*Symposium*

# *The Homosexual Imagination*: A Fifty-Year Retrospective

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## "Before Eve Sedgwick": Reading *The Homosexual Imagination* Again for the First Time

Michael J. Faris and T J Geiger II

In 1974, *College English* published a special issue on *The Homosexual Imagination*, edited by Louie Crew and Rictor Norton. This special issue was, according to then-editor Richard Ohmann, "the first issue of a scholarly or professional journal ever on that subject"—*that subject* being homosexuality and homophobia (qtd. in Williams 60). In a 1993 interview with Ohmann, Jeffrey Williams observes that the special issue was "Long before Eve Sedgwick" (60)—a cheeky observation given that queer theory was, at the time in its institutional infancy, often attributed to the work of Sedgwick, Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), Michael Warner, and Teresa de Lauretis (among many others).

This symposium honors, remembers, (re)reads, pushes against, and extends the 1974 special issue at its fiftieth anniversary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the special issue seems barely remembered by English studies, a point Gavin P. Johnson makes in his contribution to this symposium. In this introduction, we briefly contextualize the special issue—to encourage *College English* readers to read *The Homosexual Imagination* again for the first time—and contextualize this symposium.

*The Homosexual Imagination* was published during a dynamic and changing time in academia and in society: the Stonewall uprising was only five years before; NCTE published "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL) in 1974 (Committee on CCCC Language Statement); Watergate and the Vietnam War were eroding American confidence in governance; the Gay Liberation Front, the Lavender Menace, and various gay rights, women's rights, and Black rights groups were active in changing culture and academia; and the Combahee River Collective began meeting in 1974 before publishing their now famous statement—among many other moments. As we (re)read *The Homosexual Imagination*, we suggest resisting two common historical

gestures. The first gesture—a narrative of progress—would see this issue as situated in a naive, homophobic past, casting the present as more liberated and enlightened, a move that risks ignoring the very real dangers to queer and trans folx today. The second gesture—a nostalgic one—risks idealizing the past for its activist idealism, occluding the complexities of particular moments. We can't do justice to the full context of *The Homosexual Imagination,* but these are thoughts guiding our and contributors' (re)reading of the issue.

*The Homosexual Imagination* opens with Crew and Norton's editorial, "The Homophobic Imagination," which outlines how homophobia has shaped the literature that is written and read, the scholarship and criticism that are published, and the practices of English teachers. They call for "gay criticism," which challenges normative literary judgment and aesthetics and affirms "the essential ambiguity of all human experience" (286), and for an activist and inclusive English studies. As they conclude their editorial, "The appearance of a gay space in this issue of *College English* is more than a refreshingly novel turn of the tables: it is a step towards human liberation" (290). The rest of the issue is dynamic, including a variety of entries:

- literary analyses of a variety of texts, including Melville's *Billy Budd* (Austen), Black drama (Clayborne), and Rechy's *City of Night* (Giles);
- discussions of literature courses focused on homosexuality (Kantrowitz; Schreiber);
- personal narratives like Dolores Noll's essay "A Gay Feminist in Academia" and the anonymous essay "Some Notes of a Homosexual Teaching Assistant in His First Semester of Ph. D. Work";
- interviews with openly gay theater critic Eric Bentley (Norton) and with Allen Ginsberg (reprinted from the Gay Liberation newsletter *Gay Sunshine*);
- an essay by Jacob Stockinger on gay criticism;
- a discussion of gay slang by Julia P. Stanley;
- a variety of poems;
- a "Checklist of Resources";
- a "Garland of Gay Proverbs" collected by Harlequin Paramount; and
- artwork by Sage L. Reynolds, whose frontispiece for the issue is reprinted here (Figure 1).

The issue is rich and impossible to adequately summarize (indeed, we didn't mention every entry). We are hopeful that current *College English* readers will seek out the issue and read it. Some of the claims in the journal will feel very much of their time, while others, we believe, still feel revolutionary and empowering.

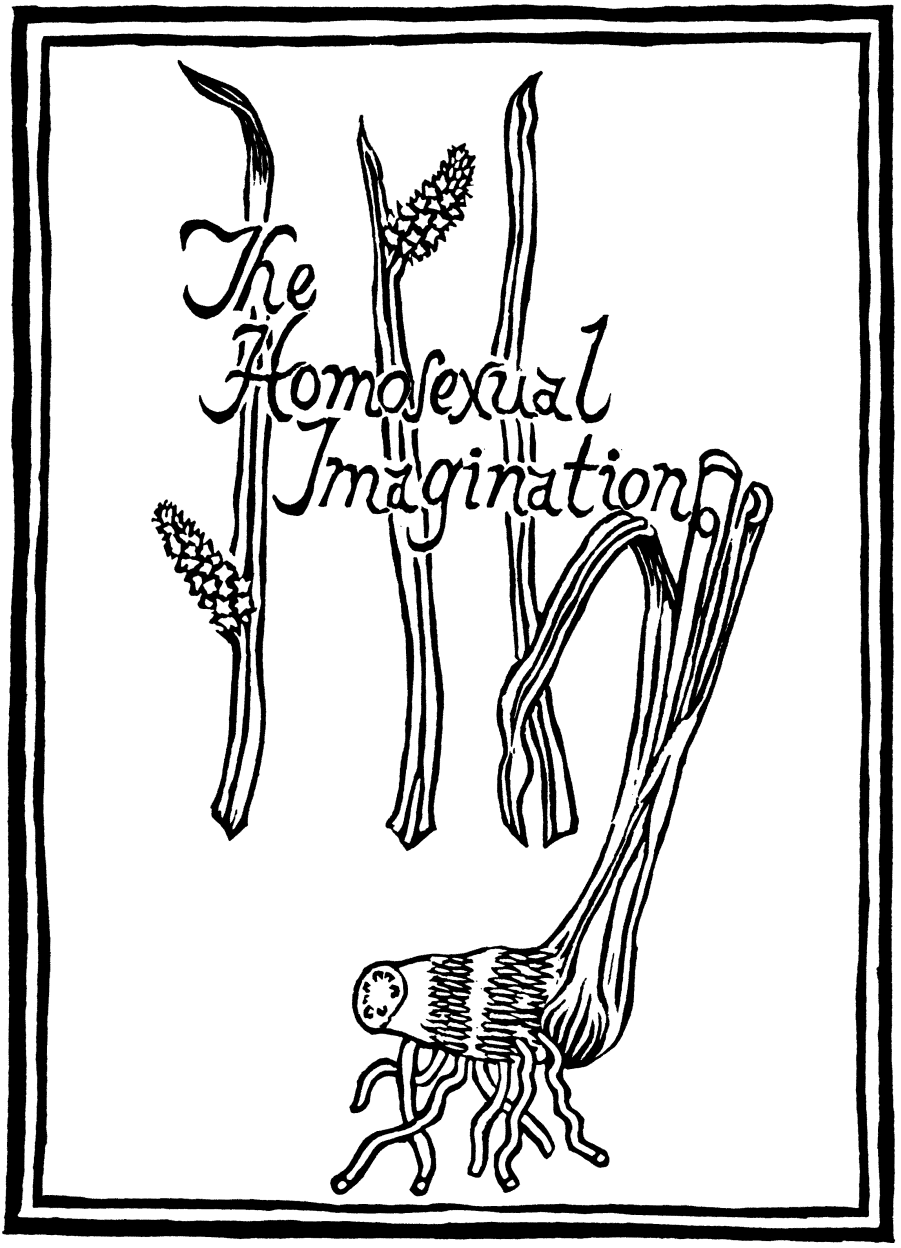


**Figure 1.** Frontispiece from the special issue. The art by Sage L. Reynolds was originally published in *College English* vol. 36, no. 3, Nov. 1974.

