

2006

## Passing/Out in Texas: The Challenges of Progressive Pedagogy in Conservative Climates

Jaclyn Pryor

*Haverford College*, [jpryor@haverford.edu](mailto:jpryor@haverford.edu)

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Jaclyn Pryor. "Passing / Out in Texas: The Challenges of Progressive Pedagogy in Conservative Climates" *Theatre Topics* 16 (1): 65-84. 2006.

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# Passing / Out in Texas: The Challenges of Progressive Pedagogy in Conservative Climates<sup>1</sup>

*Jaclyn Pryor*

I did not like or appreciate the gay and lesbian theater lecture. This lecture was a mouthpiece for liberalism and a sorry attempt to push a homosexual agenda. If Ms. Pryor wanted to be political, she should have taught government.

—Anonymous Student<sup>2</sup>

I feel as if I am going to keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing.

—Bernice Johnson Reagan, "Coalition Politics" 356

Let's face it. We are undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.

—Judith Butler, "Global Violence, Sexual Politics" 200

## **Introduction**

During the 2004–2005 academic (and election) year, I taught TD301, Introduction to Theater for Non-Majors, at The University of Texas-Austin.<sup>3</sup> Though I had upwards of three hundred and fifty students enrolled in my course each semester—each intent upon fulfilling the University's distribution requirement in the arts—I conducted my class in ways similar to a seminar. I compiled a course reader. I tried to learn names. I facilitated discussions. Though I came to each class prepared with a PowerPoint presentation, often beginning with a minilecture that historically contextualized the day's topic, the majority of the class time was spent doing close readings of "the text" together. The slides contained key quotations that I had pulled from the reading and accompanying questions that I hoped would guide our lecture-*cum*-discussion. Often, I had student volunteers join me "on stage," acting out exercises that I had devised to clarify theories; other times, selected students acted out scenes from assigned plays so that we could discuss them in closer detail.

Since I structured class largely around open-ended questions and experiential exercises, and I couldn't always anticipate what students' responses would be or their performances would look like, I would characterize my pedagogical style, though in many ways rehearsed, as highly improvisational. Prioritizing response over intent is a practice of feminist pedagogy (see Case), and a poten-

tially exhilarating one—I never could know what to expect, and I was often surprised by my students’ smart and incisive comments, the unexpected turns that intellectual conversations would take, and how thoughts and feelings got mapped out and folded back on one another in pleasing ways. Sometimes, however, feminist pedagogy made me vulnerable; prioritizing response over intent would destabilize me in frightening ways, creating tiny disturbances that knocked me temporarily off balance. During our discussion of Anna Deavere Smith’s work, for instance, it became clear to me that some students had not previously conceived of identity as performative—a doing, a feeling, a practice—but rather something somehow stable, fixed, coherent, and discrete.

Off the cuff, then, speaking parenthetically and attempting to make connections between theatrical performance and everyday life, the avant garde and the popular, I asked the class to consider the then recent October 2004 presidential debates as a site of performativity: “What identities do you see being constructed and performed by the candidates?” From the back of the classroom, one (white female) student screamed, at the top of her lungs, “Bush rocks!” This comment reverberated in the lecture room for a few seconds, followed by ostensibly affirmative hoots, cheers, laughter, and applause from, as best as I could assess it, about two thirds of the students in the room, or two hundred fifty. They were loud and charged up with what felt like rage or indignation, and they were staring at *me*: it felt like one of those pedagogical hijack moments in which students reveal themselves to you in an instantaneous flash, as a powerful critical mass. Unsure of how to respond, I asked the student her name (Megan),<sup>4</sup> and encouraged her to articulate more cogently what she meant by “Bush Rocks.” She continued, “It just shouldn’t matter if a president is a good public speaker.” I pressed on, trying to remain nonpartisan, asking her to think more critically about the way each candidate presented himself as the ideal of that thing we have come to call “American.” She was silent. I asked if anyone disagreed with her statement. The entire room fell silent and felt, to me, a little menacing. No one said a word. My TAs stared at me and at each other. What would be a good segue, I wondered, back to *Fires in the Mirror*?<sup>5</sup>

I am a doctoral student in the Performance as Public Practice Program at UT; as such, I bring to my teaching an interest in the relationship between performance and cultural studies and a desire to engage in progressive pedagogy that teaches theatre as an expressive art and, through it, demands a critical awareness of and engagement with the histories and complexities of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation that shape the world in which artistic work is made and that inspire, too, artistic work to shape it back. Quoting Elin Diamond, I frequently reminded my students that “theater makes culture discussable” (9)—theatre, in this sense, becomes methodology as well as subject of study.

Describing the aims of progressive pedagogy and advocating teaching as a site of activism, Jill Dolan<sup>6</sup> writes,

I consider myself a “progressive” teacher for a number of reasons. First, I believe that teaching is activism, that changing students’ consciousness is important to contesting social and cultural structures that perpetuate gender, race and ethnic, class, and sexual inequities. I believe that teaching students how ideology works, whether in women’s studies, gay and lesbian

studies, or theater studies, allows them to engage critically with the various discourses they encounter and by which they are shaped. (*Geographies* 120)

As a feminist, queer, and antiracist teacher engaged in everyday practices of progressive pedagogy,<sup>7</sup> I, like Dolan, see teaching as a site of intervention in which the classroom becomes a place to think and question together about, among other things, the ways in which “ideology works” to commit violence against marginalized bodies. Embedded in this project of progressive pedagogy, then, is also the belief that the classroom is a part of what feminist geographer Nancy Fraser, building upon Habermas, has described as the affective dimension of the “public sphere”: a space both inside and outside of the state apparatus, a space in which, through discursive acts of intersubjectivity such as talking, listening, looking, thinking, feeling, and exchanging (not things but) ideas together, individuals become constituted as a group and students as citizens of an imagined public.<sup>8</sup> While many of my students did embrace citizen-scholarship in this sense, others resisted it—feminism, critical race theory, and queer politics that laced the structure and content of the course challenged the structuring principles of many of their lives. What, then, are some effective strategies for teaching critical cultural thinking to nearly four hundred people at once without turning more conservative students off to the work? Even more specifically, what are some effective strategies for teaching critical cultural thinking about queer performance and culture as a queer person oneself? If, as Elizabeth Grosz has argued, bodies do in fact leak, does a leaking (queer) body limit pedagogical efficacy in certain contexts?

