Considering Queer Objects, or Failing to Pass (through) Composition
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I'd like to start off with a somewhat informal, very much anecdotal introduction. In my first semester as a composition instructor, when I was a master's student, here at the University of Louisville in fall 2014, I failed four students. Each of these students, at various points during the semester, disclosed to me that they had a mental illness. Each disclosed that they were receiving some sort of professional treatment, either psychoactive drugs or psychological counseling or both. And each failed due to my course's absence policy, which was relatively strict but not uncommonly so compared to other instructors in the program. I had other students with mental illnesses or psychiatric disabilities that passed the class and/or did well in the course, and I had other students with intellectual or physical disabilities who got through the class with no significant problems. And I gave one student a D—somebody who was clearly dealing with *something* outside of his classwork, and who told me, midway through the semester, that he hadn't been doing the course readings because he couldn't afford to buy the textbook. Other students had their own *somethings*; one student focused several of her assignments on the rise in heroin use in Kentucky, which local news media attributed to the then-current crackdown on pharmaceutical opioids. In one of these essays, she wrote about her cousin who had recently died due to heroin use, and she wondered, in her writing, whether her cousin had really wanted to die, and escaped her addiction through an intentional overdose.

I know that none of this is unique to that classroom at that time. And I've failed students every semester since then—many of them disclosed various reasons, various *somethings*, that kept them from coming to class or doing their work. But that first semester sticks out to me because I had my own *something* at the time. During the previous summer I had been diagnosed

with depression and anxiety, and I started taking psychoactive drugs. But my depression got worse as that semester went on, to the point where it caused me to cancel class twice. In one of those instances, I cancelled class, or rather the UofL English Department cancelled my class on my behalf, because I had spent the night prior in the psychiatric ward. I was having suicidal thoughts, and people began to notice something was up, so while I was in an evening graduate seminar the campus police came and took me (not entirely against my will) to the university hospital, where, after about six hours, I was evaluated by a staff psychiatrist and deemed safe to release. I did not tell my students about this.

So I tell these stories as an introduction to this particular presentation in order to give a sense of what was coloring my mind as I began working on this project. An inquiry on the general state of what has come to be known as "queer pedagogy" gradually turned into a more oblique consideration of the *somethings* that lead *away* from the composition classroom, as well as what we as a field have done to try to account for those *somethings*. I will be using the term "queer objects" to refer to these *somethings,* and during the course of my presentation I'll do my best to explain what that term means and what it might do for us. And I've chosen to orient all this towards the issue of failure because this has proved to be the phenomenon that accompanies these queer objects, at least as they have appeared in my own experience as a teacher. In the current pedagogical climate, it seems that students who fail are most often kept from passing through the composition classroom not due to a problem of language or invention but because there was some queer object that demanded their attention.

The uptake of "queer" in composition studies that flourished in the late 1990s and early 2000s has recently been judged a "failure," most notably by its (at first) most vocal supporters, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes. They argue that, because "queer" signifies that

which breaks or exceeds the normal and intelligible while "composition" and "pedagogy" signify coherence and standardization, "queer pedagogy" cannot exist as such. Any attempt to put this idea into practice, they say, is flawed from the get-go. So although there is a relatively substantial history of theorizing queer pedagogy in education studies and composition studies, recent scholars in our field have maintained this view that the theory and practice of pedagogy (particularly composition pedagogy) has no place for queerness, or at least any concept of queerness that lives up to its history as a term used to refer to what is beyond the limit—the limit of heterosexuality, the gender binary, familial reproduction, or disciplinary knowledge. Either you can have queer or you can have pedagogy, but not both.

We can see an example of this tension in Robert McRuer's concept of "de-composition," along with Alexander and Rhodes's response. The question here is whether there is anything pedagogically useful about a concept that refers to disruption and disorganization—do we ask our students to "de-compose"? What would that mean? Alexander and Rhodes question McRuer's failure to show actual examples of "de-composed" writing from students.

For my purposes, I think this discussion opens up some new questions for us if we try to take it at face value. With respect to Alexander and Rhodes, let's ask: what writing *is* de-composed? Or, what writing *fails*? Or, more to their point, what writing *fails to appear*? These questions in turn, I want to argue, open up some broader questions of what counts as legitimate, within the composition classroom and the discourses surrounding it.

This brings me to "queer objects." This term comes from Sara Ahmed's theory of "queer phenomenology," which is an attempt to account for the embodied realities of queerness, in time and space, and in feelings and sensations (hence phenomenology). By focusing on the phenomenological sense of terms like "orientation" and "object," Ahmed is able to create in

these terms a resonance with what it feels like to deviate, to follow the "wrong" path, or to feel "out of place." And while her theories most overtly address non-normative sexual and gender identities, she also uses these terms to discuss experiences of migration and racial otherness. I want to suggest here that we can use these terms to better understand disabilities, addictions, and other "abnormal" states of being. Ahmed herself uses these phenomenological terms to analyze how positive and negative affective states (that is, happiness and unhappiness) come to be associated with particular objects, and in turn with particular people and contexts. Taking all of this into account, I want to suggest that Ahmed's theory of objects and orientations gives us a better sense of what "queer" can do for composition pedagogy. Rather than working out a "queer pedagogy," we might be better served by working out a queer *orientation towards* pedagogy.