Notably, the special issue included many voices, in various genres and modalities—essays, poetry, artwork, interviews. In the spirit of the special issue's multimodal extravaganza, this symposium includes multiple media (including a comic by Don Unger) and essays that blur genres (an open letter by Danielle Bacibianco). *The Homosexual Imagination* also ranged in voice—from the personal to the institutional—a move mirrored in this symposium, from personal narrative (e.g., Christina V. Cedillo's contribution) to a discussion of institutional sites like writing centers (Harry Denny and Travis Webster). While the special issue was certainly diverse, it lacked diversity in terms of race and gender—a largely white, gay, male enterprise: only one article directly addresses race (Clayborne), and the vast majority of authors are men. (Caroline Dadas's contribution to this symposium attends to this lack of engagement with lesbian resources and materials.)

Responses from the field show a mixed reception to the special issue. Some, like Ken Macrorie, celebrated it, writing in a letter to the editor that he was "more than proud—*amazed* is the word—to be a member of NCTE" because of the issue ("Letter" 85). Others, however, responded negatively. Ohmann explained in his 1993 interview with Williams that the College Section Committee of NCTE—which oversaw *College English*—didn't raise objections to special issues on feminism, Marxism, or any other topic, "but it deeply upset them that the homosexuals were now in *College English*" (Williams 60). Many published letters to the editor were negative. Richard Fulkerson, for instance, penned a sarcastic letter suggesting that *College English* follow up the issue with one "devoted to the Fat Imagination" ("Liberated" 81)—writing one and a half pages (!) satirically outlining its potential contributions. (In the present symposium, J. Logan Smilges addresses how disability is weaponized by both pro- and anti-gay discourses.) We reference these complaints because they are indicative of both the 1970s and the 2020s, when we see a resurgence in anti-trans, anti-gay, and anti–"gender ideology" rhetoric (Butler, *Who's Afraid*).

Indeed, we see many parallels between 1974 and 2024 (admitting that, yes, they are very different eras). Among those parallels is how some of the most admirable gay and queer activism (in academia and out) is intersectional in nature. Crew, one of the coeditors of the special issue, is perhaps underrecognized in the field for his advocacy and activism. In 1974, Crew (a white man) taught at Fort Valley State University (then Fort Valley State College), a public historically Black university. Also that year, Crew married his husband Ernest Clay (a Black man). Crew founded what would become Integrity, the LGBTQIA+ inclusion ministry within the Episcopal Church, and soon launched a newsletter, *Integrity: Homosexual Episcopal Forum*. Fol-

lowing his activist editorial work with the special issue and within his religious community, Crew further illustrated an intersectional standpoint when writing about linguistic justice three years later in his 1977 *College English* piece, "The New Alchemy," challenging the white normative language standards in college literacy testing in Georgia. Crew quotes a University of Georgia testing official who argued for allowing college officials and testing specialists to openly embrace racist pseudoscience related to intelligence, and then Crew asks, "Is there a logarithm to indicate the power to which prejudice is raised as one gasses a Jew or a gay person, or as one flunks blacks and rednecks?" (708). While surely we wish to indicate the differentials of power, precarity, and outcomes in these examples, Crew showed a productive attention here to the intersectional networks of forces that constrain possibilities and perpetuate harm.

A second parallel is how anti-queer rhetoric is never solely about sexuality but also about reanimating "an ideal past" organized by logics of race, gender, ability, nationality, and class (Butler, *Who's Afraid* 15). Interestingly, 1974 also saw the publication of SRTOL, and NCTE passed resolutions against censorship in textbooks. In an omnibus complaint letter (again, sarcastic, in the vein of Fulkerson) responding to *The Homosexual Imagination* and other NCTE actions, William H. Pixton ironically advocates sexual desegregation of public bathrooms, the abolition of "distinctions between academic excellence and mental incompetence," and that "students will remain blissfully ignorant" because they don't speak or write in standardized English (93). What Pixton's letter teaches us, even if some progressive activists, scholars, and educators don't realize it, is that struggles against oppression and domination are intersectional in nature: reactionary forces are more than willing to show that they hate queers, racial minorities, nonstandard English speakers, immigrants, disabled folx, and more all in one breath (or letter). Black feminists and feminists and queers of color, going back to the Combahee River Collective (if not before), have been telling us how oppressions are interrelated. It is far past the time for more of us to listen to them.

In closing this introduction, we want to continue to address issues of intersectionality and diversity in the field. We circulated a call for proposals to this symposium in August 2023 and received many promising responses. However, the overwhelming majority of proposals came from white, male, cisgender authors. Consequently, the majority of contributors to this symposium are white, male, cisgender, and tenure track—including us two (Michael identifies as a white, cisgender, queer man, and T J identifies as a white, cisgender, heterosexual man). We made many efforts to reach out to multiply marginalized scholars from a variety of subject positions to encourage them

to propose a contribution, but many declined due to feeling overextended. In an era when many marginalized scholars are stretched thin with service expectations (e.g., mentoring junior faculty and graduate and undergraduate students, doing the diversity work of universities), their own research and teaching, and the challenges of navigating tremendous precarity, the field needs to continue to evaluate and assess our labor assumptions and how the field can be more inviting and inclusive—especially if we are to better incorporate perspectives on research and theory from queer, trans, disabled, BIPOC, international, and contingent-labor scholars.

Our hope is that this symposium helps foster continued discussion on inclusion, sexual rhetorics, and intersectionality within English studies.

## Cruising Citations: Meditations on the Impact(s) of Queer Knowledge

Gavin P. Johnson

Isn't it queer how we cite impact? So often we imbue ephemera and the ephemeral with covert affective attachments noting histories that otherwise would remain unmarked and unaccounted. While reading the call for this symposium, I recalled my introduction to the 1974 special issue. I was preparing for candidacy exams and a dissertation that would interrogate world-making potentials at the intersections of composition, digital media, and queer rhetorics. During a regular check-in, Scott Llyod DeWitt, my advisor and first openly gay academic mentor, shared that he recently came across something special. He handed over a worn copy of *College English* and explained it as the first engagement English studies as a field had with the *taboo* topic of homosexuality.

That queer object impacted me as a queer PhD student, especially the anonymous "Some Notes of a Homosexual Teaching Assistant in His First Semester of Ph. D. Work." I wondered, "Why haven't I come across this before? Why wasn't this on my reading list?" Of course, exam reading lists are necessarily incomplete, but I struggled to pinpoint any critical gathering around an object from which my specialization had, in some ways, emerged. The citations I traced to understand a genealogy of queer rhetorics had not led me to *The Homosexual Imagination*.

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Academic citations enact *certain* values, facilitate *certain* knowledge circulations, and notate *certain* impacts, often at the cost of systematically margin-

alized communities. Sara Ahmed argues that "citation is feminist memory" (15), and Jennifer C. Nash encourages the Black feminist citational desire of "un-forgetting." As a practice separate from mere remembering, Nash explains how un-forgetting Black feminism works to "bring to the foreground Black women thinkers *and* interrogate the institutional, intellectual, affective structures that have made possible their forgetting" (83). This, Nash admits, is a risky move, as it often plays into the seduction of scholarly endorsement that condemns a lack of citation of marginalized knowledge while policing its credentialing, which effectively flattens complex onto-epistemologies to two-dimensional identitarianism.

The absence of citation of marginalized communities is rhetorical and doesn't index a lack of knowledge-making, but rather the preservation of racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and ableism in academe (*Position Statement*; Connors; Itchuaqiyaq and Frith; Jones; Lane, De Hertogh, and Ouellette). To this point, Eric Darnell Pritchard calls for citation to act as a type of accountability that avoids erasing, appropriating, or tokenizing Black feminists, queer and trans folks, and disabled activist-teachers. Unfortunately, as Pritchard and so many others have explained, citation is a choice that must be made, and very few have made the choice to embrace, build from, or even generatively critique *The Homosexual Imagination*. Embracing these arguments, especially those forwarded by Nash and Pritchard, I wonder how un-forgetting *The Homosexual Imagination* might enact accountability.