While I never formally came out to my students (but, as will become apparent in the essay that follows, I did strategically come out to individuals), by the point in the semester that we reached the unit on lesbian, gay, and queer theatre, most of my students had already sensed it. The way a teacher looks, Janet Davis has recently argued, is “deeply laden with values [. . .] it’s not even so much what we say, but the visual spectacle of who we are.”<sup>9</sup> My language, my dress, my gestures, my voice, the ease with which I was able to teach this unit in particular (though due more to my academic training and theatre-going than my sexual practices), were evidence to some that there was something a bit “queer” about me.<sup>10</sup> So while I never formally came out to my students as a lesbian, my queerness loomed large in the lecture room, impacting upon my pedagogical efficacy in ways I will detail in this essay. It is necessary to note, too, that of all the various inflections of negative criticism that I received and archived over the course of the year—emails, surveys, and evaluation forms that disparaged the “liberal,” “feminist,” and “queer” aspects of the course—not one student made mention of the progressive racial politics of the classroom, though race was as equally foregrounded as gender and sexuality as a site of critical interrogation. Why and how was I able, as a white woman, to adopt progressive racial politics in the classroom in ways, perhaps, that a person of color could not, and why and how was I unable, as a lesbian and feminist, to adopt feminist or antihomophobic politics without it seeming like a (merely) personal agenda?<sup>11</sup> How does my perceived identity and the proximity of this identity to dominant power situate me, from my students’ perspective, as in the case of race somehow inherently unbiased, neutral, an ally, but in the case of gender and sexuality somehow inherently biased, extremist, an adversary?<sup>12</sup> How do you teach when you are perceived as an adversary and when, too, you begin to feel like one? What, in short, is to be done when you feel undone?

In brief, I am interested in parsing out the ways in which the public and private got entangled in my performance of pedagogy and my students' reception of it and, as the opening quote so clearly demonstrates, the ways in which my activist pedagogy was read as "liberal" politics and those politics conflated with my queer identity, and how all three of these entanglements somehow interfered with my students' desires for this course to be normatively pleasurable, intellectually easy, and politically vacant. To this end, certain aspects of my pedagogy—particularly those which required discursive representations of (homo)sexualities—were met with resistance.

### **Rethorizing Resistance**

In archiving and theorizing resistance, I rely upon my reception of my students' reception of the course material and of me in the form of oral, written, and kinesthetic feedback I received and perceived over the course of the year. In theorizing resistance, I am also enacting what Jane Gallop has called "anecdotal theory," a kind of theorizing which "honors the uncanny detail of lived experience" (2).<sup>13</sup> In addition to theorizing the anecdote as always already rife with meaning, anecdotal theory also "anecdotalize[s] theory—[making] theorizing more aware of its moment, more responsible to its erotics, and at the same time, if paradoxically, both more literary and real" (11). In short, I (de)posit anecdotes here with the hope that they will mean and do something real as well as poetical, hoping that the affective charge of my anecdotes will sometimes stand in for theory as well as alongside it. And while I use the term "resistance" to theorize this insidious rub of personal and political, private and public, me, them, and the world in which we live by detailing the ways in which my classroom became a site for this highly charged performance, I do want to foreground that my account here is strategically partial—many of my students did not resist learning at all. Instead of this essay theorizing resistance, I just as easily could have constructed an argument about those students who have been seduced into the pleasures of radical thinking—their emails filled my inbox, as well—I could have written about the ways in which my classroom became a space of counterpublic discourse and what José Muñoz has called "humanist world-making."<sup>14</sup> This essay, then, is one version of many that could be written about my experience teaching this particular course. I choose to write about resistance, in particular, because I think it reveals a great deal about pedagogy writ large and serves as an index for some of the challenges of public life.

Resistance is often characterized as an unquestioned social good and an expression of intellectual emancipation, whereby the individual (e.g., the student) has overcome the determining and detrimental effects of ideological institutions (religious, corporate, media, etc). In retheorizing the concept of resistance in reception studies, however, scholar David Sholle critiques this poststructuralist, cultural studies model which insists that "resistance springs from individual difference and agency" (83). Sholle questions the simplicity of this model and the way it positions the individual apart from the society in which she lives. He suggests that before we romanticize act(s) of resistance, we first ask, "Why is any act of resistance significant in the first place?" (87). Making a move from the "how" to the "why" of reception theories, Sholle encourages us to interrogate what otherwise invisible circuits of power and knowledge resistance can reveal. Flashes of resistance, even when enacted privately by

individual students—such as the “Bush Rocks” incident—strike me not as independent actions but manifestations of larger constellations of public feelings, evidence that social imaginaries have seeped into the space of my classroom. In this sense, I am constructing my students as cultural (re)producers who, in the words of Janice Radway, “fashion narratives, stories, objects, and practices from myriad bits and pieces of prior cultural production” (362). Here, I do not wish to position my students as cultural dupes, nor do I want to pathologize them, but I do want to suggest that my classroom, as part of the public sphere, is neither an original nor a contained space. It might be what Lauren Berlant has called an “intimate public sphere,” a space where the political and the personal “collapse [. . .] into a world of public intimacy” (1). Ultimately, then, it is my performing body—as teacher—that becomes the prime(al) site for enacting official national affects and affiliations, such as queer violence, anxiety, panic, and fear.<sup>15</sup> And while I remain dedicated to and invested in strategies of progressive pedagogy, I believe it important to recognize its challenges and limits in certain academic contexts. To this end, I offer a close reading of one particular(ly) (porous) site—my Introduction to Theater class—in which such strategies did not always work.

