1992. A sizzling summer morning in the Deep South. I am teaching a six-week writing institute for a dozen K-12 teachers — all women. Our day starts with a presentation by one of the teacher-participants who launches her two-hour session on poetry writing with a brief "warm-up activity." We turn off the lights in the windowless classroom and listen breathlessly in the dark as Bette Midler's voice soars, "You are the wind beneath my wings." The lights flicker on. We blink away the brightness and are asked to "freewrite" our responses to the song. Moments later the read-around starts. A flood of sentimental memories of husbands and boyfriends. Voices crack. Tears flow as, one by one, the women poignantly acknowledge the men in their lives. My turn comes. I squirm uncomfortably and mumble something inconsequential. The read-around circles swiftly to my right, leaving me numb, angry, disappointed in myself — a deeply closeted lesbian unwilling, unable to share herself. I swallow bubbles of rage. All summer I've envied the ease with which the women seem to speak — their effortless candor about marriages, divorces, children — while I swelter in self-imposed silence, which is itself a discourse. A discourse riddled with pain, deception, and, worst of all, fear. When faced with offering "personal" revelations, I responded to a lifetime of habit by lapsing automatically into silence. What if . . . my students discovered my difference — the difference that dares not speak its name. What if . . . ?

Three summers later, in the midst of my own coming out journey, I recognize the irony of that particular July morning etched so indelibly in my memory. Midler's song, I remember, was intended as a testament to women's friendship; yet, within the narrow confines of our workshop, the lyric had been automatically — and, I would guess, unself-consciously — reframed within a heterosexual master narrative. Because both Midler and I had repeatedly been buoyed by same-sex affection, we were positioned as outsiders and, thus, denied the authority of our experiences and of our differences from mainstream discourse. What, I wonder now, is the deeper meaning of such epistemic privileging?

Here I turn — not without trepidation — to Harriet Malinowitz's *Textual Orientations*, which challenges me to shatter a lifetime of self-consuming silence — a silence that for years represented safety. I learned, long ago, to submerge my sexual identity in the texts I created — a strategy that daily becomes more and more untenable. Not only am I tired of artfully masking my own difference but, as a teacher of writing, I am also intent on creating classroom communities that legitimize all differences — not just the routinized litany of race, class, and gender — as sites for exploration, self-knowledge, and critique. Immediately, I recognize both myself and those I teach when Malinowitz asserts that gay and lesbian students have been consistently silenced in composition classes where, despite acknowledgment of gender, race, and class differences, sexual identity is assumed to be universally heterosexual, a norm vigorously enforced by individuals' spoken and unspoken homophobia. Because the discourse of sexual difference is deemed irrelevant by otherwise well-intentioned educators, Malinowitz contends that gay and lesbian students feel powerless to construct their own knowledge, to author their lives in textually authentic ways: "I am proposing quite simply that the field of composition find out about its lesbian and gay students" (p. 6).

*Textual Orientations* is about shifting the terrain of epistemic privilege to create a "queercentric environment" (p. 26) for gay and lesbian composition students. What happens when sexual identity — like race, class, and gender — is acknowledged as a
dynamic social construction affecting how it is we come to know and what it is we know? How would such a lens change the contours of a college writing classroom for all students? "Queercentric," Malinowitz carefully points out, does not mean exclusively for gay and lesbian students, but, rather, means acknowledging that "homophobia and the silencing of lesbian and gay discourse do have a significant impact on students who do not define themselves as lesbian or gay or insofar as the silencing of any social group creates cognitive gaps for the whole community" (p. 28). *Textual Orientations* thus describes how Malinowitz, as a writing pedagogue and lesbian activist, attempts to bridge these gaps by inviting students to explore the tensions, complexities, and contradictions of sexual identity.