Like most queer knowledge, the special issue's traceability was difficult. I was left cruising citations,[1] scanning bibliographies for something desirable while simultaneously trying not to over-anticipate finding it. My citational analysis of the special issue returned few results, and the rush of pleasure of stumbling onto what I wanted never came. Google Scholar, for example, only counts twenty-six citations over fifty years for Crew and Norton's editorial. JSTOR, which hosts a full archive of *College English*, reported only four citations. The unexplained difference in count certainly calls into question the validity of quantitative bibliometrics; nonetheless, either of those returns would, by normative standards of "impact," suggest the issue did not move the conversation about the homosexual imagination forward or backward or even sideways.

Importantly, this lack of documented impact wouldn't surprise the original guest editors. In their editorial, Crew and Norton demand readers "recognize how homophobia has had a detrimental effect upon scholarship itself" (277). From historical mutilation of documents to "de-homosexualized" readings and authors self-censoring, Crew and Norton "suspect there is a conspiracy

of silence. The lack of homosexual research and criticism suggests that the field is being deliberately ignored rather than found unfruitful for exploration" (278). Today, I'd apply similar concerns to *The Homosexual Imagination* itself. This is a big claim, and I don't have big evidence to support it—though Crew and Norton remind us that the act of homophobic suppression is itself often suppressed for the benefit of bigotry (279)—but immediate reactions to the special issue seemed to instruct readers to discount and forget the issue's insights. For example, Richard Fulkerson's[2] gluttonous sarcasm specifically targeting "a liberated editorial policy" is especially insidious for purposefully linking homosexuality with bestiality and insistent fatphobia that critiques any attempt at circulating the imaginations of "alternative lifestyles" ("Liberated" 83). In some ways, Fulkerson's point seemingly prevailed over the last few decades, if not in discursive proclamations, then in citational practices.

The lack of citationality for the special issue is an indication of a persistent invalidation of queer knowledge—whether deliberate or not is debatable. However, we can simultaneously hold another theorization in productive tension; that is, perhaps the impact of the special issue is something more queerly ephemeral than academic citation can handle. Recall, for example, José Esteban Muñoz's arguing, "Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack" ("Ephemera" 6). Muñoz insists the ephemerality of queerness may protect "minoritarian cultural workers" but also opens us up to critiques of "the evidentiary authority of queer inquiry" ("Ephemera" 7); that is, the (de)valuing of queer citationality as a (de)valuing of queer life.

Thinking with *The Homosexual Imagination* leads me to question if academic citation, as currently articulated and enacted, can ever be socially or epistemologically just. Maybe academic citation is too homophobic, too racist, too ableist, too sexist, too unimaginative. Perhaps, then, this symposium should engender what Chase Gregory imagines as "an eros of citation, in order to reveal how citation confuses what we think we know about knowledge production. That confusion might open up space to think more laterally and creatively about how ideas are created, disseminated, and felt" (62). Calling for an eros of citation in place of an aesthetic of citation can facilitate unforgettings, à la Nash, that "lay bare the structuring desires that already lurk behind academic citational practice" (Gregory 72). Such an erotic allows us the opportunity to playfully and passionately honor the ephemeral qualities of queer practices, critical imaginaries, epistemological intimacies, and citational relations that sustain and circulate queerness.

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When I first read the call for this symposium and considered if I would submit an abstract, I sent Scott a text reminding him of that moment in his office when he illuminated a different genealogy . . . that moment of un-forgetting. He responded, "I'm going to gift that copy to you." Just another ephemeral citation and an anticipatory, covert transmission of queer knowledge that will go unaccounted for in the academic record but for this brief meditation.

## The Homo-ableist Imagination

J. Logan Smilges

In his affirming response to *The Homosexual Imagination*, poet and English professor Bernhard Frank opens with a fascinating reminder of 1970s social context. "Such a kosher-stamp to homosexuality in academia," he writes of the issue, "is paralleled only by our removal from the psychiatric sick-list" (76).

The sick-list to which Frank refers is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*), which pathologized homosexuality from 1952 until the American Psychiatric Association removed the term shortly before the publication of Crew and Norton's issue. For Frank, these two events—the publication of *The Homosexual Imagination* and the depathologization of homosexuality—were intertwined accomplishments. Both helped him to "know that I really exist" (76), aiding a transformation of his felt homoeroticism into a decided identity. Frank's homosexuality emerged through its transition from a stigmatized and individualized mental illness into a legible academic field of study. While Frank's explicit binding of *The Homosexual Imagination* and the removal of homosexuality from the *DSM* is unique among the contributors and respondents to Crew and Norton's issue, its guiding sentiment serves as a common ideological foundation—one we might call the homo-ableist imagination.

The homo-ableist imagination derives a grammar for queer subjectivity and world-building from a dynamic (dis)attachment to disability. For many of the people involved with *The Homosexual Imagination*, including Crew and Norton, a number of the original authors, and almost all of the issue's critics, disability serves as a lynchpin, a rhetorical commonplace that—through its mobilized plasticity—gives discursive weight and ontological depth to homosexuality. Though Crew and Norton had good reason to differentiate between the "homosexual imagination" and the "homophobic imagination" based on their oppositional sexual politics, the homo-ableist imagination subtends them both, sustaining debates over what homosexuality is and can be. If ableism

names the uneven distribution of power based on shifting registers of bodily and enminded normativity (Smilges, *Crip*), then homo-ableism refers to how this uneven distribution is vectored to materialize homosexuality as a political and intellectual project.

In their introduction to the 1974 issue, Crew and Norton remark that the "homosexual imagination" can only be understood in the context of "heterosexual sickness" ("Homophobic" 274). Sickness, here, is a flipped metaphor referring both to the depathologization of homosexuality and to the irrationality of homophobia. Implying that academia is infected with heterosexual sickness is to propose homophobia as an epistemological problem woven into the muscle of scholarly inquiry. "*Homosexual literature is not in the mainstream,*" they write, "*not because the mainstream is heterosexual, but because the mainstream is homophobic*" (280). The work of Crew and Norton's sickness metaphor is twofold. First, it sets the terms of debate for the issue, insisting that it is not interested in the contested "abnormality" of homosexuality but rather in homophobia and the subversive emergence of a "homosexual imagination" (286). Second, the metaphor secures the language of disability as grounds on which a conversation about homophobia and the homosexual imagination may take place. Crew and Norton resurrect disability on the tail feathers of depathologization as a rhetorical figure for the newly liberated homosexual subject to articulate themself against. Herein lies the key function of a homo-ableist imagination, which conceives of homosexuality through its proximity, however near or far, to the disrepute of disability.

Following the introduction, disability routinely appears in the issue as a negative space out of which the political potentiality of homosexuality is salvaged. This is a mode of rhetorical silencing that I have elsewhere identified as a core strategy for the emergence of an early queer politic (Smilges, *Queer Silence*). Arnie Kantrowitz, for instance, recalls teaching a course entitled "Homosexuals and Literature" that he likened to a "liberation" (328). Led to define the term, he offers the example of homosexual liberation, describing it as "the rejection of labels like 'sick'" (328). He also repeats Crew and Norton's claim that homophobia might be the true "sickness which pervades our society," reconfirming the notion that disability is an antagonist to the radical homosexual (325). Allen Ginsberg adopts a psychoanalytic approach, allegorizing homophobia to stigma against partners with an age gap. He insists that both homosexuals and age-differentiated partners can form "a healthy relationship, not a sick neurotic dependency," implying that health is a barometer for respectability (397). Finally, in an anonymous contribution by "a Homosexual Teaching Assistant in His First Semester of Ph. D. Work," the author recounts his dismissal from the military for homosexuality,

documented as an "incapacitating social infirmity" ("Some Notes" 332). The insinuation of illness haunts him as he navigates graduate school from the closet, worrying that one of his professors, "who sees through everybody's madness," will clock him as gay (335). Across these essays, disability is invoked through its disavowal. It is the uncontested premise from which the respectability of homosexuality or the malevolence of homophobia might be deduced. For these authors, it is only when read against disability's irredeemability that homosexuality is witnessed as a viable political object. Homosexuality is glimpsed as a target of pathological homophobia, that is, through its victimization to disability.