I'll attempt to explain what this means. A "queer orientation," for Ahmed, is one that considers—or directs itself toward—the objects that are hidden from view or "out of bounds" when we take up a "normal" orientation. Part of the point here is that this is uncomfortable: by "stepping out of line" we go against what we are expected to do, against what "feels natural." This might mean attending to objects that seem to cause or to be associated with negative feelings and affects. Ahmed's critique here is that these affective, embodied phenomena are the things that normalize certain orientations, certain objects, and certain lines of development. This is how they are reproduced in new bodies and new lives. The point is not to demand queerness or demand discomfort but to recognize that *what* and *where* we direct ourselves toward involves an affective, embodied political relation to others.

OK, that's the extent of the heavy theory I have for you. But I do want to go on and explain why I think this matters for composition classrooms. I want to ask: what are the *queer* objects in our classrooms? What are the *unhappy* objects in our classrooms? What is our

orientation toward the language and writing (or lack thereof) that accompany these objects? To reiterate Ahmed's point: these are political questions: "some bodies more than others…"

I want to also point out here that composition scholars have considered these questions before, primarily in terms of affect and the relationship between affect and pedagogy. In particular Lynn Worsham's well-known essay "Going Postal" theorized how educational settings (in particular writing classrooms) "schooled" (or "disciplined") students' feelings (about school, about work, about each other, about themselves, etc.). She considered as well how particular objects of attention and attachment were legitimated by the dominant pedagogical paradigm. In addition to Worsham, T. R. Johnson and Julie Lindquist have considered the classroom dynamics of pain and pleasure, competence and incompetence, respectively. And there have been various discussions of student goals and desires, ranging from the pages of *College English* (Smith and Miller) to *JAC* (Fox, Monson and Rhodes). We've considered whether and how to influence students' visions of the future, ranging from skills and careers to ideologies and revolutions. Notably, Anis Bawarshi, in his book on genre, pointed out that desire (that is, the assumption of particular desires) is built into the structure of a writing assignment: as students respond to a prompt, they incorporate in their writing the desire that the text of the prompt has positioned them to take up. And from the position of queer theory, Connie Monson and Jacqueline Rhodes have argued that shaping students' uses of language (something we all do as writing teachers) necessarily shapes those students' desires.

All of this is to say that we are implicated, already, in our students' desires, attachments, and objects of desire and attachment. To bring my presentation back around to the question of *who* or *what* fails in our classrooms, I think it goes without saying that, to the extent that we do understand our pedagogies as normative or disciplinary, *failure* is the mechanism that gives force

to the prescriptions we make and the assignments we hand out. Point being: if we agree with Alexander and Rhodes that "pedagogy" necessarily excludes the "queer," it does so through failure and the threat of failure.

As the field of composition has studied and theorized failure (most notably in the subfield of basic writing), this function of failure has not gone unnoticed. Discussions of the "gatekeeping" role that the first-year composition course seems to play are all about this. Even while we understand the teaching of writing to be beneficial and liberatory, we also (must) understand that at the very least there is a danger that writing courses may ultimately serve primarily as, in Tom Fox's words, "social sorting"—that is, deciding which students can pass on as legitimate participants in academic and professional discourses. My concern here is that, as a field, we may not have fully accounted for the justifications we give for failing students: at some point, someone decides what the limit is—whether that means how many errors can be made or how many classes can be missed. I am not suggesting that we take the tactic of "anything goes"; I am suggesting that, even as we fail students, we need to orient ourselves toward, and attend to, the students, objects, and orientations that are beyond the limits we inevitably set.

I want to return to Ahmed in my last section here to foreground one particular point that she makes about failure. I have been using the term "orientation"; Ahmed also uses the term "disorientation." By "disorientation" she means the feeling or sensation that occurs when we do step "out of line" or into a context where we "don't fit"—this is the queer affect we feel when we orient ourselves toward queer objects. Her ultimate point is not that we seek out moments of disorientation, or discomfort, or pain, but that we must pay attention to what we do when we find ourselves in those moments of disorientation. Do we re-align ourselves with what feels comfortable? Or do we search for new directions? I want to suggest, in closing, that as teachers

we are often disorientated by our failing students, and in fact by the experience of *having to fail* students. I suggest that we attend to these feelings of discomfort and disorientation, and we ask ourselves: whose bodies, and whose lives, do we feel compelled to attend to and account for?