powerful essay by Scott Lauria Morgensen, which reminds us, both white queer men, how “[t]heorizing settler homonationalism indicates how U.S. queer claims on national belonging stabilize settlement and participate in reinventing its lessons within new imperial projects” (125). That is, any advancement in LGBT rights in this country, the United States, serves to reinforce the hegemony of the US as a colonial, colonizing power. Queer rights and queer recognition within this framework cannot help but be complicit in valorizing the very political, social, and culture structures that have contributed—and continue to contribute—to the psychic and material immiseration of so many indigenous people. Whatever pain and victimization I may have encountered as a queer boy should not—excuse me, *I* should not think it outside of a recognition of my presence on this continent as already in itself a problem of displacement, colonization, and terrorization of indigenous peoples. Queers do not get a “pass” because of our pain, our trauma.

Like many white folk (though not nearly enough), I am coming to grapple with this realization, and I am grateful to Morgensen and other scholars who point out these critiques, who demand an accounting, and I am grateful to friends like David who show me the necessity of doing this work. I am also hopeful that at some point we begin to understand our complicity—the complicity of all of us in a world in which we are

all at some point responsible for each other—as not only accusation or critique, though it is surely both of those things, but also *ontology*, as the grounding from which all future ethical action must proceed. We *are* responsible for one another, for our messy, complicated, and interlocking pasts, and for our longed-for, however messy, and hopefully more just futures. We are, to borrow a word from the new materialists, *entangled*, whether or not some of us want to acknowledge that. Can we be complicitly entangled, then, in desiring together, in educating and reeducating our desires together for a better world? Understanding desire within the ontology of complicity is simultaneously to be far more mindful of one’s desires—of how what one desires is always already complicit in larger structures and histories of hegemony—and far more intentional in crafting them toward ethical action.

My hope in this book is that I sufficiently recognize the difficulties, the traumas of history, even as I, with others, desire a different future, as we attempt to write our way toward that future. To be sure, claiming that writing is desire, even if desire is understood as a form of openness, is hardly all fun and games. The great writer E. M. Forster might have urged us to “only connect,” but so much depends on that “only.” “Only” belies simplicity. Desire—and writing—are never simple. But they are, as I cast them here in this book, activities and practices of hope. I recognize the challenges, but I am persisting here in holding our attention on hope and possibility. Why? The field needs new sources of inspiration—or, if not always new sources, then a revitalized look at those who have been thinking the value of rethinking desire. This book is an attempt to provide those sources, those new looks, that sustained attention. To that end, I have opted not to divide this book into “chapters” but rather into “movements,” which signal more, I believe, the courses and flows of analysis and discussion that I am enacting about writing and desire. This is a book organized less around theses, and more around pathways toward thinking, feeling, and being. Individual movements overlap, for sure, and they are bridged by “intermezzi,” or more creative and

experimental forms of writing that also attempt to focus attention on particular dimensions of writing and desire, picking up different critical and creative forms of composing that explore my contention, with Eileen Myles, that *writing is desire*. As such, each of these movements is not only an examination of queer composing practices of desire but an enactment as well, with the intermezzi constituting my own experimental bit of writing that confronts or explores desire in a queer artist or event.

Ultimately, considering everything I have said so far, perhaps the very best way to understand this book, then, is as a critical autobiography, or as my autobiography as a critic, theorist, thinker, and even a practitioner of writing and desiring. I suggested earlier, in my aside on queer theory, that you might approach this book as tracing a movement from a rather narrow set of concerns with identity and futurity (à la Edelman) to a more capacious connection and openness (à la Muñoz). I might broaden that to say that the book traces my critical development—and the education of my desires, theoretically and personally—from a limited set of concerns with overcoming shame and forging a survivable identity toward learning how to desire far more robustly as an ethical human densely entangled with others and with the materiality of the world itself. In tracing that path and hopefully modeling it for others, I necessarily move from a particular set of thinkers to an increasingly broader set, starting with putatively canonical thinkers—the ones I was taught, and who, admittedly, come from a narrow band of folk—and then showing how my thinking has continued to develop, extend, expand, and enrich itself through grappling with increasingly diverse thinkers and writers. Put another way, this book is in no small part about the education of a white queer cis-appearing but not-so-cis sissy boy into what I hope is a far more interesting and enriched queered and ever-queering self. With that said, I do not intend that movement to be understood dialectically. That is, put another way with reference specifically to queer theory, I do not seek a synthesis of, say, Edelman and Muñoz, just as I also do not seek to *displace* Edelman with Muñoz. You will see that my concerns are