In my attempt to unglamorize resistance, I do want to offer one caveat. What, in the words of Diana Taylor, might be the “staying power” (5) of activist pedagogy in spite of (or because of) its ostensible failures? In what ways is resistance a temporary performance and “being undone” a necessary step in the process of redoing? Here, I wish to invoke George Chauncey, who argues why, as queer and progressive teachers and scholars, we want and should want to change our students.

We are engaged in a deep struggle over the future of this society—over social reproduction in the broadest sense—and that is why we, as academics, are not and cannot be just observers and commentators from the sidelines, but are necessary on one of the forefronts of that struggle. Teachers and scholars, after all, educate [the] children [of the conservative Right], and the control of children is one of the central issues in this struggle [. . .] We aren’t going to molest or seduce their children [. . .] but [. . .] *we do want to change their children*. And by our presence as openly gay educators whose every word and action challenges the demonization of homosexuals and bisexuals, *we will change their children*. As educators, gay and straight, who express our respect for gay people and who show students how homosexuality has been a part of our culture and other cultures, and who give people the skills and the predisposition to develop a critical analysis of their world, *we will change their children*. When we say we want to educate young people, we are saying, like all other educators, that we want to change them. (312, original emphasis)

Transforming the social imaginary of gay teacher as child molester into gay teacher as cultural worker, Chauncey suggests that, as queer educators, we are in a uniquely powerful position to change students’ relations to “their world” by our presence, words, and actions. What Chauncey is not arguing however—and I think it important to rehearse this distinction here—is that, as queer educators, we are hoping to change students’ specific political affiliations, to create new ideologies, newly (read “liberally”) enlightened subjects. On the contrary, progressive pedagogy, the kind that I am attempting to theorize, is defined as a

process of becoming, as a practice of critical analysis and intellectual and emotional engagement—what Bernice Johnson Reagan calls “coalescing.” Coalescing, by definition, is an active struggle. Can acts of resistance, then, be read as generative and moments when the classroom becomes a space of crisis, productive?<sup>16</sup>

### **Spaces of Crisis / Structures of Looking**

In her foundational and highly debated article on the male gaze, Laura Mulvey suggests that certain “structures of looking” produce voyeuristic pleasures in the viewing spectators. This pleasure, she argues, is partly predicated on the invisibility of the spectator in relation to the hypervisibility of the object of gaze. Building upon Mulvey’s assertion that “the spectator has the privilege of invisibility, looking without being looked at” (cited in Stacey 18), in what ways does the physical structure of my classroom space produce spectatorial invisibility that, while positioning the spectators as seemingly insubordinate, actually situates them safely within what Jackie Stacey has called “the dominant patriarchal system of visual representation” (21)? How does what David Morley calls the “social architecture” of my classroom and the surrounding space—the “context of viewing” (26)—structure looking and, by extension, structure thinking and feeling? In what easily overlooked ways are my students physically and psychically positioned as power agents and I as vulnerable? How might this positionality support a culture of resistance, reinforcing dominant power positions and destabilizing my attempts at transgression?<sup>17</sup>

The classroom in which I taught is Jester A121A—often referred to simply as “Jester”—situated on the first floor of Jester Hall, a postwar brick complex replete with undergraduate dorms, the Center for African and African American Studies, Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, Pizza Hut, Smoothie King, a grocery store, a piano bar, FedEx and UPS offices, and its very own ZIP code. Tucked into the corner of this complex, Jester is attached to no particular departmental home and exists instead as a flexible space, my class flanked by “Anthro” at 9:00 and “Chem” at 11:00. The spatial configuration of the auditorium reflects the scale of the entire building and, in some ways, mirrors the physical design of a large proscenium theatre: my students sat in a four-hundred-seat raked house, their cushioned fold-up chairs bolted to the floor and facing a raised stage. I faced them, standing on the apron of the stage, costumed to appear professional, and wearing a lapel microphone that boomed my voice through an invisible sound system. Two gigantic screens onto which I projected my PowerPoint slides served as scenic backdrop. The geography of the room placed my students literally below and at a great distance from me (the students in the front row were more than thirty feet away; those in the back were upwards of two hundred feet away), as well as in an awkward relationship with one another, bound to immovable seating. In essence, all eyes were upon me.

On the surface, it would seem that the social geography of the classroom placed me in a position of dominance: I stood alone, facing them, above them; I was free to move around; technology supported my voice and ideas. And this, while true, does not accurately represent the “structure of feeling,” to borrow from Raymond Williams, of standing before four hundred students in a giant lecture auditorium. First and foremost, it is important to underscore the fact that