The backdrop for the book is the special topics college composition course Malinowitz developed and taught at two different New York City institutions in the spring of 1992. The course was called "Writing about Lesbian and Gay Experience"; however, at one university, the title was amended to "Writing about Lesbian and Gay Issues" because the English Department chair felt "experience" was too personal a term that "might discourage students who didn't identify as lesbian or gay from enrolling just as it might discourage lesbian or gay students who were not yet ready to publicly identify themselves" (p. 145). Malinowitz graciously complied with the chair's request. Yet, for me, the apparently harmless substitution of "issues" for "experience" deftly erases the personal and distances lived experience. This substitution perpetuates the tyranny of the heterosexual master narrative by sanitizing a "queercentric" course of study and by shoring up mainstream society's increasingly contested insider/outside borders.

*Textual Orientations*, in fact, deliberately disrupts traditional dichotomies by acknowledging identity as multifaceted and endlessly permeable, a theme prominent in Malinowitz's course syllabus, which announces: "You will be asked to read and think about lesbian and gay experience and to write critically about the politics and representation of multiple sexualities" (p. 148). As Malinowitz lucidly describes her course, its theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical implications, her underlying focus is how such fluidity might prompt critical awareness in the writing classroom and, in so doing, reshape traditional monologic discourse. The heart of the book — the final hundred pages — is the author's grounded "interpretive portraiture" (p. 157) of four gay and lesbian course participants, including a provocative analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by each.

Unlike many classroom portraits where the teacher-narrator is content with atheoretical storytelling, Malinowitz's presentation of her students' voices is meticulously grounded in postmodern theoretical understandings of identity, discourse, and their pedagogic intermingling. She explores these ideas in the first third of the book in a section titled "Ways of Teaching." Identity, Malinowitz contends, citing constructivist theorists, is shifting rather than stable, fragmented rather than unitary, blurred rather than bounded. Sexual identity is particularly precarious and often culturally conditioned by generalized homophobia: "Homophobia's role in regulating cultural representations and human behaviors is a fundamental reference point not only for homosexual people, but equally, for heterosexuals whose lives are schematized by a 'homosexual panic' that induces them to configure themselves in otherwise inexplicable ways" (p. 57).

Recognizing how dramatically discourse shapes identity, Malinowitz theorizes what can happen to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in traditional writing classrooms. Her astute critique of the rhetoric surrounding contemporary writing pedagogy reveals that most theoretical perspectives of composition situate themselves squarely within the realm of mainstream discourse and, thus, diminish gay and lesbian identities. For example, expressionist rhetoric, characterized by the uninhibited freewriting that has long been the mainstay of writing workshops (Elbow, 1973), suggests that one's "true self" emerges from the written text unfettered by social, economic, or political appendages. This search for personal authenticity celebrates the continual reincarnation of the self-sufficient individual engaged in a solitary struggle for "his" inner being.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the social constructionist theory of knowledge epitomized in the composition field by Kenneth Bruffee's (1986) landmark essay, "Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay." Although Bruffee admits that knowledge is non-unitary, he interprets social constructionist theory to mean that knowing is "only an agreement, a consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of knowledgeable peers. Concepts, ideas, theories, the world, reality and facts are all language constructs generated by knowledge communities and used by them to maintain community coherence" (p. 777). Despite the allure of social constructionist theory, Malinowitz notes that a consensus elides difference, stifles dialogue, and promotes entrenched ways of knowing and being. Better
to negotiate the tension crackling between differences than to yearn for the illusion of solitude or the chimera of consensus.

Thus, as a writing teacher, Malinowitz values composition theorist James Berlin's (1988) social-epistemic rhetoric in which "ideology is . . . foregrounded and problematized in a way that situates rhetoric within ideology rather than ideology within rhetoric" (p. 477). Consequently, through writing, students become aware of the ways discourse defines the self and of the relentless power of our discursive patternings. Malinowitz comments: "It is only when one is self-conscious about position and location in this way that one can act to reposition and relocate oneself in the world" (p. 72). By making problematic the complex interplay between discourse and identity, Malinowitz's course becomes the crucible for students to analyze how knowledge, power, and sexuality intertwine to construct their individual and collective identities as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual persons.