Critical respondents to *The Homosexual Imagination* similarly draw upon rhetorics of disability to elucidate their arguments, despite presenting inverted claims about the ethics or politics of homosexuality. In a response that is seemingly targeted to the anonymous contributor mentioned above, Don Slater remarks that "well adjusted" homosexuals "feel no compulsion whatever to discuss" their homosexuality, suggesting that it is only the maladjusted "plastic pansies" who worry themselves about being found out (79). Edward Jayne, in his "Defense of the Homophobic Imagination," rejects Kantrowitz, Crew, and Norton's shared claim that homophobia is a sickness, arguing to the contrary that homophobia results from "mild paranoid tendencies" that are essential to human survival (63). He asserts that, far from an illness to be cured, homophobia "has delivered mankind" and to misrepresent it as pathology is "essentially to deny ourselves . . . the root of our identity" (67). Then, in an amusing comment, Richard Fulkerson speculates that the only special issue more preposterous than *The Homosexual Imagination* would be one dedicated to "Idiocy as an Alternative Lifestyle" ("Liberated" 82–83). Disability is, once again, heralded as an analogical device: it exists as the distorted mirror image of homosexuality. For Slater, Jayne, and Fulkerson, its distortion is magnifying, bringing into relief the inadequacy of homosexuality as a site of intellectual inquiry. While their homophobia may set them apart from Crew, Norton, and the other original contributors, they nevertheless find in ableism a shared rhetorical opportunity. Through either its disavowal or imbrication, disability substantiates homosexuality: a vehicle through which the homosexual is given form.

Across the issue's interlocutors, the homo-ableist imagination is the inevitable result of ceding disability to the recesses of politicality. It is by sublimating disability as a political project in its own right that homosexuality emerges as a seizable object for intellectual attachment. By staking homosexuality's resuscitation on its divestment from pathology, the homosexual imagination empties disability and disabled people of their own capacity for liberation.

The homophobic imagination, by contrast, clings to a pathological model of disability to justify its heterosexism. Disability is the unstated base matter for both, the raw material out of which homosexuality can be imagined at all. What these imaginations fail to imagine, however, is disability as anything other than a weapon—something to be slung back and forth across rival camps. Lost in the battle is the possibility for a crip imagination, for a world-building project in which disability is not plasticized for the (un)making of others, but centered as an asset to our collective freedom.

"Gays are not in the business of trying to find others on whom to step," Crew writes ("To Fulkerson" 83), and frankly, I wish that were true. Unfortunately, homo-ableism is a fundamental component of gay intellectualism. *The Homosexual Imagination*, for all its risks and refusals, is early evidence of how the institutionalization of gay and lesbian studies (and, later, queer studies) grew out of the suppression of disability and its own imaginative capacity. I wonder, looking ahead toward the next fifty years, what opportunities might arise to rethink the relationship between disability and sexuality. What modes of accountability for homo-ableism should we expect from one another? What might it mean to develop new vocabularies and critical registers for articulating homosexuality, alongside other queer ways of being, that do not rely on friction? I wonder, too, as the field of disability studies institutionalizes, gelling into its own disciplinarity, how we might learn from the harm of homo-ableism to address disability's own obfuscating and effacing tendencies. These questions are, after all, the purpose of imagination: taking stock of what is so that we might dream of what could be otherwise.

## Lesbi Honest: The Stark Homogeneity of *The Homosexual Imagination*

Caroline Dadas

While *The Homosexual Imagination* special issue stands as a vital historical marker of how our field has engaged with queerness, its overwhelmingly white male viewpoint demonstrates how dominant discourses can foreclose the full range of a community's perspectives and contributions. Even with the feminist movement in full swing in 1974, the special issue treats queer women as ancillary; out of twenty contributors, only two identify as lesbians (Delores Noll and Julia P. Stanley). As a result, (cis or trans) female experiences of being gay are granted little exploration in the collection. In the ensuing decades, writing studies scholars, particularly in the areas of feminist and cultural rhetorics, have published widely about the limitations of identifica-

tion as a primary relational framework (Blankenship; Daniel, Malcolm, and Rai; Leake; Lyon; Ratcliffe). Even so, the lack of diversity in *The Homosexual Imagination* serves as a caution for our discipline today. As queer scholars, we must invite multiple subject positions into our scholarship beyond those with whom we identify. If we are not deliberate about doing so, we will enact further harm on folx who are already rendered less visible.

Inclusivity involves amplifying voices that are already present but relegated to less obvious locations. While a lesbian presence in *The Homosexual Imagination* is scant, the periodicals section of the "Checklist of Resources" mentions several prominent lesbian magazines of the period. One omission in that list is the newspaper *Off Our Backs*, considered the longest-running radical feminist news journal (1970–2008), widely read in the lesbian community during this time. That special edition editors Louie Crew and Rictor Norton were either unaware of this newspaper or decided not to include it shows how scholarly and activist work taking place in non-mainstream venues is often overlooked. Based on my review of the eleven issues of *Off Our Backs* published in 1974, the magazine was engaging in the kind of intersectional work that could have informed a more representative perspective on the gay community than what Crew and Norton ultimately offered. *The Homosexual Imagination* presumably served as an introduction to queerness—both an identity and an academic site of inquiry—for many straight colleagues in the field; however, its overwhelmingly white male perspective left a false impression of who comprised the gay community (as a reference point, the Stonewall uprising only five years earlier was led by multiply marginalized folx such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera). The special issue also missed the opportunity to serve as a foundation for rich and diverse representations of queerness in future academic work.

We should not be surprised. Outside of academia, the gay rights movement that grew out of this era and gained significant traction in the 1990s and early 2000s centered the concerns and desires of upper/middle-class white gay men, focusing on marriage as its centerpiece. After marriage equality became law, we saw an alarming rise in anti-gay legislation, much of it aimed at transgender individuals. Our current situation is alarming: according to the *Trans Legislation Tracker*, in 2023, 589 anti-trans bills were proposed across 49 states, with 85 having passed (and 269 still active). A 2022 article by CBS News shared that "there was a 93% increase in tracked homicides of trans and gender-nonconforming people in the United States and Puerto Rico over the last four years. . . . Black trans women accounted for nearly three-quarters of the known victims" in 2021 (Mandler). While the mainstream gay rights movement positioned marriage as the defining issue in attaining

equality, less organizing energy was devoted toward assuring that the most vulnerable members of the queer community could attain basic human rights such as bodily safety. In short, we are now living the political repercussions of having centered the desires of the most privileged members of the queer community over the past fifty-plus years.

The scant representation of women in the special issue gives the impression that lesbians had a very limited homosexual imagination in 1974. This implication could not be further from the truth. Lesbian magazines have played an important but little-acknowledged role in the construction of queerness for women. They have functioned rhetorically to educate women about what it has meant to be queer. These magazines represented one of the few places that women had, aside from bars, to build community and identity. In her work on queer epistolary exchange, Pamela VanHaitsma argues, "An unfortunate effect of [the] long-term coupling of rhetorical education and civic engagement is the methodological marginalization of questions about other potential pedagogical purposes, especially those concerned with romantic and sexual life" (7). By what means of education does a queer person learn the cultural, discursive, and sexual practices of being queer? We should consider this kind of rhetorical education a form of civic engagement (participation in the life of the community), considering that queer people's safety and fulfillment depend in large part on finding each other and coexisting safely with straight folx. While VanHaitsma's project is oriented around uncovering queer composing practices, I am interested in the rhetorical and political import of archival pedagogies of queer romantic and sexual life.