they were a critical mass; the potential for a kind of radical overthrow always existed and was felt. They could come and go as they pleased (and did), some packing up and leaving mid-class—and in thunderous hordes at that—with little regard for those who chose to remain. Some talked, whispered, passed notes, and made fun, or refused to talk, read, or engage with course material; due to the size of the class, they suffered few consequences. Perhaps most insidiously, however, they could remain entirely anonymous to me and to one another, though I could not to them. Even as some students engaged in public articulations of resistance—such as anonymously-sent emails and University-sanctioned Course Instructor Survey (CIS) forms—they remained cloaked in the powerful protection of “spectatorial invisibility.” The student who wrote on the anonymous survey that I was pushing a homosexual agenda reveals more than a fear that such an agenda exists; more than a suspicion that I have a stake in and am capitalizing upon my position as teacher to push it; more than a conviction that a theatre classroom is not a place for serious, political agenda-making in the first place. Reading between the lines, it’s not difficult to argue that this student suspects that not only do I have a personal investment in “the gay agenda”—one that transcends a professional or intellectual interest and has something more to do with personal gain, a prurient interest, perhaps—but that the University officials who read these anonymous surveys should know about this transgression and, one would hope, police it. More to the point, it is no accident that this survey, which was submitted shortly after our unit on censorship and the case of the “NEA Four,” overtly ventriloquizes assaults wielded by Senator Jesse Helms, the Moral Majority, and others against Karen Finley, John Fleck, Tim Miller, and Holly Hughes. These assaults—in the service of a similarly sanctioned policing of decency—became the subject matter of *Preaching to the Perverted*, Hughes’s parodic one-woman retelling of her now infamous appearance before “The Supremes.” It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that during this lecture I read aloud from the section in Hughes’s play in which she frantically rifles through a cardboard box in search of “the gay agenda” that she has been accused of having; later, I asked students to detail the ways in which Hughes employs parody as a political and performance strategy. That this anonymous student would then recycle this sound-bite in a critique of our class says a great deal about the ways in which words can and do get hijacked in the current political climate; about the pervasive power of language to host ideology; and, perhaps most significantly, about the ways in which the structures of looking in this classroom set up a circuit of exchange that placed my students in an unexpectedly powerful position, potentially ideal for assault.<sup>18</sup>

### **Radical Contextualization**

In what ways are my students’ intellectual “dispositions,” to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, “transported from other structuring structures?” (qtd. in Johnson 5)? What principles consciously and unconsciously organized and orchestrated their thinking and feeling and, by extension, certain practices of resisting? In his editor’s introduction, Randal Johnson characterizes Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production as a kind of “radical contextualization,” as it “takes into consideration not only works themselves, seen relationally within the space of available possibilities, but also producers of works in terms of their strategies and trajectories, based on their individual and class habitus, as well as their objective position within the field” (9). Many of my students, as I discovered over the

course of the semester, have themselves interesting “trajectories.” They’ve come to UT (population 87,000) and the progressive capital city of Austin (population 700,000) from smaller and more conservative<sup>19</sup> places: suburbs of big Texas cities (such as Dallas and Houston), small cities (Waco, Lubbock, Corpus Christi), and tiny towns in rural regions. I do not wish to categorize all my students as ascribing to any one monolithic political ideology—the reductive Red State / Blue State binary has done enough regionalist damage in this regard. I cannot claim to know what ideologies circulate in their (recently-departed) homes, neighborhoods, and cities, or what access to countercultural discourse they had prior to arriving in Austin. But it seems to me that cultural criticism was new to many of them and, to some, anathema. Matt, a white male music major, who self-identified as “conservative evangelical Christian” from a “small town” in Texas, for instance, approached me after class to explain why he hadn’t taken a quiz that covered lesbian and gay theatre, a unit during which he didn’t read or attend class. In an email to me, he elaborated:

Howdy. Jaelyn, I need to let you know that I went in to take quiz 7 today, but due to the topic matter of the quiz, I did not take it [ . . . ] I did not attend class on the days where ya’ll talked about gay and lesbian theater. On a personal level, I have a big problem with submitting myself to that topic. [The TA] understands that this is a personal matter, and he suggested that I ask you if there was an alternative way I could make up the points for the quiz based upon the fact that half of the questions on quiz 7 are related to this topic. I am sorry for the inconvenience of an additional burden on the last week of class, but I look forward to finding common ground [ . . . ]  
Thank you  
Matt

I replied:

Hi Matt,  
Thanks for your email.  
As I said after class, it is your choice to come or not come to class, to do or not do the reading, to engage or not engage with the course material. However[ . . . ], you must also accept the consequences of those choices. The material that is covered on quiz 7 is not negotiable or optional— it is [ . . . ] required. So, unfortunately, I cannot offer you an alternative way to make up points for that quiz.  
If, as you mentioned after class today, you would still like to take the make up version of quiz #7 [ . . . ] you may[ . . . ], but do know that the make up, like the original, **will** indeed cover lesbian and gay theater[ . . . ].  
Finally, I want to encourage you, Matt, to consider the ways in which this request for an “alternative” quiz is deeply problematic and offensive. While I truly appreciate your candor here and the overall respectfulness of the tone of both your email and our in-class conversation, I must tell you that, as a lesbian, a teacher, and a human being, I find your unwillingness to learn about lesbian and gay theater a personal affront. As far as I am concerned, homophobia is not an acceptable way in which to navigate through college (say nothing of the world)—it is a social bias that needs to be interrogated. The irony of the situation is that had you come to class the day we discussed lesbian and gay theater, or read or seen *Angels [in America]*, you

might have found an opportunity for such interrogation. I hope that you come to consider the possibility that the very aim of your education here at UT is the ability to think in new and critical ways about the world in which we live and challenge your pre-existing assumptions about what does and should constitute this world

[. . .]

All best,

Jaclyn

It occurred to me, in receiving Matt's email and composing my response, that embedded in his argument for an alternative quiz was the assumption that homophobia was a sanctioned excuse for missing class. And in many ways it was.<sup>20</sup> As a relatively socially acceptable form of prejudice, heterosexism and homophobia remain largely uninterrogated in many contexts; their enactments are sponsored everywhere, from transnational legislation to childhood slurs. It is for this reason that I strategically came out to Matt in my email, and it is for this reason, as well, that I encouraged him to consider the relationship between his feelings, actions, and responsibilities as a student / citizen. In my subsequent conversation with Matt, I discovered, too, that he needed this quiz in order to pass the course—he was averaging a “D”—a zero on this quiz would pull him down to a failing grade. He wanted to meet with me—in my tiny office in the basement of the theatre building—to discuss queer theatre. And, in spite of my ostensible assuredness about the whole thing, I worried that the (less public) intimacy of this space, coupled with his discomfort over the erotic charge of the material and, increasingly, mine in delivering it, might be just a little too much coalescing for either of us.