Malinowitz's commitment to empowering students to view the world differently is rooted in liberatory pedagogy as well as composition theory. However, unlike liberatory teachers like Ira Shor (1980), whom she critiques, she resists privileging her own knowledge and supports students as they shape, through critical reflection, their own understandings of knowledge, power, and identity. Above all, Malinowitz champions a discourse community that uses difference, particularly sexual difference, as a catalyst for continually re-envisioning how meanings are made.

For Malinowitz's gay and lesbian students, her pedagogy offers the possibility of "speech after long silence" (Yeats, 1932/1968), and her four student portraits illustrate how rhetorical theory, specifically Berlin's social-epistemic perspective, might be translated into classroom practice. We meet Adrian, Isabel, John, and Mary, and glimpse gay, lesbian, and bisexual students grappling with the complexities of writing from the margins and, in so doing, learning to value the multiple, often contradictory dimensions of self.

Isabel, a thirty-two-year-old Puerto Rican lesbian, is intent on using oral and written discourse to "set the record straight" to counter "the inaccurate perception, the limited perception of what it is to be gay" (p. 188). Initially, Isabel's vision of "setting the record straight" was divorced from her own experiences. In her essays, she consistently avoided self-revelation and appropriated the language of activism, a discourse that resonated with her political zeal to provide an alternative to mainstream heterosexual thinking. As the course progresses, Isabel's journal entries, as well as the multiple drafts of her essays, provide an unexpected avenue for reflection. Gradually, "setting the record straight" also encompasses Isabel's coming to terms with herself. "Our class just made me think more of myself as a lesbian," she writes, "I'm really thinking about gay now where before I was just being gay" (p. 203).

John, a twenty-five-year-old African American, describes himself as "the crossover kid" — "a Black gay man immersed in a white gay world" (p. 214). Malinowitz defines the term "crossover kid" as "the dismantler of reified homogenous realities" (p. 219), and such deconstruction is the task John sets for himself in his writing as he wrestles with the conflicting discourses of White/Black, gay/straight, and tries to move beyond the simplicity of binaries. In his final paper for the course, he finds himself focusing on Black gay men. "Writing about the uniqueness of that experience," he reflects, "compared to gay experience and Black experience and why gay men are neither one nor the other, but that being both is something completely different. Both of those identities — Black identity and gay identity — work equally to shape the person. I realize that that's what I was trying to write all along and wasn't getting it" (p. 218).

Adrian, a nineteen-year-old gay White male, writes to relocate personal identity within a public community that values multiple, contradictory perspectives. As the semester unfolds, Adrian crafts increasingly personal essays that begin to erode mainstream society's public/private discursive barriers that wall off sexuality, particularly sexual difference, as a legitimate topic for open discussion. Rather than limiting the "personal" to what Adrian cynically described as "a childhood experience on your bicycle or something like that" (p. 176), Malinowitz created a discourse community that, by radically extending the realm of the personal, enabled Adrian to "analyze his experience, not simply argue for its validity. Importantly, it wasn't a queer-only place but rather a community forged by a coalition of discourses in which queerness claimed a visibility and authority it doesn't ordinarily enjoy in the world" (p. 185).

Mary, an eighteen-year-old bisexual who refers to herself as a "byke," was, like Adrian, struggling to move beyond the language of justification to make visible the invisible
facets of her identity. Responding to social construction theory and gay and lesbian history, Mary found, in Malinowitz’s class, a heady intellectual forum that demanded she move beyond the superficial. “The overall feeling I have about these papers,” she comments, “is that I would never have gotten this much depth if I was in another class. . . . My emphasis now is on ‘I’m coming out because . . .’ instead of ‘If I come out . . .’” (p. 236). Like Isabel, Mary discovers the power of language to probe both the personal and political dimensions of sexual difference.

