Locating Queer Writing in/as Failure
Conference on College Composition and Communication 2017
Dan McCormick, Purdue University

I'm going to begin this presentation with a dramatic assertion: the field of composition studies has yet to mourn its dead. As much as we have studied and memorialized the history of the college composition course, we are still haunted by the unmarked and unremembered lives that have passed through that history without passing that course. We are the survivors—as members of "the academy," all of us have survived the process of training and accreditation and passed into the fold of the academic community. And as teachers, we now participate in the mechanism that distinguishes between those who pass and those who don't. Yet we fail to remember those who fail. So, in this presentation, I want to work towards an answer to the question: Where is the history of failure?

I am locating this project primarily within the conversation around "queer pedagogy," a term which itself has been said to have "failed." But in its preoccupation with failure, I think my project has resonance with the emerging conversation around disability within composition studies, and in taking up the legacy of David Bartholomae's work my project will engage with the conversation around "basic writing," a conversation which, due to political controversy and lack of funding, seems increasingly relegated to our field's past—one of its ghosts. So in addition to taking up the question of students' failures, I'll make some gestures here towards the role of failure more generally within composition studies: failed projects, failed discourses, discourses of failure.

I want to point out up front three thematic movements I'll be using to structure my presentation. In using the term "locating," I want to refer to both the sense of "finding" or

"identifying" and also the sense of "legitimating"—that is, locating something inside or outside the boundary of legitimacy. In using the term "reading" and taking up the issue of reading student writing, I want to refer in particular to valuing and evaluating student writing—which, I argue, we do every time we read and assess this writing. And in taking up the issue of "memory" and "history"—that is, what gets remembered and what becomes part of our history—I want to strike a particular resonance with the relationship between "memory" and "membership": a history is always a shared history, and who gets to share that history is always a question of political membership.

So, as I start by taking up this term "queer pedagogy," let me point out a few valences of this phrase "locating queer writing": some of the basic moves of queer theory and critique deal with the phenomenon of "limit-setting," making the distinction between what is legitimate and what is illegitimate, or normal and abnormal, or intelligible and unintelligible.

The term "queer pedagogy" began to emerge in education scholarship in the mid-90s, most notably with Deborah Britzman. Britzman takes up and reconsiders the relationship between knowledge and ignorance—a relationship that tends to take the form of a limit. By examining this limit, she critiques the very foundation of academic authority, and thus begins the discourse on "queer pedagogy" with an already radical stance towards its own underwriting institution. So, from its beginning, queer pedagogy is an attempt to remember the bodies and subjects whose de-legitimation allows for the legitimation (and normalization) of other bodies and subjects. Within composition studies, scholars have considered how theories of queerness and anti-normative political strategies might force composition as a field to reconsider its pedagogical

principles. Robert McRuer takes up queer and disability theories and argues that teachers ought to foreground the messy and unstable element of the writing process, paying closer attention to the "de-composed" texts that students create rather than the "composed" product that is fetishized by academic discourse. So McRuer asserts that queer, disabled, and "de-composed" writing has the potential to completely transform the way that the field and its students understand writing and bodies.

This is a powerful and radical argument, but later composition scholars identified significant problems. First there is the obvious problem with the notion that "queer writing," as if it were a magical incantation or the spoken name of God, could totally destroy the hegemonic order of standardized writing—if only such queer writing would appear in our classrooms. On this point, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes critique McRuer for not showing any examples of "queer" or "de-composed" writing. In addition to this concern over the non-appearance of actual "queer writing," there is the problem of how to reconcile any notion of queerness with the essentially normalizing practice of pedagogy (particularly writing pedagogy). Karen Kopelson points out that, with respect to such liberatory notions of queer pedagogy or queer writing, anything we enact in our classrooms is necessarily underwritten by our authority as teachers. And Rhodes goes on to assert that "queer pedagogy" is simply a contradiction in terms—she even posits the idea that queer pedagogy "has failed."

I'm going to turn now to two examples of "failed" or "queer" writing that we see in the work of David Bartholomae, in order to move towards this question of "reading" and "valuing." I use Bartholomae's work because it has been so influential and so often referred to, but also because I think he is a particularly interesting reader of this sort of

"failed" or "queer" writing. So, I want to draw some connections between the sort of reading that Bartholomae enacts and the recent push among feminist and queer composition scholars such as Allison Carr and Stacey Waite towards an affirmation of failure and fragmentation as epistemological resources. And in doing so I suggest that if we want to practice a queer reading of composition's history and practices, we ought to focus less on provoking our students into writing more queerly and focus more on exemplifying a queer practice of reading. That is, I want to argue that queer, "de-composed" writing is not something we need to wait for or conjure up—it in fact appears frequently in our classrooms, but is consistently failed in, by, and out-of our classrooms. My concerns, then, in reading Bartholomae reading queer writing, are: what writing "fails"? And what does that writing "do" for Bartholomae?