Judith Halberstam, in “The Brandon Archive,” theorizes the fear of sexual imaginaries and the way in which they often circulate in particularly rural contexts. Though aware of the dangers of reinforcing dominant stereotypes of the rural as a backwards, queer dystopia (and, by extension, the mythology of the urban as queer utopia) Halberstam writes,

While no one would want to demonize poor, white, rural Americans as any more bigoted than urban or suburban white yuppie populations in the United States, it is nonetheless important to highlight the particular fears and paranoia that take shape in rural, all-white populations. Fear of the government, fear of the United Nations, and fear of Jews, blacks, and queers mark white rural masculinities in particular ways that can easily produce a culture of hate [. . .] In small towns where few people of color live, difference may be marked and remarked in relation to gender variance rather than racial diversity. (29–30)

Trafficking though she is in an essentialist reading of rural America, Halberstam's attempt to mark white rural masculinities is an important intervention in the current political climate, in which the violence of white masculinity is pervasive and relentless in its (real and imaginary) assaults on queer people and people of color. Moreover, certain performances of white rural masculinity, like that of cowboy / President George W. Bush, adopt the rural as masquerade, encouraging, in the words of Diana Taylor, “false identifications” and sanctioning violent

performances and hate-mongering as official national affect through public policy and speech acts that reinforce the dominant power culture as exclusively white, heterosexual, US-born, Christian, and increasingly anti-intellectual.<sup>21</sup> Individual subjects are encouraged, like Bush himself, to perform identification with this power culture, regardless of their actual identity positions. In this sense, performativity takes a dangerous and destructive turn, and the desire to play the role of the oppressor becomes increasingly seductive, capable of being mapped onto any / body. Many of my students, like (and unlike) Matt, must choose between identifying with the (familiar) dominant power culture and counteridentifying with me (a stranger), or counteridentifying with dominant power culture and identifying instead with me. As a Jew, a lesbian, a woman, and an intellectual, I am, in the current social imaginary, what Butler has called *the abject*: the subject that is not even a subject—less than human, less than real, outside the protection of national or even global citizenship. Without such protection, I become a vulnerable target for dismissal and / or attack.

After our in-class screening of the HBO movie version of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, I received the following anonymous email. The subject heading was “a deep concern.”

Dear Jaclyn Pryor,

i feel that this class is a waste of my time. This class is too concerned with gay and lesbian rights. feminist and queer theatre has norelevance [sic] in the real world. Making us watch graphic gay plays and reading numerous queer scripts has been an absolute waste of my time. I feel we should be studying actual theatre that normal people have intrests [sic] in, such as: oklahoma, les miserables, andrew lloyd weber stuff, or arthur miller. These are real plays, that real people watch. once again, i am disappointed by the liberal staff here at ut. hopefully in the future, this problem can be corrected and future students can avoid this pain.

thank you,

a concerned American

I replied:

Dear Student,

Sorry for the delay in getting back to you [ . . . ] I must say that I find your email deeply disconcerting on many levels. I will try to address my concerns one at a time.

First, I am sorry that you find this course a waste of your time. Had you mentioned this earlier in the semester, I might have encouraged you to drop the course in favor of another survey course (art, music) that you found better suited your academic interests.

Second, as you suggest that this course is “too concerned with gay and lesbian rights” and continue on to state that “feminist and queer theatre has no relevance in the real world,” I think it is important to underscore the distinction between a “rights” discourse (right to vote, right to marry, right to own property, etc.) and feminist and queer analysis of theater. To be specific, this course has never adopted a rights discourse at all (although I do believe, of course, that gay and lesbian people, as human beings, are entitled to human rights). The aim of the course is not political **in this sense**—rather, a feminist or queer analysis of a text is a critical and intel-

lectual project (not a “liberal” one)—the goal of which is breaking through certain patterns of thinking (such as sexism and heterosexism) that block our learning. Unlearning bias is a very political project in its own right, but it toes no party line.

Thirdly, you seem to use the words “real,” “actual,” “normal,” and “relevant” interchangeably here, and set up “feminist and queer theater” (and by extension, feminist and queer people?) as unreal, not actual, abnormal, and irrelevant. As your teacher, I find this comment deeply disappointing, particularly in light of the fact that we have spent so much time questioning terms such as “real” and “normal,” acknowledging the ways in which such language supports oppressive ideologies of hate. Moreover, as a feminist and lesbian myself, I find your insistent use of “real,” “actual,” “normal,” and “relevant” to denote exclusively non-feminist and non-queer theater practices, personally offensive. When we strip artists, or just people in general, of their realness, aren’t we saying that they are less than human? Doesn’t this sanction violence? I can’t (don’t want to) imagine that queer violence is something you would condone or support.

Fourthly[. . .], the musical theater genre (under which falls *LES MIS*, *OKLAHOMA*, and Andrew Lloyd Weber) was largely innovated by gay men (Cole Porter, Leonard Bernstein, Noel Coward, Stephen Sondheim, Tommy Tune . . .) and continues to have a significant lesbian and gay fan base; Arthur Miller was a “liberal” renegade (*THE CRUCIBLE*, for instance, was an allegorical critique of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the McCarthy “witch-hunts” that HUAC sponsored and that we discussed in class — Arthur Miller, who sadly died just a few months ago, will be remembered for his “refusal to name names” of queer, communist, and other radicals before Congress.) That is to say, neither Arthur Miller, Andrew Lloyd Weber, nor the majority of (gay) innovators of American musical theater would actually fall under your definition of “normal.”