The pedagogy at play in the eleven issues of *Off Our Backs* published in 1974 included resources for lesbians to engage in queer community-building practices. Volume 4, number 5 (1974) devoted twelve pages to a catalog from the "1st Things 1st—Books for Women—Fe-mail Order House," a mail order and mobile bookstore whose mission was "to educate people about feminism, the sexist nature of society, the discrimination, inequity, oppression that exists; to get as much of this information and literature into the hands of women (and men and children) as possible" ("First Official" 1). With categories such as "By or About Black People," "Reproduction," "General Herstory," and "Sexism and Women's Studies," this extensive catalog demonstrated how lesbian identities were historically and politically grounded, representing a range of diverse backgrounds and concerns.

The women of *Off Our Backs* consistently modeled an eagerness to talk about difference and work through ideas that we would later find foundational to feminist thought. Contributor Fran Pollner, a white woman, reported on a meeting of the National Black Feminist Organization in the January 1974 issue.

Her analysis gestures toward a nascent understanding of what we now know as intersectionality: "The relationships between classism, racism, and sexism are enormous—and subtle. We sometimes go around in circles discussing, analyzing, acting, re-evaluating, and starting over again—in our insulated groups, without necessarily limited perspectives. We have a lot to teach one another" (Pollner 3). Pollner acknowledges the overlapping oppressions of different identity markers and bemoans the existence of "insulated groups" that need to be in conversation with each other. All eleven issues of *Off Our Backs* published in 1974 included a major story on some facet of labor organizing, while the March issue offered extended coverage of women sex workers in Vietnam. Sexuality's intersection with class, race, and other identity markers was very much on the minds of *Off Our Backs*'s contributors, as they struggled to formulate theories and practices to reflect what they were seeing in their community and activist circles. Other lesbian periodicals of the time were included in *The Homosexual Imagination*'s "Checklist of Resources," which suggests that Crew and Norton valued the intellectual labor taking place in these forums. Yet the pieces they chose to include in their special issue do not invoke the kind of theorizing that came out of these spaces such as intersectional analyses of discriminatory practices.

As the example of *Off Our Backs* demonstrates, paying attention to the work taking place beyond academic borders will also enrich our understanding of what queerness offers culturally, politically, methodologically, personally. Black Lives Matter, for instance, was started in 2013 by organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, who state on the organization's website that "As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people" ("Herstory"). Their intersectional approach to their organizing work is just one example of how queerness can and does play a role in myriad social justice movements. Only if we maintain a deliberately capacious stance toward who contributes, who is cited, and what counts as queer scholarship can we reflect the richness of the queer community—a richness that I trust *The Homosexual Imagination* sought to communicate but fell short of doing.

## *The Homosexual Imagination* and the Ongoing Importance of Queer Stories

Christina V. Cedillo

Five years after the Stonewall uprising, *College English* published *The Homosexual Imagination*, a special issue that addressed the hostility surrounding

the teaching of homosexual literature and advocated for the fundamental humanity of queers. In their introduction, Louie Crew and Rictor Norton wrote that they invited contributors to write from a pro-gay stance, yet found that "all of them . . . recognized the need for some comment upon the homophobic imagination during the course of each discussion" ("Homophobic" 273). Crew and Norton delineated some of the physical and material threats facing gay teachers: publisher prejudice, institutional precarity, conversion therapy, and sodomy laws. "The oppression of homosexuals is becoming an increasingly familiar story," they explained, "but one that must be repeated at every opportunity until it becomes so familiar as to bring society to its senses" (273). Fifty years after the issue's publication, the editors' words prove all too familiar.

In 2023, Texas state bills like SB 12, SB 14, and SB 17 targeted drag shows and so-called "explicit live performances," gender-affirming care for trans youth, and diversity and inclusion initiatives, respectively. Collectively, these bills sought to pathologize queer and trans people; erase people of color, queer, and disabled history; and promote white supremacist able-bodied cisheteronormativity (Hubrig, Hsu, Cedillo, and Wingard). Similar policies are being enacted across the nation, reminding us that despite neoliberal notions of "acceptance," we have a long way to go before achieving equity.

Still, I believe that radical acts of imagination have the potential to transform the worlds we inhabit, allowing us to dream of futures to come, visions that orient our actions within the field and in everyday life. As a cultural rhetorician, I see that special issue portending some of the same work we do today, foregrounding the power of stories to help us imagine possibilities for meaningful action. Stories enmatter or dematter. Normative, imposed stories that narrowly define identity, emotions, and relationships can erase worlds that have been and preclude those that can be, while queer stories—those that defy narrow strictures—foment worlds yet to be that shatter a reliance on normativity itself.

Normativity hinges on a belief that struggles are exclusive rather than imbricated, keeping us from understanding our interconnectedness and working toward collective liberation. José Esteban Muñoz begins *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* by reminding us that we must be "attentive to the past" and compose "critical practices that stave off the failures of imagination that [include] antirelationality and antiutopianism" (18). Similarly, Ilan Kapoor argues that (neo)liberal queerness fails to recognize its intersections with other identities and bolsters colonial, cisheteronormative systems, "upholding reproductive futurism . . . while also strengthening and promoting hetero-patriarchal global capitalism" (1614). Shared stories

can challenge the hold such systems exert over our lives, and English studies should stress this aim as a fundamental rhetorical objective.

For example, the anonymous author of "Some Notes of a Homosexual Teaching Assistant in His First Semester of Ph. D. Work" discusses his experiences, from realizing that he is a gay Catholic adolescent to hiding his identity as a student instructor in a university English department. Describing life with his conservative parents, he explains, "My mail is closely scrutinized; my phone calls are screened; all errands and appointments are timed" (332). One day, his mother finds a porn magazine ad and scours his room for further proof of his identity before leaving a foul note on his bookcase; reading a pop psychology article stating that all young people experience a homosexual phase finally assuages her fears. I relate to this story. When I was thirteen years old, my conservative Christian mother threatened to kick me out because she suspected that I liked a girl in a higher grade whose yearbook photo I showed her. She was right, but although I didn't say so, she yelled that I better not be a [gay slur] or I'd be out on the street. Like the author, I spent years thinking "Can people tell?" and performing straightness, while finding that queer students still sought me out for help because they felt safe. Stories proved a way to share vital coded information.

Stories also reveal the intensive labor associated with subterfuge. Queer rhetors may "double-draft" to determine how much of themselves to reveal, costing them points on assignments or job performance (West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks 198). For many queer and trans people, this additional toil proves necessary for basic safety. Other marginalized folks may engage in it too, seeking to counter stereotypes or to prove that they belong. Such stories should invite us all to imagine a world where rhetorical self-fashioning can be driven by playful quare desire (refer to E. Patrick Johnson) rather than fear or shame.

Finally, stories prove a potent rhetoric that depicts people's realities and the realities they wish to live, uncovers the colonial foundations of intersectional oppressions, and challenges injurious biases. In "Modern Black Drama and the Gay Image," Jon L. Clayborne discusses playwrights' deployment of homosexuality as a trope for weakness—a too-common view within communities of color. Clayborne explains that after coming out to his mother, she "semi-facetiously remarked that we blacks had indeed contracted homosexuality from whites" (382). His story also elicits my narrative response. I think of the time a self-declared elder preferred to argue over translated histories than to shut down a young man's transphobia when I called out the latter's

use of slurs. This "elder" then advised me to mind my place as a woman, misgendering me to boot. Many Indigenous societies recognized genders beyond the binary before colonization and still do. Writing about Two-Spirit people, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states, "The powerful relationships queer bodies house—consent, diversity, variance, spiritual power, community, respect, reciprocity, love, attachment—were the very first thing colonizers sought to eliminate" (126). I have heard people say that trans identity is an invention of white culture to encourage "us" to stop reproducing. There's no "us" where people erase me to serve colonial norms.