I have two examples of "failed" or "queer" writing in Bartholomae's work that I want to look at. The first come from "Inventing the University"—it's the unnamed essay that appears right before the end, which Bartholomae seems to include as an emblem of failure. The second is the infamous "Fuck You" essay that appears in Bartholomae's "Tidy House."

First example: for me this essay stands out (or rather, fails to stand out) in "Inventing the University" partly because it doesn't have a name: Bartholomae gives names to all of the other student essays in the piece (the "Clay Model" essay, the "White Shoes" essay), but he doesn't name this essay, and in fact it doesn't appear until after Bartholomae has named, discussed, and ranked all of the other essays. For that reason alone, this unnamed essay strikes me as a queer remainder: it's the unmarked chaos out of which the normalized order must emerge. In some anthologized versions

of “Inventing the University,” this essay is excised—it’s literally an outcast. But of course the style and content of the essay also mark it as a “failure”: it’s a looping, staggering piece of writing that evokes anxiety about time and choice. We might consider it an example of Judith Halberstam’s “queer art of failure,” the looping or forgetting characteristic of queer modes of knowing, as well as Jay Dolmage’s *mētis*, the sideways or backwards rhetorical movement characteristic of bodies marked as disabled. Bartholomae reads this essay in similar terms, characterizing it as repetitive and confused—on the right track, actually, but unable to proceed beyond step one. Hence its failure. In this case the essay doesn’t hold a lot of value for Bartholomae: it’s unnamed, unremembered, and seems to serve as a small gesture towards what lies beyond the boundary of his invented university.

Second example: in this case, the failed essay has a name *and* an author—the “Fuck You” paper, by Quentin Pierce. It has been picked up and commented on several times since Bartholomae (by Geoff Sirc and Thomas Rickert, among others). Rather than serving as a token failure, a shadow that casts relief on the more developed writing, this essay receives Bartholomae’s full focus. And it demands that sort of reading. The essay is a series of refusals: a refusal of engagement, a refusal of optimism, and a refusal of knowledge. Rather than exemplifying confusion and anxiety, this essay seems to exemplify both defiance and despair. We might consider it as an example of Lee Edelman’s mantra of queer refusal, “no future,” or as an example of Jasbir Puar’s critique of “It Gets Better,” taking up the problem of survival rather than waiting for the revolution. For Bartholomae, this paper is literally unforgettable. But it seems to memorialize, for him, an ambivalent sense of failure: he says he knew from

the start that this would be a class of failures, and yet he also refers to himself with a sense of not-knowing, not-understanding, an inability to account for what was happening in front of him. The “Fuck You” essay, then, holds a strange sort of value in this regard: it is a failure, Bartholomae is sure of that, but it is also points toward something that Bartholomae himself is unable to see.

So these two examples give us two extremes of failure: on the one side, exclusion and anonymity, and on the other side, refusal and infamy. We might consider these two valences of “queer writing” or “queer failure”; but it’s clear that these are valued differently, in Bartholomae’s work at least.

Finally, then, I want to consider this question of remembering: re-reading, re-memory, re-member-ing. I want to ask, what does it mean to have a “queer” memory? Or a “queer” membership? Considering Britzman’s critique of the academic model of knowledge-as-limit, we might think of academic membership as a conditional membership. In the same light, we might also recall disability theorist Tobin Siebers’s concept of able-bodied status as “the right to have rights.” That is, Britzman and Siebers both suggest that membership status—which could mean legitimacy, personhood, or human-ness—is always based on a variable limit between what is included and what is excluded. Because this limit is variable and unstable, gaining membership requires proof of ability or legitimacy, rather than need or vulnerability. The point here is that writing pedagogy also relies on a limit and requires something to occupy the far side of that limit—but we tend not to remember or pay attention to what gets located on that far side.

Bartholomae points us toward the function of this limit when, after considering the "Fuck You" essay, he suggests that basic writing programs partly serve the function of preserving the distinction between "basic" writers and "normal" writers. These programs give a certain amount of access to academic membership, but they also create categories of limited inclusion that stabilize the category of "normal" and cover over the exclusion of writers who are too "abnormal" even for basic writing. So as I move towards a conclusion, I want to consider our discourse around "basic" writing, "queer" writing, and "failure": what do these terms do for us and our history? What do we do with our failures?

One final point: Joseph Harris has recently pointed out that our scholarship tends to value student writing in odd ways—often discussed, but rarely quoted at length, and almost never revisited. I think the two examples of "failed" or "queer" writing I've considered here point to this uncertainty: some disruptions (some "failures") are remembered and re-circulated, others are forgotten. We ought to ask ourselves why.