Fifthly, I am not sure to what “graphic gay plays” and “numerous queer scripts” you refer other than *ANGELS IN AMERICA*, *ANGELS* being the only play we read that overtly engaged with queer sexualities. It strikes me as interesting to consider, from your perspective, then, what constitutes excess. Why is one queer play too much? And what does it threaten? Heterosexism? Isn’t this a good thing? Should we not study queer theater at all? Should we bar it from the canon? *ANGELS*, I should also note, has received numerous awards (including a Tony Award for Best Play)—is this not evidence of “real” people, indeed, watching it and recognizing its value? Finally, it strikes me as ironic that you signed your email “a concerned American” rather than with your actual name. What, I would ask you to consider, are you “concerned” about, and why must your concern be waged anonymously? Did you know that the email was offensive and not want to put your name behind it? If you knew it was offensive, why did you write it? Why, finally, did you choose to voice your concerns over email rather than in the more public forum of class—a space particularly suited for engaging these very issues of power, relevance, censorship, and citizenship that you raise in this note?

I hope that you consider some of these questions I have posed to you  
[. . .]

Jaclyn Pryor

The nature of academic e-correspondence is such that the private and the public get easily entangled in dangerous ways. This particular email, for instance, delicately nestled between emails from colleagues, friends, and family, landed on my screen at 12:04 a.m., as I was getting ready to go to bed. The light from the computer was the only one illuminating the house, and I remember staring at its glow, frozen, for several minutes before forwarding it to various faculty mentors and imploring their help in crafting a response. In truth, then, the “delay” in my reply, which I note in my opening sentence, was due to the fact that I had, at first, no idea how to respond to this particular email and that in many ways I was beside myself about it. The heated litany that I ultimately sent (to no reply) was my best attempt at, in spite of myself, taking this student’s complaint seriously and responding as his or her *teacher*. So while correspondences such as these are very complex things to address—and equally difficult, it seems, to unpack—it is important nonetheless because they reveal a great deal about habit(us) of thinking. As I pointed out to the student, what strikes me as most significant (and insidious) about this particular email is how, for instance, the words “normal,” “real,” “actual,” and “relevant” are being deployed. As Butler notes, “to be called unreal, and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality” (208). In this anonymous student’s “ostensible reality,” feminist and queer theatre—and, by extension, feminist and queer people—are less than human. How, I am left to ask, can I stand before this student among students and attempt to teach anything (no less queer theatre) if I am not recognized as human, if, in the words of Butler, “[I] find myself speaking only and always *as if [I] were* human, but with the sense that [I am] not.” What is the value of my reply if, as Butler suggests, my “language is hollow?” (209, original emphasis).

My colleague Jennifer Kokai, who taught the 8:00 a.m. section of the same course the same year, expresses similar concerns, stating that “except for the extremes, who make a point of telling me they love me or hate me, I think the majority of my students are apathetic to me and don’t even recognize that I am human. I am like some irritating TV show” (personal correspondence). Kokai, who is also a feminist, suggests that her experience of abjection, like mine, is an index of larger issues of identity politics in the classroom and the culture writ large, but also intimately linked to notions of students’ expectations and desires for pleasure. She also reads it as a marked resistance to the seriousness of play(s).

They probably all hate our incessant talk about politics and identity positions. It’s a horizon of expectations problem. They have a preconceived idea of what the class will be coming into it that bears nothing in common with reality. I’m not even sure what they expect, but they think it will be hugely entertaining and somehow completely apolitical. They don’t expect to have to do any work and they expect me as a lecturer to be even more of a dancing monkey than I am. I honestly can’t figure out what they think would happen in the class—I can’t conceive of how you would teach it that way. But for them theatre equates to easy and sparkly, and we fail to achieve that standard. (personal correspondence)

It is worth noting that Kokai is heterosexual and married. She claims, however, to be read and written as “an angry lesbian” because of her overt feminist poli-

tics and cool affect, a slippage that looms large in public imaginaries. Moreover, Kokai suggests, students expect that a theatre class will be pure fun, an easy ride, and free of politics; attempts to subvert these expectations, coupled with a refusal to act as a “dancing monkey,” are often met with serious alarm.<sup>22</sup>

Of note, too, is that fact that, though certainly no dancing monkey, I frequently used humor to tackle controversial and complicated subjects, particularly those that are often already rife with irony and cultural parody. Muñoz, in his foundational analysis of performance and queers of color, refers to this strategic lampooning of insider and outsider culture at once as “disidentification.” He suggests, as well, that minoritarian subjects—such as queers and people of color—often negotiate a kind “a burden of liveness” when performing before majoritarian publics. He writes:

[There is] a particular hegemonic mandate that calls the minoritarian subject to “be live” for the purposes of entertaining elites. This “burden of liveness” is a cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing her or his alterity as a consumable local spectacle. (182)

I do not wish to suggest that my students were “elites” in the sense that Muñoz describes, and as a white woman, an artist, a scholar, and a US citizen, I have access to larger channels of representation than the stage of Jester A121A. For me, however, Muñoz’s attention to the ways certain subjects are expected to perform alterity for the pleasurable consumption of others seems to resonate with Kokai’s description of teacher as dancing monkey. Following Muñoz’s suggestion of performing “disidentification” as an alternative to this mandate, my pedagogical style was often strategically playful, demonstrating, by example, the ways in which a study of theatre and the politics of performance can be both playful and serious. Here, I challenged what Alan White has called “the social reproduction of seriousness,” a kind of “double exclusion” that suggests that “where knowledge is, play is not; where play is, knowledge is not” (qtd. in Radway 371). What I found, however, is that disidentificatory performatives, and the strategies of parody that disidentification often requires, fell outside the purview of many students’ cultural competencies, reliant as it is upon a whole host of cultural signs and signifiers for successful cultural transmission. Students were also justifiably attuned to the progressive slant of this project and the way it challenged some of their deepest-held beliefs and fears, sometimes expressing their resistance through a strategic rejection of both the playful seriousness of intellectual labor as well as of me, its mouthpiece and synechdotal stand-in.