Like Clayborne, I won't have any aspect of myself erased because I still lose, as do others like me. I also refuse to deny the queer, trans, and Two-Spirit relatives whose struggles have made life more bearable. If the past were truly cis and straight, the state wouldn't have to enshrine cisheteronormative history by law. Furthermore, we can always radically imagine new and better futures where everyone belongs. The stories commented on and shared here link the past and present to ask what futures we want even as we are busy building them. "I had never thought of that" can become "Let's try something completely different," so long as we maintain our senses of relationality and utopianism that say we all deserve more.

Ultimately, stories can demonstrate and enact our relationality and connect the past to potential futures. Stories are important because dominant histories tell us that those of us who are marginalized don't matter. Stories allow storytellers to speak our experiences with little mediation from a normative intercessor. They also highlight our commitments to one another and the communities to which we belong, while revealing connections that have been obscured and must be (re-)appreciated. In addition, stories make room for more stories that counter the harmful status quo, refuting anti-utopianist pragmatics that tell us "good enough" should be just that. Looking back at the *College English* special issue, I note some of my own storying practices reflected. Within the realm of the queer imaginary, where the stories in the special issue meet mine and others I've encountered along the way, I find intimate connections built across time, in the sharing of ideas of what writing was/is/will be in the classroom and in everyday life.

# THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION IN THE SOUTH TODAY

BY DON UNGER, UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

*IN THEIR INTRODUCTION TO THE 1974 SPECIAL ISSUE OF* COLLEGE ENGLISH *TITLED* THE HOMOSEXUAL IMAGINATION, *CO-EDITORS LOUIE CREW AND RICTOR NORTON DESCRIBE "THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION" THAT SKEWS ENGLISH STUDIES BY OPPRESSING QUEERS.*

LOUIE CREW

A CELEBRATION OF THE HOMOSEXUAL IMAGINATION [IN WRITING, CRITICISM, AND TEACHING] REQUIRES AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION... THE HOMOSEXUAL IMAGINATION CONSISTS, IN PART, OF AN IMMEDIATELY FELT AWARENESS OF THE MOST BRUTAL FORMS OF DEGRADATION BY WHICH CIVILIZING INSTITUTIONS HAVE SOUGHT TO SUPPRESS THAT IMAGINATION.

RICTOR NORTON

*IN ACADEMIA, THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION SUPPRESSED WORK BY QUEER WRITERS AND SCHOLARS, FIRED OR DENIED PROMOTION TO QUEER TEACHERS, AND POLICED QUEER EXPRESSION IN ANY FORM. RECEPTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE WAS MIXED.*

KEN MACRORIE

I AM MORE THAN PROUD--AMAZED IS THE WORD--TO BE A MEMBER OF NCTE.

I HAD CONSIDERED PROPOSING AN ISSUE ON "THE FLATULENT IMAGINATION," BUT THE SUGGESTION MIGHT, FOR SOME BIGOTED READERS, DETRACT FROM THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH I INTEND THESE SUGGESTIONS.

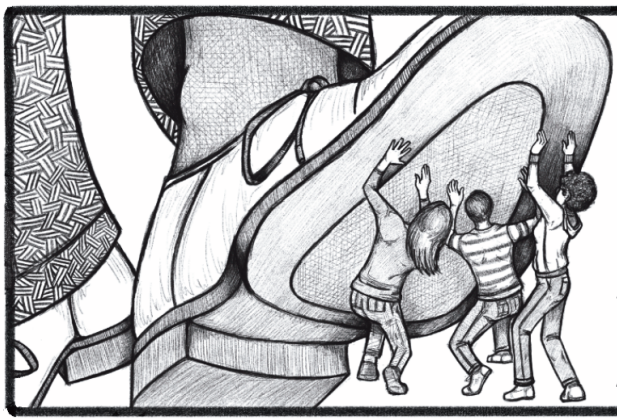
RICHARD FULKERSON

ARGUED FOR STUDENTS TO BRING THEMSELVES TO THEIR WRITING, LEADING TO THE I-SEARCH PAPER

SELF-APPOINTED WHITE KNIGHT DEFENDING WRITING PEDAGOGY FROM CRITICAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES

FOR CREW AND NORTON, COMBATING THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION MEANS TRANSFORMING SOCIETY INTO "A COMMUNITY THAT WILL GROW RICH BY ACCOMMODATING SEXUAL PLURALISM." IN MOVING TOWARD PLURALISM, ENGLISH STUDIES HAS A ROLE TO PLAY: INSTITUTIONS, DEPARTMENTS, AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD MAKE SPACE FOR QUEER PEOPLE TO ADDRESS OUR EXPERIENCES AND TO CREATE POLICIES THAT SUPPORT RATHER THAN DISAPPEAR OR DENIGRATE OUR LIVES.

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION, WE HAVE SEEN A SLOW, UNEVEN MARCH TOWARD LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES. TODAY, HOWEVER, BIGOTED POLITICIANS AND ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS THE U.S. HAVE RE-ASSERTED THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION ALONGSIDE RACIST AND TRANSPHOBIC IMAGINATIONS.



FEW EXAMPLES POINT TOWARD THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THESE IMAGINATIONS AS CLEARLY AS FLORIDA GOVERNOR RON DESANTIS'S "WAR ON WOKE."

THROUGH THE "STOP WOKE ACT," THE "DON'T SAY GAY BILL," THE "LICENSE TO DISCRIMNATE IN HEALTHCARE BILL," AND DOZENS OF OTHERS LAWS, DESANTIS HAS TARGETED BLACK PEOPLE, TRANS FOLKS, AND QUEERS.

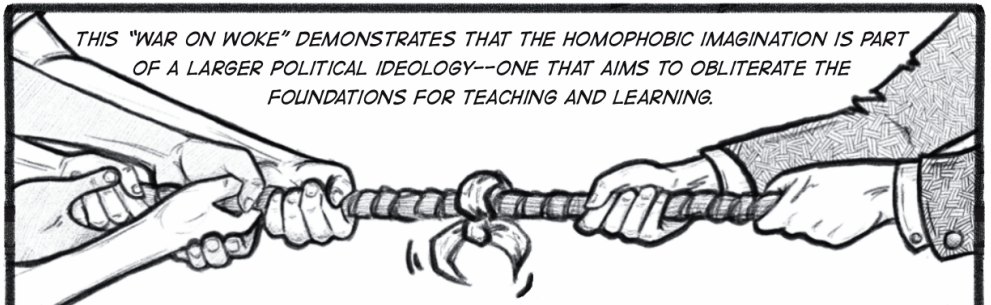
DESANTIS'S WAR HAS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, AND SOUTHERN STATES LIKE TEXAS AND TENNESSEE HAVE LED THE CHARGE.

← my former home
55 ANTI-LGBTQ+ BILLS IN 2023

← my current home

26 ANTI-LGBTQ+ BILLS IN 2023


THIS "WAR ON WOKE" DEMONSTRATES THAT THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION IS PART OF A LARGER POLITICAL IDEOLOGY--ONE THAT AIMS TO OBLITERATE THE FOUNDATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING.



FIGHTING BACK AGAINST THE HOMOPHOBIC IMAGINATION IN ENGLISH STUDIES HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BROADER STRUGGLE TO ESTABLISH GREATER DEMOCRACY THROUGH EDUCATION.

# Alcoholics Anonymous and Its Homophobic Imagination

Danielle Bacibianco

I invite you, readers of *College English*, researchers, and friends in recovery, to reflect on the impact that Alcoholics Anonymous' collective collusion has had on the fundamental silencing of its queer members—queer folks seeking twelve-step recovery, who, like me, have experienced "this self-suppressed homosexual sensibility" (Crew and Norton, "Homophobic" 278).