broader. I am pretty much an *anti*-dialectician. I understand *queer* as a positional stance, one that *cannot* seek synthesis because it always seeks to unsettle, to problematize, to disrupt. Queer's honoring of excess is a reminder that the end goal may very well never be synthesis, but rather the ever-ongoing and capacious valuing of differences and incommensurabilities. We need, in other words, both Edelman and Muñoz, Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler, and many, many others to understand and appreciate the complexities of desire, much less writing.

As such, we start in the first movement, "Desiring Connection" and its intermezzo, with some of the figures that initially provoked and inspired me, including Edmund White, Dennis Cooper, and Nayland Blake. All three, albeit in very different ways, show the ongoing desire to connect through various forms of writing, making, and being, and that at the heart of desire is a ceaseless reaching out to the other, a compulsion that is less a healing and fulfillment and more an outbound striving, even if that moving is at times a difficult embrace of the unknown. While White grapples with shame, Cooper confronts the possibilities that desiring might undo us in our pursuit of the other *and* constitutes a form of violence to the other—a violence that he renders figuratively in narratives of disembodiment. Blake furthers such figuration by showing us in their artwork how we always already live in a world of embodied pain, specifically through the violence of racism. Without accepting the "rightness" of that pain, Blake persists in showing us how to work with it to nonetheless follow through on the desire to connect.

The second movement, "Desiring Material," looks at the "material turn" in writing studies to ask how we might think desire and writing as not just discursive but material practices. The work of Eli Clare, David Wojnarowicz, and then, in the intermezzo, Catherine Opie, provide case studies for analysis of how our reaching out to the material world can proceed as both desire *and ethics*, and how our material desires might be worked as an ethic of environmental and ecological care even as we use our writing and making to build sustainable selves. Each writer and

artist is an activist in their own right, whether confronting the challenges of disability in an ableist world, the institutionalized disregard for gay men in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, or the global disregard for the environment that characterizes so much of our contemporary world. Each artist-activist uses their words and media to shape a different understanding of our relationality to the world, a different and more nurturing way of desiring *with* each other and the planet on which we live.

The third movement, “Speculative Desires,” turns to science-fictional work, including the film *Her*, the interactive programs of Robert Yang, the Wachowski sisters’ *Sense8*, Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis*, and then, in the intermezzo, the art of Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Xavier Schipani to consider writers and makers who speculate on where desire might take us next—our desire for different worlds, different forms of relationality, and a different politics of being together. I have long been a fan of science fiction and speculative narrative, and I see in the works considered in this movement some profound interventions in our understanding of desire and how it might—perhaps how it *needs*—to manifest in the future if we are to help create survivable lives for the next generations. Queer and trans artists Sepuya and Schipani, though not explicitly creating in a science-fictional vein, are nonetheless powerfully speculative as they mobilize their experiences of survivable queer-of-color and trans lives *in the present* to invite us to desire more richly and fully a capacious world of diverse eroticism and identities.

Penultimately, in the movement “Desiring Time,” I try to bridge desires for connection, material relations, and speculation in the work of writers Roxane Gay and Myriam Gurba and in the podcast *S-Town* and the AIDS memorial quilt. In the accompanying intermezzo, I present my own attempt to imagine a long-dead gay uncle in a collaborative art and poetry project, *Burning Time*. This movement and intermezzo collectively ask how we desire time, both time past and time future, as part of our ongoing becoming, as well as how time betrays, slights,

promises, delights, and complicates our desires. I am proud to present work with my collaborator, the artist Antoinette LaFarge, whose work with me on *Burning Time* remains one of the richest life experiences I have ever had. Together, and inspired by the work of Gay, Gurba, and others, we explore in this movement how our desires for a queer past can better prepare us to desire richly in the present with an eye toward a more hopeful and just future. And, in a further queer twist, the coda, “Desiring Legacy, Refusing Legacy,” then queerly repudiates our attachment to time, specifically our misplaced desires to control the future, as the ultimate form of desiring and writing that embraces and centers an openness to the unknown, the unknowable.

So, with that (and perhaps especially as I border on the gnostic), let’s begin again.