### **A Conclusion of Sorts: Something Missing**

On a recent panel about “Democracy and the Arts” at the “NEA at 40” Conference at The University of Texas, poet Sekou Sundiata remarked that “among the endangered species [in this nation at this moment in time], imagination is at the top of the list.”<sup>23</sup> He was careful to clarify that by “imagination,” he meant not artistic production but the ability to imagine the experience of others: a practice that one hopes would lead to social change on the level of affect, a change of feeling towards the world, developing “feelings of compassion and

respect” for the other people who inhabit it. Imagination, then, is first and foremost an intellectual project, an act of thinking hard and listening hard, of parsing out truths (if we can use words like “truth”) from fictions, feelings from ideologies, futures from presents and pasts and, at the same time, an ability to see the contradictions inherent in this project and embrace them: truth with fiction, feeling with ideology, future, present, and past all at once. As logic would follow, then, failure to imagine the world slightly differently from how it is right now is a failure of intellect and will. Before concluding that my students have failed (to imagine), though, perhaps I should consider how I have failed (to imagine) my students. Perhaps I have truly expected too much of them—or, at least, too much too soon. During a conversation about pedagogy in the newly formed Queer Research Group at the University of Texas, queer scholar Neville Hoad described teaching as a kind of “slow activism,” remarking that the structure of slow activism is one which does not allow for measurability in the present. In this regard, my desires for change, like those of (some of) my students for stasis, must be deferred—for now.

### **Coda: Towards a Theory of Cultural Relevance, or “Reagan(’s) Kids”**

[An archive is] an immaterial repository [that] . . . extends beyond the image of a place to collect materials or hold documents, and it has to become a floating signifier for the kinds of lives implied by the paper remnants of [live events . . .]—not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance.

—Judith Halberstam (“What’s That Smell?” 170)

In the introduction to this essay, I offered a caveat. I suggested that this was just one narrative of cultural relevance that could be spun from my experiences. I would like to close with offering another, as a way of getting at Butler’s notion of being undone, Johnson Reagan’s theory of coalescing, and Taylor’s belief in the staying power of performance.

As the fall semester coincided with the 2004 presidential elections, and I was a volunteer voter registrar for the state of Texas, I encouraged my students (many of whom had recently become eligible voters) to see me during office hours if they wished to register. The first (of more than one hundred fifty) was a young man named Pete. Pete was a first-year student, I learned, recently relocated from Orange, Texas. He was white, a business major, and struck me as very polite and engaged. While filling out his voter registration paperwork, I routinely asked him his middle name. “Reagan,” he replied rotely. “After the president?” I asked. “Yes,” he replied proudly, adding that his parents were big Reagan fans, and so was he. I dropped the questions, careful to maintain some sort of professional (and nonpartisan) distance in the (less publicly) intimate space of my office. What, I wondered to myself, is it like to be a Reagan kid?

Pete continued to visit regularly during office hours, often to discuss required and extra-credit plays he had seen around town. After seeing Thera Rebeck’s new play *Omnium Gatherum* at the Zachary Scott Theatre, a drama about life and love in a post- 9/11 world, Pete came to my office to discuss what he found to be the play’s “liberal socialist dogma.” He sat across from me, arms folded as if on the defensive; I engaged with him on this matter, pleased that he was interested in discussing live theatre as an index to politics.

Several weeks later, after our in-class discussion of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, Pete followed me back to my office. He was undone by it—he didn’t use these words exactly, but I remember that he used the word “ambivalent” in a reference to a similar structure of feeling expressed by Louis to Belize. He said that he identified with Joe—the closeted gay Republican and arguably the play’s most ambivalent of characters—and mentioned his best friend from home who had just come out as gay and who was experiencing familial rejection. Pete also said that *Angels* felt so “real,” and that it was his favorite play we had studied all semester.

While Pete’s love of *Angels* and his identification with Joe could be read as a kind of thinly-veiled coming-out narrative, I think it would be reductive to rehearse that analysis here. Instead, I am actually reminded of one of Louis’s lines in *Millennium Approaches* when, after jokingly suggesting that Ron Reagan Jr. is gay, he asks Joe, “So what’s it like to be a Reagan’s kid?” (77). What, I wonder, *is* it like to be a Reagan kid—literally—and what is at stake in growing up?

In an email correspondence after the semester had concluded, Pete included an excerpt he had written on his application for a University of Texas Continuing Fellowship. The question asked, “Which college courses have affected you the most and why?” He wrote:

Theatre 301 with Jaclyn Pryor last semester was phenomenal. I am now, more than ever, a believer that a class is what you make of it. I finished the course with a strong interest in something I had not considered before, and a good mentor and friend in Jaclyn. Office hours on Mondays were amazing. Even though we had very different perspectives on many things, we discussed politics, religion, current events, weekend plans, and works of art as equals. The class challenged me to put myself into the shoes of an artist, often times addressing issues and concepts that were new and rare to me. I had to step outside myself, and I developed a new respect for my fellow human.

I wish to close this essay with the passage that I read aloud to my students on the last day of the semester. It is Prior’s final monologue at the close of *Angels in America: Perestroika*. It reads:

The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins. (280)

Indeed, perhaps it already has.

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*Jaclyn Pryor* is a doctoral student in the Performance as Public Practice Program at The University of Texas-Austin. In addition to her academic work, she is also a performer and director, as well as a teaching artist for Theatre Action Project, a nonprofit community-based arts organization in Austin.

## Notes

1. This title overtly references Gizelle Liza Anatol's astute article, "Passing/Out in the Classroom: Eradicating Binaries of Identity" in which she asks, "as a brown-skinned lesbian daughter of immigrants, in what ways do I pass?" Anatol offers a critical analysis of the complexities of passing and being out in the college classroom. Also see Robyn Weigman's "On Being Married to the Institution" for an excellent discussion of the ways in which systemic heteronormativity circulates in the academy.