Each student portrait, though unique, contributes to an electrifying discourse of difference that Malinowitz, in her final chapter, likens to “queering the brew”: “We must remember that ‘inclusion’ itself doesn’t indicate that the brew is queered; queering comes from the possibility that alien discourses will not only, like silent partners, be in the brew but will reconstitute it as an altogether new concoction” (p. 252). This new concoction becomes the basis for potent pedagogic theorizing:

What I am suggesting in place of “inclusion” is a pedagogy that takes into account the often very uncelebratory conditions which underwrite the exclusion one is trying to cancel. . . . The sort of pedagogy I am proposing would entail thinking about the ways margins produce not only abject outsiderhood but also profoundly unique ways of self-defining, knowing, and acting; and about how, though people usually want to leave the margins, they do want to be able to bring with them the sharp vision that comes from living with friction and contradiction. (pp. 251–252)

Without friction and contradiction, we as readers, writers, and teachers risk lapsing into Bruffee’s (1986) seductive consensus or Elbow’s (1973) solipsistic soul-search. Neither alternative prompts us to question the epistemic privilege that informs mainstream discourse or to create new forms of knowledge. If society’s greatest desire, despite a begrudging “tolerance” of homosexuality, is “that gay people not exist” (Sedgwick, 1991, p. 4), how do we as teachers “queer the brew,” shape a pedagogy that thrives on the tensionality of multiple, conflicting differences? Although Malinowitz asserts that “A teacher can promote and encourage a classroom environment which, beyond being ‘affirmative,’ is structured to creatively tap the involvement of queer subjectivities in the class’s epistemological brew” (p. 258), she demonstrates her gifts as a teacher by refusing to provide a recipe. Meaningful pedagogy resists being reduced to a cookbook. Instead, Malinowitz invites readers to “learn about gay and lesbian people” (p. 258) and offers a detailed list of resources.

Textual Orientations will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of academics who teach writing and/or queer theory. Graduate students in rhetoric and composition will benefit from Malinowitz’s incisive critique of mainstream composition theory, and teacher-researchers will appreciate her exquisitely detailed student portraits. However, because Malinowitz’s audience is primarily writing pedagogues, the appeal of her text may be limited. Readers need to be conversant with current composition theory and its jargon to appreciate fully the author’s positioning. Ultimately, Malinowitz’s bittersweet blend of theory and practice challenges us as teachers of writing to reflect critically on our understandings of the possibilities — and the inevitable constraints — of the discourse communities we create in our classrooms.

Reading Textual Orientations reaffirms my own commitment as a writing teacher to “queering the brew” by creating discourse communities that do more than merely “acknowledge” difference, and instead explore the tensions of the margins to re-envision taken-for-granted ways of knowing and being. Equally crucial, by reviewing Textual Orientations — weaving my own discursive tapestry of private and public meanings — I break the stranglehold of silence and discover that being lesbian is a difference I must cherish out loud.

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References


Notable works by Malinowitz include Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities (Heinemann, 1995), an ethnographic study focusing on the community emerging in a college course that examines lesbian and gay experience. Textual Orientations highlights the productive intersections of two academic fields: rhetoric and composition and lesbian and gay studies while providing a pedagogical model that values the "vantage point of the social margin."[2]. Books[edit]. Malinowitz, Harriet (1995). Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers: Heinemann. Book chapters[edit]. Malinowitz, Harriet (2008). "The Writer-passion of a Feminist Dilettante". Notable works by Malinowitz include Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities (Heinemann, 1995), an ethnographic study focusing on the community emerging in a college course that examines lesbian and gay experience. Textual Orientations examines two emerging, mutually illuminating fields: rhetoric and composition and lesbian and gay studies. It is a thorough, fascinating study of the complex rhetorical features in operation for lesbian and gay students in college writing classes. What kind of discourse community is formed? What kinds of new work does it enable? The book illustrates that in an academic environment that is "queercentric," the complexities of lesbian and gay subjectivity can be drawn upon to frame the very acts of composing from which they are usually erased.