* * *

To My Fellows in Alcoholics Anonymous,

To write about my experiences with homophobia in Alcoholics Anonymous is to also write about how I learned to be silent for the sake of survival, *again*.

At the peak of my alcoholism, I finally came out of the closet only to go back in again, through what Louie Crew and Rictor Norton describe as "brutal forms of degradation" ("Homophobic" 273). When I got sober, AA became a new closet through the "increasingly familiar story" (273) of suppressing my queer identity and sexuality. And because my life literally depended on it, I did not immediately see how AA was another enclave of misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia. *First things first*.[3]

Homophobia is a violence that only serves the patriarchy. I remember how young I was when I began to notice the way my uncle would firmly press his hands on me and hold me in place. He would talk down to me, to let me know that he was "the man," that I was not liked. I reflect on that forced shame and fear, his egregious tactics of intimidation and silencing. I've always known my place, to be dominated, to serve the system. I share that reminder because his patriarchal violence simply mirrors the same way I would come to later learn "the man" in AA.

Homophobia and transphobia are easily justified just about anywhere in America, and most certainly in the church basements of AA meetings in Staten Island, New York.

*Easy does it.*

And though the core practice in AA is oral storytelling, ironically, I experienced "the inability to speak in one's authentic voice" along with the "struggle against suffocation" (Crew and Norton, "Homophobic" 274). As a masc-of-center, gender-nonconforming lesbian, I was silenced in AA. The man in AA stepped on my throat. *Stick with the winners.*

Oppression is patriarchally motivated in AA's cis-hetero narrativization of its master narrative, "Bill's Story," the origin story of its cofounder, Bill Wilson (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 1–16). I've spent most of my sobriety in AA "ungaying" my recovery story so that it would fit neatly within AA prescriptiveness. I never truly achieved authenticity in my own AA qualification because I was afraid to fail the community narrative: the fifteen- to twenty-minute *experience, strength, and hope* retelling of *what it was like* (before AA), *what happened* (AA program/steps), and *what it's like now* (life with AA today). *Progress not perfection.*

I learned the script.

"Hi, my name is Danielle, and I'm an alcoholic. My sober date is November 12, 2011, and it is by the grace of God that I have not thought of a drink since. I have a sponsor, who has a sponsor, who has a sponsor. I am also a sponsor today. I have a service commitment. I actively work the steps and continue to practice these principles in all my affairs. I choose to stay in the center of the triangle of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA gave me a solution and a relationship with a Higher Power." . . . *Let go and let God.*

I thought I only had a story because of AA.

Personalizing "Bill's Story" taught me how to "find religion" in the program's patriarchal hierarchy. I learned how to be likable in AA while dying inside, as Lacy M. Johnson says in her essay "On Likability":

> The pressure to remain likable exerts power over us . . . keeps us from doing this hard work, keeps us from telling the truth. . . . We tell lies to survive and to fit in . . . [W]e constrict our stories because we are told they do not deserve to occupy space in the world.

In AA, I learned to tell a version of my story in order to survive. I altered my story so much it no longer became mine. *Everyone loves a good redemption story.*

I'll never forget the first time I was asked (allowed) to tell my qualification at a midnight candlelight meeting, as I then had ninety days of sobriety. I thought it went pretty well: both verbal and nonverbal signals of identification and laughter occurred as I was standing in front of that room telling my story. After the meeting, my sponsor mocked me, saying I needed to work on giving *the message of AA* and not to tell a "lesbian drunkalogue" (because I had gotten too honest about the things I did and the places my alcoholism took me: dark corners of gay bars, hooking up in the bathrooms of Henrietta Hudson, cocaine nights at Deko, car crashes, getting arrested, etc.). *Keep it simple.*

I realized then that the way I would tell my story in AA would be continually assessed and measured against how well I translated the anti-gay narrative

markers of the AA's story paradigm, how well I proved "what a sober woman looks like." *AA is not something you join, it's a way of life.*

I was allowed to be in AA, just not "too gay" in AA.

I learned that in order to be fully in AA, I had to become subjugated—I protected its traditions,[4] its symbols, its heteronormative history, its expectations of normative gender performance, its rhetoric, its ideologies. What I learned as "text" in AA became the intermediary that would guide me toward ubiquity in the program. I learned how to uphold the patriarchy of AA. *Principles before personalities.*

This dangerous culture assisted the program's patriarchal literacy borders. I, too, became complicit, through what Audre Lorde says to be a "range of pretended choices and reward for identifying with the patriarchal power and its tools" (119). I drank the Kool-Aid.

When I shared my qualification at meetings, I substituted phrases—"my girlfriend" with "significant other"—and covered up queer literacies with euphemisms and AA slogans or sayings like "outside issues." I learned how to code-switch within AA's hegemonic and homophobic attitudes and values, signaling the only way to survive in the program was through its Christian-based rhetoric. Around my one year of sobriety, I was invited to be the newcomer speaker at the annual spiritual breakfast. I had grown out my hair, I showed up wearing a dress and a cross around my neck, with the AA Big Book in hand. I proved I was a sober woman. I had shared my qualification in front of a room of three hundred Staten Island AA-ers. I learned that the only way to achieve agency within AA was to never express myself in my truest (queerest) form. *Keep coming back.*

It was so convincing I believed it too.

And initially, because of its cultish indoctrination, I could not see another way. You learn how well (or how not so well) you spoke at a meeting based on the shares around the room, who's in the room, and what's being unsaid. At times, I have been hypersexualized and verbally and sexually violated by patriarchal old-timer members, by those who the program deems as "guardians of the traditions." *Through discomfort we grow.*

I was taught to *practice patience, kindness, love, and tolerance to all those who I would come in contact with*, even the members who showed up to meetings wearing "Make America Great Again" hats because, you know, *take what you need and leave the rest*. On Zoom AA meetings, I've even been repeatedly asked to take down my pronouns because *we have no opinion on outside issues*. No matter how well I spoke or how much I knew about AA discourse or its

culture or literature, I was inhibited by the reality that I knew that my body was constantly being read when I was in its rooms. *Live and let live.*

I had found a way to create a character of myself in AA in response to my voicelessness, through the subtle acts of AA's colloquial gaslighting. I was afraid my sobriety would be compromised if I did otherwise. I thought I found my hallelujah. *Acceptance is the answer to all our problems today.*

But I just wanted to tell my story too.

Writing my dissertation was what saved my life as a queer person and survivor of lifelong homophobic trauma. And it is only through (continually) doing autoethnography that I am able to create "gay space" in AA and queer recovery community literacy.

I realized that I've *always* had a story. I don't only have a recovery story because of AA.

How do you expect us to find unity and fellowship in a program that continues to facilitate violence by pressuring us to serve and accept its homophobia?

Let me be clear: we create spaces in AA and recovery-adjacent communities that embrace and affirm our lived experiences and radical histories in order to reclaim our silenced voices. It is why we *create the fellowship we seek* because we don't feel safe. It is why I cofounded a queer-inclusive, online LGBTQIA+ meeting and why I created the podcast *Voices from Rock Bottom*, to disrupt hegemony, to do public rhetorical activism, to create "gay space." We deserve to feel safe; to feel seen; to have our realities, identities, and contexts affirmed.

We know how important community is for survival, before most of us came to AA.

The alternative means death.

I hope in the act of reading this letter you can see that I am attempting to demonstrate unity and create community through the act of sharing my experience as a queer sober person. I hope this letter creates a deeper understanding of the collective harm and subsequent violence that we have experienced as queer members in AA. *Be part of the solution, not the problem.*

When we embrace our queer identities and experiences, voices, and stories—when we tell our queerstory of recovery (Bacibianco) in all spaces, that's when queer liberation is radically imaginable. *Pass it on.*

To thine own self be true,
"Danielle B."