2. This comment was written on a University of Texas Course Instructor Survey (CIS) form filled out by students at the end of the Fall 2004 semester.

3. I would like to thank Rebecca Fried, Corey Jones, Megan Sullivan, and Simon Provan, who served as my TAs throughout the year and whose collaboration was instrumental in facilitating this class and writing this essay.

4. Throughout this essay, students' actual names have been changed.

5. Two days after the "Bush Rocks" incident, a student sent me the following email:

Dear Mrs.Pryor [sic],

I am so sorry that I didn't get a chance to watch the debate before you asked us in class what we thought of it. I am so disturbed that there are so many Bush supporters! This is how I felt when I watched the Gore / Bush debates. Bewildered that anyone would in their right mind vote for that cad (Bush). I really hope he doesn't win the election. Hearing views like the ones I heard in class makes me want to move out of Texas. Just wanted you to know not to lose hope. Some people saw that Kerry is hands down the better candidate. I feel sad that none of the Democrats spoke up (myself included).

Sincerely, Kelly

6. It is worth noting that Jill Dolan chairs the Performance as Public Practice Program at UT and also acts as faculty supervisor for this course. I am deeply indebted to her for her guidance in teaching this course and this project of writing about it. Special thanks, too, to Stacy Wolf, who was endlessly helpful and encouraging throughout this process, offering key insights on earlier drafts, as well as Steven Hoelscher, whose kind support and thoughtful feedback enabled a first draft.

7. Throughout this essay, I use the terms "progressive pedagogy," "feminist pedagogy," and "activist pedagogy" somewhat interchangeably, though I am aware of their genealogical distinctions.

8. I was reminded of Fraser's contribution to the discourse of "feeling publics" during Jill Dolan's remarks at the "NEA at 40" Symposium at the University of Texas at Austin, 29 October 2005. Her comments were culled from her recent book, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*.

9. Davis, professor of American studies and chair of the graduate program at the University of Texas, made these remarks during a faculty roundtable on "Values in the Classroom" at the American Studies Graduate Student Conference, 16 October 2005. Intrigued by the

discourse of ethical and ideological neutrality in the classroom which was circulating during this roundtable conversation, I asked Davis—the only woman on the panel—about her experience. This comment was a direct response to my question.

10. During the first week of the spring semester, one student remarked to me that I reminded her of Ellen (Degeneres)—that my class was like the *Ellen* show. She meant this comment affectionately, and I took it that way; it also made me realize how I, like Ellen, leak queerly, even when what I am talking about ostensibly has nothing to do with queerness or being queer.

11. I presented an earlier draft of this essay before the newly formed Queer Research Group at UT, organized by Ann Cvetkovich. Jafari Allen, professor of anthropology, stated that as a man, he feels he can “get away with” radical feminist politics in the classroom but cannot, as an African American or out homosexual, advance progressive racial or queer agendas with similar success.

12. The (false) neutrality of whiteness has been written about extensively. See, in particular, Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked* and Richard Dyer’s *White*.

13. See also Gallop’s edited anthology, *Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation*, for a discussion of the role of the personal in the pedagogical exchange.

14. For a complete discussion of countercultural world-making, see Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*, especially his chapter on “Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking; or, *Cbusmería* at the End of the Twentieth Century.”

15. For a foundational account of queer panic, see Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet*, especially his introduction.

16. For another account of struggle as index for success, see Wendy Coleman and Stacy Wolf’s 1998 *Theatre Topics* article, “Rehearsing for Revolution: Practice, Theory, Race, and Pedagogy (When Failure Works).”

17. For an excellent semiotic analysis of the ways in which architecture can overdetermine reception, see Stacy Wolf’s 1998 *Theatre Survey* article, “Civilizing and Selling Spectators: Audiences at the Madison Civic Center.”

18. It is also worth mentioning that UT hosts one of the most active chapters of the Young Conservatives of Texas—instructors deemed “liberally biased” (by students who anonymously sit in on suspect teachers) are placed on a blacklist, published and distributed in the University community. For interesting media coverage of this phenomenon, see “UT Students Single Out Profs.”

19. In employing the term “conservative” here as well as in the title of this essay, I mean to denote not simply individuals or groups affiliated with certain ideologies, but also to include multiple affective communities who, for various reasons, are committed to projects of nostalgic conservatism—invested in maintaining past behaviors and ideals as “right” (as opposed to Right) as well as securing future trajectories of those ideals. An excellent example of conservatism in this sense is the “moral values” rhetoric that surfaced in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election. Conservatism’s binary opposite, then, is not liberalism but progressivism, though this distinction is often lost.

20. In fall 2005, the semester after I finished teaching this course, I received two emails (one minutes after the other), both from individuals who worked for the Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance in some capacity, both urgently requesting a copy of my syllabus for official “records.” Immediately, I was alarmed. I imagined that someone higher up had read my Course Instructor Surveys from the prior semester and was concerned about complaints of excessive queer and feminist content. I soon discovered that this was not the case: rather, a parent had contacted the Dean, outraged that his son had been forced to read *Angels in America*; the Dean, in turn, had contacted the Department to see if it was “true” that we were “promoting a gay lifestyle.” The issue was ultimately “resolved” in my favor under the rubric of “infringement of academic freedom.” The panopticonic thinking that this administrative policing triggered for me was remarkable.

21. For a thorough case study, see Taylor’s chapter “False Identifications: Minority Populations Mourn Diana,” in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003).

22. For another account of students’ expectations of being entertained in the classroom, see Mady Schutzman’s 2002 *Theatre Topics* article, “Guru Clown, or Pedagogy of the Carnavalesque.”

23. Sundiata appeared on the same panel as Dolan, describing and theorizing his most recent project, *The 51<sup>st</sup> (Dream) State*, a work of performance / poetry inspired by his experiences of what he calls the “golden moment” of possibility that 9/11 cracked open.

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