# Centering Queer Possibilities from Liberation to the Everyday Mentoring of Writers

Harry Denny and Travis Webster

When *College English* published *The Homosexual Imagination*, a new generation of writing centers were emerging in response to social, cultural, and educational movements that centered BIPOC, GI Bill recipients, and working-class and first-generation students. Decades ago, writing center scholar Elizabeth H. Boquet cautioned against the unresolved realities of this open-admissions era (475)—an adjacent moment to the 1974 publication—given higher education's relative evasion of proactively supporting these diverse students. A quarter-century later, these realities persist, more acute as postsecondary education becomes more critical for financial security in a postmillennial United States. Some fifty years after the publication of *The Homosexual Imagination*, we shudder at the likenesses among national and global backdrops and at the continued failure to celebrate diverse bodies in higher education. Homing in on the "hostile" descriptor that surfaces in the special issue, we find it chilling that the lessons of the past seem increasingly lost in the present, as diversity, equity, inclusion, and access initiatives are dissolved; as affirmative action, voting rights, and reproductive rights are rolled back; and as healthcare remains political and stigmatized. Against this backdrop, the status of teaching, learning, and research in the orbit of today's writing centers remains dubious despite their ubiquity, but these centers are still full of promise, especially as we take notice of hope in the past collection.

We write from positions at leading research-intensive universities, where our units occupy secure positions in institutional, departmental, and programmatic cultures. They exist in relatively moderate to conservative statewide geopolitical environments, where the conscience clauses or neofascist conservatives have not yet begun to influence our everyday practices as they have in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere. Our writing centers are, perhaps, comfortable. Yet, in those moments of comfort, we realize our supposed security's fleeting nature, especially as we look to a time not that long ago that cautions against complacency, as Louie Crew and Rictor Norton did. We find that writing center lessons may teach broader English studies about overcoming, thriving, and queer world-making when paired with the hopeful and cautionary insight of our 1970s "homosexual" colleagues. We think of writing center colleagues facing backlash for challenging racist writing or pedagogy or for suggesting writers avoid gender bias in writing, aware that leaders who center nonnormative practices are still quite revolutionary. Like-

wise, we see growing tensions as writing center leaders leverage expertise about languaging politics to support campus writers in environments that default to bifurcated notions of writing quality, vernacular, and expression. Such actions are no small feat. While neoconservative movements no longer actively oppose our personhood as governmentally recognized identities, they also seek to push us back into closets, reminiscent of the stifling life before 1970s liberation movements. But how does the chant of Crew's and Norton's time ("Out of the closets and into the streets!") translate, when so many in writing centers—and English studies practitioners at large—face contingent employment, winnowing funding, and downsizing institutions?

Despite its limitations, the 1974 issue centers hope for English studies and for modern writing centers. A contingent worker, Anonymous, discloses their trying experiences with English doctoral work, while also arguing for better futures for the discipline ("Some Notes"). Such a message has resonance today, as modern writing centers are often led by contingent workers (The Writing Center Research Project) against tumultuous backdrops in English departments and beyond. And when we read Jacob Stockinger's encouragement, drawing from Oscar Wilde, to read dangerously beyond the textual surface to discover and celebrate oft-erased gay worlds and gay people (303), we see guidance for today, well beyond how literature is read and written about. From this past imagination, we see opportunities for leaning into writing center subversions that reflect similar orientations to the issue's queer imagination. Such subversion looks like queer, peer-to-peer moments that support marginalized students navigating oppressive university structures (Denny). It looks like listening to working-class students whose articulated needs challenge long-established writing center orthodoxies (Denny, Nordlof, and Salem). It looks like imagining possibility in modern centers during times of global crises (Giacomo). It looks like counterstorying in order to celebrate oft-erased writing center voices of color (Faison and Condon). It looks like administrative praxis that centers BIPOC wisdom (Morrison and Garriott). From these theorists, one-to-one, peer-to-peer writing support and its administrative stewardship may help writers and workers of nonnormative bodies question and navigate the hostile animal that is higher education. Such queer action is about reading, responding, and acting within and beyond the surface of a "text" (e.g., the university), as the 1974 collection made space for.

We look to the centers of that era for modern stewardship. Since 1974, histories of writing centers have been written about widely (Boquet; Lerner), while the presence of them is nearly taken for granted on today's campuses. Then and now, writing centers are spaces where institutions, curriculum, and the teaching and learning of writing intersect and collide. Tutors chan-

nel the sociocultural regulation of faculty and institutions in order to gesture as and with learners and writers who seek support. Centers can be noisy and disruptive as well as offer solace from parts of university life, while also often being overdetermined by institutionalized, straight, and oppressive politics of higher education (Boquet). In short, writing centers were what they have always been: historically and fabulously queer, disruptive, and responsive, despite and, perhaps, because of their institutionalization. Writing centers may even be safe, so to speak, in modern universities because of their institutionalization. A perceived university fix-it shop has power in that problematic perception, operating in plain sight but under the radar. Such a benign identifier may offer avenues for transformational change. In this vein, transformational change could look like Rebecca Hallman Martini's call for writing center administrators to embrace university partnerships with unlikely places and people—an action through which subversive, transformational activities are possible, she argues (17–19). By extension, writing center leaders may employ subversive thinking by advocating for progressive languaging practices through faculty consultations. It also could mean everyday policies that respect the pronouns and names students bring to sessions.

In the late 1970s, Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first openly gay supervisor, was assassinated alongside Mayor George Mascone by Dan White, who was later convicted of manslaughter, instead of murder, on account of his infamous Twinkie defense. In the days that followed, protestors clashed with local police chanting, "Out of the bars and into the streets!" Part call to action, part awareness of the complacency of the time (an assumed postliberation moment), the words resonated in the years that followed. A dawning health crisis around a virulent virus would draw attention to governmental inaction and would prompt greater action, organization, and change. Criminalizing same-sex activity would fall away as antidiscrimination and legal recognition of our relationships rose. Another period of complacency would culminate in today's movements on the right to roll back society to a time before the Civil Rights Movement and identity-based collective action. While less dramatic and visible, writing centers have enacted similar sorts of change and stasis, the latter of which might imperil their futures. Along with our allies across writing and English studies, we, in writing center studies, must craft a rhetoric and a vision that secures our future while centering ways to make "good trouble," as John Lewis called it (qtd. in Reeves). We need to move from our centers and get into the sheets and streets, as the editors and authors of *The Homosexual Imagination* suggest. We think the sexual liberatory demand to exist and flourish extends to how we embody queer lives at our sites, but it

also declares a need for that activism beyond the supposed safe harbors of campus life. We must redouble efforts for linguistic justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and belonging, all of which ought to be operationalized in everyday writing centers.

## Notes

1. Within queer communities, cruising describes the discrete search for sex, often anonymous and casual. Scholars like Muñoz (*Cruising*) and Bermingham use cruising as a critical concept to explore the pleasure of possibilities, never knowing if an encounter will occur. Here, I'm also invoking Marinara, Alexander, Banks, and Blackmon's use of the term when searching (mostly without finding) LGBTQIA+ representation in composition textbooks.

2. It gives me a sort of queer pleasure knowing Fulkerson and I share an alma mater (separated by fifty years) as well as an institutional affiliation. What would Dick think about me—a queer rhetorician—having an office down the hall from his?

3. The italicized phrases throughout this letter play on AA's dominant cultural and rhetorical practices and slogans, which one can hear at meetings and find in AA's literature (primarily known as "The Big Book" but officially titled *Alcoholics Anonymous*).

4. The Alcoholics Anonymous program has twelve traditions in addition to the twelve steps for the program. The traditions are guiding principles that were created to ensure unity and cooperation between members in groups, the entire Alcoholics Anonymous organization, and our larger global society. For more information, refer to *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

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